



# MEANINGFUL | IN THE | MARGINS

CHURCHES AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE DUTCH COUNTRY SIDE

JACOBINE GELDERLOOS COMMANDEUR



# **Meaningful in the Margins**

Churches and Quality of Life in the Dutch Countryside

Jacobine Gelderloos-Commandeur

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# **Meaningful in the Margins**

Churches and Quality of Life in the Dutch Countryside

## **Van betekenis in de marge**

Kerken en leefbaarheid op het Nederlandse platteland

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Jacoba Klasina Gelderloos-Commandeur

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Voor  
oma Buurma  
en  
Trees





# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>11</b>
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## Chapter 1

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1   A Family Farm	15
1.2   The Context of Village Churches	18
1.3   Aims of the Research	21
1.3.1   Research Questions	21
1.4   Framing the Research	26
1.4.1   An Interdisciplinary Approach	26
1.4.2   Theology and Ethnography	31
1.5   Exploring the Field	32
1.6   Structure of the Dissertation	34

## Chapter 2

<b>An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies</b>	<b>37</b>
2.1   Case Study Research: Reading the Field	37
2.1.1   A Case Study Approach in Empirical Practical Theological Research	37
2.1.2   Fieldwork in Two Case Studies	39
2.1.3   Traveling to the Peel Area in North-Brabant	41
2.1.4   Wandering through the Groninger Ommelanden	43
2.1.5   Perspectives for Coding and Analysis	46
2.2   Reflections on the Research Process	48

## Chapter 3

<b>Rural Developments and Quality of Life</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1   Characterisation of the Countryside in Brabant and Groningen	56
3.2   A Liveable Countryside	61
3.2.1   Liveability in Newspapers	64
3.3   Liveability and Quality of Life with regard to Churches	68
3.3.1   Liveability as a Lens	69
3.3.2   Quality of Life	70
Conclusion	74

## Chapter 4

<b>Church in a Changing Society</b>	<b>77</b>
4.1   Church from the Centre to the Margins of Society	77
4.1.1   The Rise of Protestant Civil Society	78
4.1.2   From Pillarisation to Secularisation in the Twentieth Century	79
4.1.3   Church in Decline	80
4.2   Church between Welfare Society and Participation Society	81
4.3   Perceptions on the Task of Church in Society	85
4.4   Religious Repertoires in the Twenty-first Century	86
Conclusion	91

## Chapter 5

<b>Village Churches in Rural Theology</b>	<b>93</b>
5.1   Rural Theology	93
5.2   Rural Theology in the Netherlands	98
5.3   Change of Perspective: from Church to Village	104
5.4   Quality of Life in Church Newsletters	108
5.4.1   Physical and Social Meeting Places	109
5.4.2   Personal Well-being: Dealing with Life Difficulties	110
5.4.3   Personal Well-being in Relation to Others	112
Conclusion	115

## Chapter 6

<b>A Protestant Church in Brabant</b>	<b>116</b>
6.1   Introducing the Protestant congregation Asten-Someren	117
6.1.1   Village Walks	119
6.2   A Tale of Two Churches	120
6.2.1   Someren	121
6.2.2   Asten	123
6.3   Church in Decline	124
6.4   Ordinary ecclesiologies	127
6.4.1   Worship services	128
6.4.2   Support	130
6.4.3   Reflection and Faith Development	136
6.5   Protestant Church Community	139
6.5.1   From a Closed to an Open Community	139
6.5.2   Ways of Connecting and Belonging	140
6.5.3   Belonging through Believing	144
6.5.4   Dynamics of Belonging	144
6.6   The Closing of a Church	147
Concluding Remarks	151

## Chapter 7

### **The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context** 152

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>153</b>
7.1   A Catholic Province	155
7.2   Church Meets Church	162
7.2.1   Developing Relations between Protestants and Catholics	162
7.2.2   Ecumenism in Discussion	166
7.3   Church Meets Care and Welfare	170
7.3.1   Ziekentriduüm	170
7.3.2   Church in the Nursing Home	174
7.3.3   Church and Welfare	176
7.4   Church Meets School	177
7.5   Church Meets Culture	181
7.5.1   Church as a Theatre	181
7.5.2   Koepelkerk Concerts	182
Concluding Remarks	188

## Chapter 8

### **Four Village Churches in Groningen** 190

8.1   Introducing the Hervormde congregation of Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild and Noordbroek	191
8.1.1   Village walks	193
8.2   A Tale of Four Churches	199
8.2.1   Schildwolde	200
8.2.2   Hellum	205
8.2.3   Noordbroek	210
8.2.4   Overschild	218
8.3   Church Life in a Regional Network	219
8.3.1   Relations between the Hervormde Churches	220
8.3.2   Church in a Cluster	223
8.3.3   Connections in the Wider Region	225
Concluding Remarks	229

## Chapter 9

<b>An Intertwining Church in Groningen</b>	<b>232</b>
9.1   Christmas Celebrations	234
9.1.1   Christmas Gathering in a Tent in Schildwolde	235
9.1.2   Christmas Service in the Village Church of Overschild	236
9.1.3   Christmas in Hellum	238
9.1.4   Christmas Walk in Noordbroek	242
9.1.5   Context of Christmas celebrations	243
9.2   Memorial	245
9.2.1   Commemorating the Dead	245
9.2.2   Remembrance Day	246
9.3   Church Intertwines with Culture	250
9.3.1   Festival of the Spirit in Schildwolde	250
9.3.2   Helmster Easter Play	252
9.3.3   Cultural Church Noordbroek	253
9.3.4   Theatre Church in Overschild	256
9.3.5   Church and Culture	257
9.4   Church Intertwines with Care and Welfare	258
9.5   Church and Earthquakes	261
9.5.1   From Gas Extraction to Earthquakes	262
9.5.2   Platform Kerk en Aardbeving	266
9.5.3   The Quest of the Platform	270
9.5.4   Church and Earthquakes?	273
Concluding Remarks	276

## Chapter 10

<b>Reconsidering the Meaning of Village Churches</b>	<b>279</b>
10.1   The Church-Village Relation	280
10.2   Church and Quality of Life	288
10.3   Religious Village Life	294
10.4   Church between Religious and Secular Space	297
10.5   Village Ecclesiology	302

<b>Appendix A. Chronological Overview of Rural Theology from the Netherlands</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>Appendix B. Fieldwork</b>	<b>313</b>
<b>Appendix C. Survey Results</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>Appendix D. Illustrations</b>	<b>335</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>343</b>
<b>Nederlandse samenvatting</b>	<b>371</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>383</b>
<b>Curriculum vitae</b>	<b>389</b>

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*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*





# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 | A Family Farm

When I was a little girl I used to visit my grandparents in Oldenzijl, a small village in Groningen, a rural province in the northern part of the Netherlands. They lived on a farm which is in the family for four generations. When my grandfather took over in 1947 it was a mixed farm. He grew horse beans, canary seed, flax, oats, barley, and wheat, as well as sugar beets and mangel-wurzels. He also had a couple of cows and horses for the fieldwork. Leafing through a photo album I saw pictures of my grandmother cleaning the milk buckets. The pictures were taken around 1980, when for the last time the milk was collected by a milk wagon to be transported to a dairy factory in one of the larger villages. On Saturday morning my grandfather took me to a neighbouring farm to fetch some milk in a small milk can. I can still see before me the stable with the five cows, which were milked by hand, the milk poured into the small milk churn. On Sunday we ate the clotted cream from the milk with vanilla pudding. Since then I have never tasted such delicious cream. Later I realised I had just caught a glimpse of a time gone by.



1. The family farm in Oldenzijl

Nowadays my uncle has taken over not only my grandfather's farm, but also that of my great uncle. To survive it was necessary to expand, specialise and make considerable investments. Although he farms more acres, his crops are less varied than in the time of my grandfather. He grows potatoes, wheat, and sugar beets. A large barn was built to sort and keep the potatoes. A couple of years later a bigger barn with a cool cell was added. When a cooled milk container became a requirement, the cows were sold. The horses had been replaced by tractors long ago. My grandfather had employed a full time farm hand and had

## Chapter 1

less land to work on, which meant he had the Saturday afternoon to spend with his family. My uncle had taken on a labourer together with another farmer. With the machines he is able to farm 80 hectares of land. Although he works from dawn to dusk and is assisted by the farm labourer, family and friends, the work is never finished. The future is uncertain, because my uncle has no children to take over the family farm.

My grandfather's sister would have liked to continue her studies after domestic science school, but being the daughter of a farmer it was not appropriate for her to study in the 1930s. My grandfather knew times were changing and he urged his daughters to learn a profession so that they would be able to make a living. So in the 1970s three of his four children left the farm to find a job in another part of the country. My mother ended up in The Hague, where she met my father in the *Gereformeerde* church. In the meantime people from elsewhere bought the houses of the farm workers, who had left the village to find jobs in industry. To visit my grandparents it was necessary to have a car. The nearest train station is 5 km from the farm. My grandmother had never got around to acquiring a driving license, making her dependent on her husband and children for transport to visit family and friends, go to church, and do the shopping. In the 1930s there had still been a bakery, forge, two groceries, and a painter in Oldenzijl. In the 1950s when my grandmother came to the farm, the baker and the grocer came to the door. Later my grandparents would go to Uithuizermeeden, a neighbouring village once a week to do their shopping.

In the fifties fourteen *Gereformeerde* families lived in Oldenzijl; now there is only one. When my mother was a little girl she had to cycle every day to Uithuizermeeden to go to the *Gereformeerde* school. In Oldenzijl was a public school, but because she came from a *Gereformeerde* family, it was unthinkable that she would attend that school. The family also went to the *Gereformeerde* church, did their shopping at the *Gereformeerde* bakery and grocery. They were members of the *Christelijke Boeren- en Tuindersbond*, the Christian Farmers And Market Gardeners Association. Every month, my grandmother cycled with a group of women from Oldenzijl to Uithuizermeeden to attend the meetings of the *Nederlandse Christen Vrouwen Bond* (Dutch Christian Women's Association). The effect was that my grandparents' lives were divided between two village communities; they did not really belong to either. Still, both of them lie buried in the churchyard in Oldenzijl, which overlooks the land my grandfather worked for years.

When I stayed at the farm in the summer my grandmother would ask me to deliver the *Elisabethbode*, a magazine for people over fifty on traces of God in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> The magazine was originally distributed to twenty addresses in Oldenzijl. Over the years the number of magazines gradually declined to two. On Sunday morning we would visit the *Gereformeerde* church in Uithuizermeeden. In later years, through the *Samen op Weg* process<sup>2</sup>, the

<sup>1</sup> *Elisabeth magazine*, <http://www.elisabethmagazine.nl/>, accessed 20 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The *Samen-Op-Weg* Proces was a process of several decades which led in 2004 to the merging of three denominations: the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* and the *Evangelische Lutherse kerk* into the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (Protestant Church in the Netherlands). Thereby ending a church schism between the *Hervormde* church and the *Gereformeerde* church which started in 1834. The

## Introduction

*Gereformeerde* and *Hervormde* church started to cooperate and the worship services were held alternatingly in the medieval *Hervormde* and the *Gereformeerde* church of the 1970s in Uithuizermeeden. When my grandmother became too old to travel to the church, she listened to the worship services on the internet radio. Although she might have been able to go to the *Hervormde* church in Oldenzijl, worship services are only held there occasionally. The church of Oldenzijl is now part of a regional Protestant congregation that encompasses five other villages.<sup>3</sup> If my grandmother and uncle were to join this regional congregation, it would mean that they would leave the congregation to which they have belonged for more than half a century.

My family history illustrates how rural life has changed in the last decades and how socio-economic circumstances and religious backgrounds shape people's personal lives. It highlights people's increasing mobility, the upscaling of farming, the declining number of people working in agriculture, young people leaving the countryside for work. At the same time it becomes clear how church affiliation has shaped the social environment, how gradually the number of church members has decreased and how the process of *Samen op Weg* helped to bridge a social divide. This is the context in which my research is situated: at the intersection between the quality of life in the countryside and the changed position of church in society.



2. Saint Nicholas Church in Oldenzijl, with the land my grandfather worked in the foreground

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*Hervormde* and the *Lutherse* church had been separate churches since the time of the Reformation.

<sup>3</sup> *Protestantse Gemeente Roodeschool*, <http://www.pgroodeschool.nl/kerkenraad/wie-wij-zijn>, accessed 3 July 2017.

In section 1.2 I describe the context of village churches and how developments in the churches and in the countryside have raised questions about the role and meaning of church in a changing rural context. In section 1.3 I explain the aims of the research and introduce the research question. Section 1.4 characterises the research as an ethnographic study on ordinary ecclesiology, which combines insights from social geography, sociology of religion and rural theology. Finally I introduce the case studies and explain the outline of the dissertation.

### 1.2 | The Context of Village Churches

#### *Village Churches*

The archetypical image of a Dutch village consists of a church surrounded by houses and several farms. The skyline of smaller villages is often still dominated by the steeple of the village church. Geographically, the church may hold a central place in many villages, but socially churches often have a marginal position. Several decades ago churches played a pivotal role in the village community. Churches initiated diaconal work, such as poor relief and care for the sick. Christian youth societies formed an important meeting place for teenagers. In this way churches were an important factor in the social infrastructure of village life. People you saw in church were the same people you met in school, in shops, and in circles of family and friends.<sup>4</sup>

In many villages the church has moved to the margins of village life. Worship services are often attended by a small number of people. The days when a congregation could pay a full time minister have long gone. Over time church groups for children and teenagers have ceased to exist. It is very common for churches in a wide region to cooperate to keep things going. Running the ecclesial organisation takes much of the time and energy available and people are worried about who will take over. The uncertain future can lead to an internal focus, which can make it difficult for church communities to be strongly involved in village life.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of the future of small village churches is not new; it has been discussed for decades. In *De kerk en het moderne platteland* H.D. de Loor addressed in 1963 the loss of function of the church in the countryside and raised the question of whether the church is speechless or a critical stranger.<sup>6</sup> In 1993 Pim van de Kerk wrote *Geloven in de kern*, stressing the necessity of a contextual approach and being attentive to the needs of groups around the church, such as children, elderly and vulnerable people.<sup>7</sup> Through the years dozens of bro-

<sup>4</sup> J. Verrips, *En boven de polder de hemel: Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp, 1850-1971*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff, 1983; J. van Zuthem, *Harde grond: Kerkelijke verhoudingen in Groningen, 1813-1945*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2012; Fred van Lieburg, *Jeugdwerk met een watermerk: de hervormd-gereformeerde jeugdbeweging, 1910-2010*, Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2012; Rein Brouwer, et al., *Levend lichaam, dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland*, Utrecht, Kok, 2007, p. 207; W.A. Sinnighe Damsté, *Gedeelde zorg: de rol van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk/Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, bij de bestrijding van armoede in relatie tot de overheidstaak*, PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011; Liesbeth Labbeke, Vefie Poels, *Bezielde zorg: Verpleging door katholieke religieuzen in Nederland en Vlaanderen (negentiende-twintigste eeuw)*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', in: J. Martineau, L.J. Francis, P. Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2004, pp. 21-43.

<sup>6</sup> H.D. de Loor, *De kerk en het moderne platteland: Moelijkheden en mogelijkheden voor de kerk op het platteland*, Den Haag, Boekencentrum, 1963, pp. 12-14.

<sup>7</sup> Pim van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern: Gids voor een zinvolle christelijke gemeente in een klein dorp*, Kampen, Kok, 1993.

chures and magazines have been published about the subject, proposing various strategies for village churches to adapt to the circumstances in the countryside (see Appendix A). These strategies tend to follow the rural development of regionalisation, advising cooperation with other churches in the region. The focus tends to be on developing a strategy for churches to connect more with their rural context. However, less explicit attention is paid to what is actually going on, both within the church communities and in the rural context. The publications tend to focus on the ecclesial organisation; the question of how church and context are related and how they shape each other is seldom addressed in a thorough way.

### *A Liveable Countryside*

When you step outside the church door and explore the rural context, you see that village life has seen some significant changes. Authors like Geert Mak and Chris Esterik have described the gradual change in the course of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The population has changed because of ageing, population decline, and the arrival of new villagers from elsewhere. Increased mobility has changed the way of life in villages. I explore these developments further in chapter 3, but for now it is important to note that discussions about the countryside in the Netherlands are coloured by the concept of *leefbaarheid* (liveability).

A recurring question is: what are the effects of the changes on the liveability of the countryside and how can the quality of life in rural areas be sustained?<sup>9</sup> It is often supposed that a declining population leads to the closure of services, which affects community life and poses a threat to the liveability of villages. This means that the presence of services like a school and a shop is often presented as a condition for liveability.<sup>10</sup> Recent social geographical research raises questions about this argument and points to other sources for a liveable countryside, such as social networks, community initiative and place attachment.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Geert Mak, *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*, Amsterdam, Atlas, 1996; Chris Esterik, *Een jongen van het dorp: Honderd jaar Ingen, een dorp in de Betuwe*, Amsterdam, Bakker, 2003; Kees Kooman, *Boerenbloed, Melkquota, megastallen en het verdwenen idyllische platteland*, Amsterdam, De Kring, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. P.J. Bouman, *Bedreigd bestaan: De sociale, economische en culturele situatie in Noord-Groningen*, Groningen, Niemeyer, 1960; A. Steenbekkers, C. Simon, V. Veldheer, *Thuis op het platteland: De leefsituatie van platteland en stad vergeleken*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2006; C. Simon, L. Vermeij, A. Steenbekkers, *Het beste van twee werelden: Plattelanders over hun leven op het platteland*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2007; Lotte Vermeij, Gerald Mollenhorst, *Overgebleven dorpsleven: Sociaal kapitaal op het hedendaagse platteland*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2009; A. Steenbekkers, L. Vermeij, *De dorpenmonitor: Ontwikkelingen in de leefsituatie van dorpsbewoners*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2013; Kennisnetwerk Krimp Noord-Nederland, <http://kkn.vanmeernaarbeter.nl/>, accessed 3 July 2017; K. Leidelmeijer, G. Marlet, et al., *Leefbaarheid in krimpgebieden: Een verkenning van de relatie tussen bevolkingskrimp en leefbaarheid*, Amsterdam, Rigo, 2011; M. Rijkers, J. Westerlaken, J.L.L. Cox, *Leefbaarheid begrepen*, Den Bosch, PON Brabant, 2011; J. D. Gardenier, *Leven in de leegte: Leefbaarheid in Noord-Groningen anno 2010*, Groningen, CAB, 2011; G. Verburg, 'Leefbaarheid op het platteland', letter from minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality to the Lower House, 1 December 2009; Gerda Geven et al., *Krimp, het nieuwe groeien: Position paper over leefbaarheid en voorzieningen in krimpgebieden*, Nationaal Netwerk Bevolkingsdaling, Werkgroep Leefbaarheid en Voorzieningen, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Nicole Besselink, 'Kleine school zal hoe dan ook verdwijnen', *Trouw*, 2 April 2013; Niels Markus, 'Kerk gesloten, kroeg weg, school weg en nu het hele dorp weg?', *Trouw*, 20 September 2013; 'Reddingsactie voor obs De Ent in Hellum', *RTV Noord*, 28 December 2015; Onno Havermans, 'Het dorp Barchem zet zichzelf te koop, vrijdag en zaterdag open dagen om jonge gezinnen naar plaats in Achterhoek te lokken', *Trouw*, 17 April 2013; Nicole Besselink, 'Dorp verliest nu ook zijn geldautomaat, Vrees voor afname leefbaarheid', *Trouw*, 19 March 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Frans Thissen, 'Leefbaarheid en vitaliteit van dorpen: mythes en uitdagingen', Gouda, 2009; J.D. Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen: Een sociologisch onderzoek naar het platteland van Noord-Groningen*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2012; K. Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio, regionale leefbaarheid en identiteiten in Noord Groningen tijdens de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw*, Groningen, Stichting Groninger Historische Publicaties, 2013; 'Verdwijnen van pinautomaat is

## Chapter 1

Because liveability is such a dominant concept in the rural context, it seemed worthwhile to relate the concept to the role of churches in village society for two reasons. First, research on liveability tends to focus on issues like mobility, safety, physical environment, and services like schools and shops. However, in general, little attention is paid to the role of churches, often the last service which remains in villages, be it sometimes rather marginal.<sup>12</sup> Second, it seemed a helpful concept for a contextual perspective: to see what is going on in village life, how the church community is relating to liveability questions and to gain insight into the various functions that a church can fulfil.

Nevertheless, during the research process the question arose as to whether liveability was a suitable concept for understanding the role and meaning of a church community. Although it brings into view how the church contributes to the social and physical living environment, it seemed that a significant part of church life would be overlooked, such as personal well-being, community building and dealing with contingencies and difficulties in life. Pastoral visits take place in the private sphere and are confidential. Furthermore, in the appropriation of ritual and religious practices, meaning making is personal. For this reason I decided to translate *leefbaarheid* not with 'liveability', but with 'quality of life', the latter is a broader concept, which encompasses both the quality of the physical and social living environment, as well as people's personal well-being. When I refer to the discussion about a liveable countryside in the Dutch context I use 'liveability'. In chapter 3 I further explain the difference between these concepts.

In sum, there are several reasons why it is worthwhile to investigate the position of church in rural society. First, Dutch studies in the fields of sociology of religion and practical theology in the last decades have focussed primarily on churches in an urban context.<sup>13</sup> Second, in liveability research there is little attention for churches. The closing of a school is often framed as a significant threat to the quality of life, but what does it mean for village life when a church disappears?<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is important to focus on what churches mean for quality of life in villages. Third, this research project is motivated by the question raised in many churches of how to become more a church in and for the village. The *Maatschappij van Welstand*, a fund which supports Protestant congregations, signalled that church com-

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niet de genadeklap voor het platteland', *Trouw*, 21 March 2013.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Enno Zuidema, et al., *Noord-Groningen Leeft! Woon- en Leefbaarheidsplan 2017-2021, Leefbaarheid en betrokkenheid, in krachtige buurten en dorpen die samen een toekomstbestendige en duurzame regio vormen*, Groningen, [s.n.], 2016; J. Rozema, *Adorp 2012: hoe waarderen inwoners van Adorp hun leefomgeving*, Groningen, 2013 (*Kenniscentrum Noordruimte*, <https://www.hanze.nl/nld/onderzoek/kenniscentra/kenniscentrum-noordruimte/>, accessed 3 July 2017); Examples of research which take into consideration the role of the church: Verrips, *En boven de polder*; Frans Thissen, Joos Droogleever Fortuijn, *Het dorpshuis: van bewoners en voor bewoners, De maatschappelijke participatie van dorpsbewoners en de betekenis van het dorpshuis in de dorpen van Littenseradiel*, Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2012; Vermeij, *Overgebleven dorpsleven*; Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*.

<sup>13</sup> Marten van der Meulen, *Vroom in de Vinex: Kerk en civil society in de Vinex*, Maastricht, Shaker, 2006; Rein Brouwer, *Geloven in gemeenschap: Het verhaal van een protestantse geloofsgemeenschap*, Kampen, Kok, 2009; Gert de Jong, *Doen alsof er niets is: Sociologische gevalstudie over een kerkelijke gemeente als dynamische configuratie*, Wageningen, Pronsen&Looyen BV, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> 'Vrijkomende kerken: PON brengt herbestemmingsproces in kaart', <https://hetpon.nl/portfolio/projecten/vrijkomende-kerken/>, accessed 3 July 2017.

munities are struggling to find enough human and financial resources.<sup>15</sup> They funded this project to investigate the situation of village churches in order to come to recommendations to help churches strengthen their missional and diaconal role in the countryside.

### 1.3 | Aims of the Research

In this research project I explore the relevance of the concept of quality of life in understanding the role and meaning of churches in contemporary rural life in Groningen and Brabant. The research project has a twofold aim, first, to describe the position of church in village society and the various functions that churches fulfil. Second, to explore what a practical theological perspective can contribute to the general understanding of quality of life.<sup>16</sup> In this exploration the ideas of two theologians are very useful for developing a contextual approach: first, Jeff Astley's concept of ordinary theology, which takes seriously the voice of ordinary (non)believers,<sup>17</sup> and second, David Walker's fourfold model of belonging, which helps to grasp the various aspects of the meaning of village churches.<sup>18</sup>

To achieve this aim I have carried out qualitative research in two case studies. I tell the stories of two Protestant congregations, the Protestant congregation of Asten-Someren in North Brabant and the Protestant congregation of Schildwolde, Overschild, Hellum and Noordbroek in Groningen (see appendix illustrations figure 1). I have approached the relation between the congregations and the surrounding villages by looking at places, people and practices which are related to the church. This draws attention to how people relate to church in different ways and how this leads to different notions of church. In this way I have collected varying perceptions on the role and function of church in village life and the meaning of church and religion in peoples personal lives.

#### 1.3.1 | Research Questions

The main question of this research is:

**What role do local Protestant churches play in village life and how do churches affect the quality of life in rural areas in North-Brabant and Groningen?**

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<sup>15</sup> *Maatschappij van Welstand*, <http://www.welstand.nl/maatschappijvanwelstand>, accessed 3 July 2017; Gijsbert Hamoen, Janet van Dijk, 'Weldadig, maar onzichtbaar': *Maatschappij van welstand, 1822-1997, 175 jaar steun aan kleine protestantse gemeenten*, Amersfoort, Uitgeverij Bekking, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> D. Winter, 'No one is a sustainable island: a theological perspective on the sustainability agenda in the rural context', in: Alan Smith, Jill Hopkinson, *Faith and the Future of the Countryside, Pastoral and Theological Perspectives on Rural Sustainability*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2012, pp. 67-90, there p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology, Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013; Jeff Astley, 'Ordinary theology for rural theology and rural ministry', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church, Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, London, Equinox, 2012, pp. 42-51.

<sup>18</sup> David S. Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theological and Sociological perspectives', in: Francis, *Rural Life*, pp. 105-119.

The first aim is to describe the role of village churches by analysing the relations between church and village community. I use 'role' to refer to the various ways the Protestant congregations become involved and visible in village life. I apply a relational and contextual approach, which ties in with congregational studies. Mathew Guest points out that a 'congregation is not a self-contained unit concerned with those who have 'converted' into its membership, but a wider unit whose life is identified with that of the society around it, the locality it serves'.<sup>19</sup>

The second aim is to interpret these descriptions in order to understand the various roles, functions and meanings of a church for village life. Consequently I have chosen to use the word 'affect'. Churches can play a specific and positive role in village society and personal life. Religion often functions as an important source of motivation to strive for a better life and is important for building social capital.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, churches can also decrease the quality of life. First, churches can have a segregating effect, dividing a village community into various groups.<sup>21</sup> Second, the perception that people have of church and religion is not always positive.<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking, people refer to religion as the cause of wars and terrorism. More locally, they criticize churches for contributing to social segregation and certain attitudes of church leaders or churchgoers.<sup>23</sup> Finally, where people come together conflicts may arise, also in church communities. This may result in people getting hurt and leaving the church, holding a grudge, which influences their personal quality of life. Fourth, the ethical claims that a church community can place on other people can also affect their personal well-being.<sup>24</sup> Fifth, the work required for the running of the church community can mean that people are not doing what they want to do, but what they feel they have to do, which can lead to burn out complaints.<sup>25</sup>

My aim is to arrive at a practical theological understanding and characterisation of churches in a village context. Therefore, I formulated a number of sub-questions that shed light on different aspects of the research question. First, it is necessary to carry out a thorough analysis of the context and sketch both the social and rural circumstances, as well as the religious developments (questions 1-3). Second, I need to map the relations between church and village in both case studies (questions 4-6):

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<sup>19</sup> Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, Linda Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, Alderhost, Ashgate, 2004, p. xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Farnell, *et al.*, *Faith in Rural Communities: Contributions of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy*, Warwickshire, ACORA Publishing, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Furbey, *et al.*, *Faith as Social Capital, Connecting or Dividing?*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> 'Meer vertrouwen in elkaar en instituties', Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 28 May 2018, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/22/meer-vertouwen-in-elkaar-en-instituties>, accessed 3 July 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Georg Ziebertz, 'Dispute about the Public Significance of Religion: an Opening Reflection', in: Leslie J. Francis, Hans Georg Ziebertz (eds.), *The Public Significance of Religion*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, pp. 1-17.

<sup>24</sup> Henk de Roest, *Een huis voor de ziel, Gedachten over de kerk voor binnen en buiten*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2011, pp. 252-266.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Rolph, 'Living the Pressures of Rural Ministry: Two Case Studies', in: *Rural Theology*, (7:2), 2009, pp. 99-111; Henk de Roest, *Ik geloof het wel... Een empirisch theologisch onderzoek onder 150 kerkenraden en 56 oud-ambtsdragers naar verminderde participatie van oud-kerkenraadsleden aan de kerkdienst*, Utrecht, 2011.



## Introduction

1. How are liveability and quality of life of the countryside in Brabant and Groningen conceived?
2. How has the differentiation and secularisation of society shaped perspectives on the role of churches in the public domain?
3. How do local Protestant churches relate to the quality of life in the countryside?
4. How are the local Protestant churches and the village communities related in the case studies?
5. How do church related practices affect the quality of life in the North-Brabant area of Asten and Someren?
6. How do church related practices affect the quality of life in the Groningen area of Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild and Noordbroek?

### *Insights from Three Disciplines*

The research is an ethnographic practical theological study, which draws on theories from social geography, sociology of religion and rural theology to interpret the data gathered in the field. To answer the first three questions I carried out literature studies from these perspectives to build a theoretical framework. A social geographical perspective helps to understand the effects of the developments in the countryside on liveability. A sociology of religion approach sheds light on the position of church and religion in the public domain. Rural theology provides a useful lens for focusing on the position, role and meaning of church in the countryside.

The first sub-question focusses on the rural context. Developments such as urbanisation, increased mobility, ageing, and population decline have changed the rural way of life profoundly, raising questions about the quality of life. Rural life takes place on both a local and a regional scale. Mobility provides possibilities to live your life in different places, but this also leads to scaling up processes, which affect the accessibility of services and shops.<sup>26</sup> Churches are also operating in this tension between regional and local living.

The second sub-question addresses the changed position of church in society. In the process of secularisation religion seems to have withdrawn from public life. Church membership has declined and the church as an institution has become marginalized. It could be that the marginalisation of the church from social domains has influenced the way people perceive the task and functions of the church. This raises a fundamental underlying question about what the place of church in society should be. Gradually the separation of church and state has led to the supposition that the public sphere should be neutral and devoid of religious practices.<sup>27</sup> But here a paradox can be noticed, since religiosity and sacrality are

<sup>26</sup> Marieke van der Meer *et al.*, *De sociale draagkracht van dorpen in Borsele: Leefbaarheid, sociale cohesie en community care in kleine dorpen*, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2008, p. 44; 'Bedumers spreken zich uit tegen herindeling', *Groot Groningen*, 2 April 2013; Niels Markus, 'Sport- en cultuurclubs in gevaar, veel gemeenten schrappen subsidies', *Trouw*, 27 March 2013; Anjo de Haan, 'Grote gemeente brengt dorp nog meer in de knel', *Trouw*, 1 November 2012; Niels Markus, 'Paspoort en geboorteakte straks gratis thuisbezorgd, Nieuwe Zuid-Hollandse gemeente Molenwaard krijgt geen raadhuis', *Trouw*, 24 December 2012; Onno Havermans, "'Gaan we het alleen over geld hebben, of ook over mensen?'" Plattelandsburgemeester boos op kabinet om fusieplan voor kleine gemeenten', *Trouw*, 8 March 2013; "'Fusiegemeente mag best kleiner'", *Plasterk: 100.000 inwoners geen harde eis*, *Trouw*, 15 March 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Hendro Munsterman, 'Secularisatie is geen groot en allesverklarend verhaal', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 30 June 2017;

not limited to the private sphere and are also found outside the domain of churches and religious communities.<sup>28</sup>

The third sub-question aims at bringing the worlds of quality of life and church together. What are the characteristics of the village church? How do churches relate to the quality of life of the countryside? Further it is important to have an awareness of how church communities are shaped by the village context. What are the challenges and opportunities that congregations in a rural context face? These questions have been asked for the last few decades and various strategies have been developed for rural churches to survive. Often cooperation is suggested as a solution, but what are the consequences of a regionalising church for the local quality of life?

### *Ethnographic Fieldwork*

Sub-questions 4-6 are the basis for my fieldwork in the two case studies. The fourth question is the point of departure for exploring what role the local Protestant church plays in village life. To map the relations between church and village I propose a three dimensional model of place, people, and practice. In this model I look at the use of the church building, church activities, cooperation with other organisations, and participation in activities that play a role in village life. This leads to an overview of the network of the congregation and the activities and projects with which a church is involved.

During my fieldwork I focussed primarily on contacts, interactions and cooperation with the wider context. I thought it necessary to map the village landscape that forms the backdrop of village church life. I started by looking from inside the congregations at what was happening outside. Once I stepped outside I looked around to see what villagers noticed of churches and how the congregations functioned within the village context. This enabled me to look at village churches from different perspectives, in an effort to avoid the risk of becoming one-sided in my analysis. In this way I was able to trace various religious practices in the context of village life. The fifth and sixth sub-questions aim to take a closer look at this collective religious life.<sup>29</sup> An analysis of what people try to achieve in these religious practices, and which meanings are attributed to them, can help to answer the question of what church and religion have to offer to the quality of life in a village society.

### *A Theological Perspective*

This leads to the final sub-question: what can a theological perspective add to the concept of quality of life? By answering this question I intend to bring the results of the literature study and the data from the field into conversation with each other. The places and practices that can be discovered in the field confirm and illustrate, but also raise questions about,

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Herman Paul, *Secularisatie: Een kleine geschiedenis van een groot verhaal*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> N.T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories: Spiritual Tribes, Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014; Paul Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw: De speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein*, Heeswijk, Uitgeverij Abdij van Berne, 2010; Molendijk, Arie L., Paul Post, *Holy ground: Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture*, Leuven, Peeters, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, p. 300.

how various theories understand the role and meaning of church and religion in society. In talking about faith, church and religious practices, respondents express their ordinary theological views. Jeff Astley introduced the term ordinary theology, to create a space in which the God talk of people without an academic theological background can be taken seriously.<sup>30</sup> We will return to this in the next section.

Furthermore, I hope to contribute to a conversation between the fields of social geography, sociology of religion and theology. In the field of practical theology it is not unusual to use theories and methods from other disciplines such as social capital theory from sociology and ethnographic methods from anthropology.<sup>31</sup> Concepts and methods from other fields can provide not only useful insights, but also offer the possibility of explaining church practices in a language that is understood outside the field of theology. Dagmar Winter signals that unfortunately the question of how theology can help other disciplines is seldom asked: 'what can a theological perspective add inherently to the general understanding of sustainable communities and quality of life?'<sup>32</sup>

In my view a theological perspective is necessary, because social and geographical frameworks are not sufficient to understand the role and meaning of churches in village life. As Leslie Francis points out, social sciences have provided valuable information on religion in society, for instance about de-churching. However, a theological perspective can question the assumptions and outcomes of social science models of religion. As Francis observes: 'Religious affiliation is often used as a measure of belonging and of self-identification with a religious tradition.'<sup>33</sup> But a theologian would ask what it actually means when someone claims to be affiliated with a religious tradition without adopting its practices or beliefs.<sup>34</sup> Or, vice versa, a theologian would question the supposed neutrality of people who claim a secular way of living, which is not devoid of rituals, symbols and values that people see as fundamental, maybe even sacred, because they give meaning to life and motivate people in their actions.

In the same way theology can investigate the assumptions which underlie a concept such as 'quality of life' and the implications of how the concept is interpreted. The concept is used in various disciplines. In the rural context social geographical aspects such as employment, housing, safety, social environment, services, and mobility are dominant. From a theological point of view the question can be raised as to whether this understanding of quality of life does justice to how people actually live their lives. To what extent does people's happiness, and well-being depend on these aspects? Of course, when people have no job, feel unsafe, or are not at home in their living environment, this deeply affects their

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<sup>30</sup> Jeff Astley, 'The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', in: Astley, Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, pp. 1-9.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Brouwer connects in *Geloven in gemeenschap* social capital theory to the theological concept of *koinonia* (Brouwer, *Geloven in gemeenschap*); Jorge Castillo Guerra, Marjolein Glashouwer, et al., *Tel je zegeningen: Het maatschappelijk rendement van Christelijke kerken in Rotterdam en hun bijdrage aan sociale cohesie*, Nijmegen, NIM, 2008; Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> D. Winter, 'No one is a sustainable island', p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Leslie J. Francis, 'Comparative Empirical Research in Religion: Conceptual and Operational Challenges within Empirical Theology', in: Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins, Jeff Astley (eds.), *Empirical Theology in Texts and Tables: Qualitative, Quantitative and Comparative Perspectives*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 127-152, there pp. 128, 129.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

personal lives. But it seems that the focus on what Rogerson calls the material life arena of the social, physical, and economic environment, can overlook the role of the personal life arena, which he understands as people's characteristics, experiences, their norms, and values.<sup>35</sup> We will see that precisely this personal life arena, which escapes the influence of politics, and policy, is decisive for people's worldviews, and how they evaluate their living circumstances.<sup>36</sup>

Churches seem pre-eminently places which can connect this material, and personal life environment. According to Kor Schippers the sum of the parts is crucial for the quality of life: the connection between the various aspects of life.<sup>37</sup> How to relate to, and depend on each other? Schippers refers to Edward Schillebeekx who speaks about gap analysis: people constantly need to bridge the gap between ideal, and reality, what they long for, and what they have or can realise. This ideal - people's worldview - determines to a large extent how people judge the gap. Every human being searches for ways to bridge the gap, and when it is not possible to bridge it, other ways have to be found.<sup>38</sup> A theological voice can raise awareness of how, as Panelli remarks, various 'dimensions mutually shape each other, and are played out in uneven spatial patterns, and relations.'<sup>39</sup> This means that churches should be able to raise questions about equality, righteousness, well-being, social cohesion, contingency, and responsibility, not only within the congregation, but also in discussion with other groups, and disciplines. Thus, by bringing theological discourse into conversation with social geography, and sociology of religion, this research project can contribute to a different understanding of quality of life.

### 1.4 | Framing the Research

#### 1.4.1 | An Interdisciplinary Approach

At this point it is worth elaborating on my interdisciplinary approach by briefly introducing the three perspectives which are combined in this research, and what insights they provide into the two central concepts around which the theoretical framework of this project is built: quality of life and village church.

#### *Rural Theology*

When people talk about church it is not always clear to what aspect of church they refer. Church can relate to church in general, the institution of church, or a specific denomination, as well as regional cooperation between congregations. When talking about church

<sup>35</sup> R.J. Rogerson, 'Environmental and Health-Related Quality of Life: Conceptual and Methodological Similarities,' *Social Science and Medicine* (41: 10), 1995, pp. 1373-1382.

<sup>36</sup> A. Campbell (ed.), *The Quality of American Life, Perceptions, Evaluations and Satisfaction*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1976 in: A.W. Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven, criterium voor medisch handelen?* Baarn, Ambo, 1987, p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> K.A. Schippers, *Kerkelijke presentie in een oude stadwijk: Onderzoek naar buurtpastoraat vanuit behoeften en belangen van bewoners*, Kampen, Kok, 1990, pp. 187-189.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Panelli, 'Young Rural lives', p. 117.

in a local context 'church' can be the church building, the worship service, church activities, the church community as a group, or people from the church, most notably the minister, the church council, or other representatives. In this study I look primarily at the second category, the visible, tangible aspects of local churches: the building, people, and community activities. But also the ecumenical contacts between various denominations are taken into consideration. Furthermore, the perception of the local church is coloured by people's understandings of the institution of church and religion in general. These understandings are to an important extent based on experiences from the past.<sup>40</sup>

Churches are pre-eminently places for religion, but churches fulfil more than just a religious function. As Jan Hermelink points out, the role of the church is broader than only liturgical.<sup>41</sup> One of the aims of the research is to bring into view these other functions, for which the notion of quality of life offers a valuable lens. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, various scholars have pointed out that religious practices are also found outside the church, in nature, in leisure, in art, and other places.<sup>42</sup> Village society is no exception in this respect. Therefore it seems justified to look not only at church practices, but to incorporate into the fieldwork religious practices outside the traditional church field that typically includes worship services, building, minister, and activities. By analysing rural religious practices both within and outside the ecclesial field of practice, insights can be found into what contributes to a good quality of life.

The observation that churches fulfil more than just a religious function, and that religious life in villages is broader than church life, raises questions about what the distinguishing feature of church practices is. Although this question falls outside the scope of this research project, it is important to keep in mind. Theologians like Jan Hermelink and Harald Hegstad who reflect in their studies on the real, empirical church, take Matthew 18:20 as their starting point: 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (English Standard Version).<sup>43</sup> Hermelink states that belonging to Christ brings people together. However this does not mean that every gathering is in itself church; there needs to be a commitment to the story of Jesus Christ.<sup>44</sup>

In his understanding of liquid church Pete Ward draws on Jürgen Moltmann who 'argues that we need to take the informal experiences of people seriously as an arena where the Spirit of God may be at work' and not limit God to the domain of the church:

...the continual assertion that God's Spirit is bound to the church, its words and sacraments, its authority, its institutions and ministries impoverishes the congregations. It empties the churches, while the Spirit emigrates to the spontaneous groups and personal experience.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> De Roest, *Huis voor de ziel*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>41</sup> Jan Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie der Kirchenmitgliedschaft: Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung kirchlicher Beteiligung*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2000, p. 349.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw: De speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein*, Heeswijk, Uitgeverij Abdij van Berne, 2010; Inez Schippers, *Sacred Places in the Suburbs: Casual Sacrality in the Dutch VINEX-district Leidsche Rijn*, Groningen, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2015; Lieke Wijnia, *Making Sense through Music: Perceptions of the Sacred at Festival Musica Sacra Maastricht*, [s.l., s.n.], 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, Oregon, Pickwick Publications, 2012, pp. 17-20.

<sup>44</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, pp. 348, 363-364.

<sup>45</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, London, SC Press, 1992, p. 2 in: Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2002, pp. 78-79.

Although other motivations play a role, these kinds of practices still reveal traces of God, or references to the transcendent. Church can thus be defined as wherever people experience a form of church: where they feel something of the life-giving, liberating and empowering Spirit of God and how Christ creates community within and between people.<sup>46</sup> Therefore I use a broad perspective, describing church life in the context of village life, taking into consideration practices that are related to church or show traces of religious meaning.

Hermelink's characterisation of liturgy is very helpful for understanding the meaning of these practices. He describes community practice, enabled in religious/liturgical ritual, as an expression of community, also when interchange between the participants is lacking. These practices have a symbolical quality. The liturgical social form is an expression of a transcendent relation, which is brought into conversation with the cultural context.<sup>47</sup> In my view, this means that the Spirit of Christ can be found in the motivations with which these practices are carried out. Therefore I have tried in my fieldwork to bring into view the meaning that people attribute to various practices to consider them as possible traces of God. The references to the transcendent can take various forms. Sometimes practices draw on remnants of the cultural/religious tradition, reliving the Christmas story, sometimes literally by re-enactment. References are made to values, concepts and ideas about the good life such as peace, support, and appreciation. Some practices refer to what transcends time or place, for instance in memorial gatherings, in music or in re-imagining an Easter Play.

In my approach I combine two ways of doing rural theology, which are inspired by Astley: first, theologising about rural contextual issues such as the disappearance of services, and, second, reflecting about how rural people talk about God, church, and faith.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, I adopt David Walker's fourfold model of belonging (see chapter 5.1). Walker distinguishes between belonging through place, people, activities, and events. In this way the model provides insight into how a church is embedded in village society by sharing spaces, through people and practices.<sup>49</sup> The model of belonging functions as a tool for mapping the position of the church and draws attention to where the ecclesial field of practice interacts with other fields such as education, culture, and care. This enables me as a researcher to develop a change of perspective, which focusses on the contextual questions instead of looking at the organisational considerations which often take precedence.

### *Social Geographical Perspective*

As argued before a practical theological study of village churches needs to take the rural context into consideration. The concept of quality of life offers an interesting perspective on rural churches. It is a concept which is closely related to the context of the countryside. The changes in the countryside, such as increasing mobility and changes in popula-

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<sup>46</sup> De Roest, *Huis voor de ziel*, p. 183; Kees de Groot, 'Fluide vormen van kerk-zijn, in: Rein Brouwer *et al.*, *Levend Lichaam: Dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland*, Kampen, Kok, 2007, pp. 240-280, there p. 240.

<sup>47</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, pp. 362-366.

<sup>48</sup> Jeff Astley, 'Ordinary Theology for Rural Theology', pp. 42-51.

<sup>49</sup> David S. Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society'.

tion, raise questions about the sustainability of rural communities and the quality of life. This also means that the question can immediately be asked about the extent to which churches are involved in local liveability issues, which affect people in their personal lives. An interesting example of how social geography and rural theology can be brought into conversation is the volume *Faith in the Future of the Countryside*, which takes rural demographic, agricultural developments as its point of departure for reflecting on the meaning of rural church and theology. While studies in the field of rural theology tend to take the church as their starting point for investigating the interaction between church and village, *Faith in the Future of the Countryside* discusses various quality of life issues, varying from agriculture and an ageing population to housing and tourism. The aim of the authors is to provide a theological perspective on the quality of life in the countryside.<sup>50</sup> This perspective is also adopted in this study.

In my research project the concept of quality of life is used first as an instrument to describe the position of church in village society and to distinguish between the various functions a church can fulfil. Theories on quality of life, such as the theory of social geographer Frans Thissen on liveability and Putnam's concept of social capital prove helpful for bringing into view other functions of the church than just its religious role. Various authors have pointed out that religion plays a unique role in building social capital.<sup>51</sup> Although the primary concern of this research does not lie with the relation between church and social capital, the distinction between binding, bridging, and linking social capital is helpful for analysing developing relations between church and village groups. For Thissen the point of departure is the physical living environment to which people can relate. In his view liveability is the result of community initiatives, which can develop when there are meeting places where people can gather to exchange ideas and build relations.<sup>52</sup> It is worthwhile relating this theory to the field of rural ecclesiology.

### *Sociology of Religion*

Since churches now have a more marginal position than they did a few decades ago, it is worthwhile mapping the relations between churches and village. An effect of secularisation is the deinstitutionalisation of religion, which means that church as an institution becomes less visible in society. But this does not mean that religion totally disappears from the public sphere. Outside the church religious practices can be developed and discovered in unexpected places.<sup>53</sup> In *Voorbij het kerkgebouw*, Paul Post identifies several sacred places outside the church building in the domains of memorial, culture and recreation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Faith in the Future*.

<sup>51</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995; Corwin Smidt (ed.), *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, Waco, Baylor University Press, 2003.

<sup>52</sup> Frans Thissen, *Wat houdt een dorp leefbaar en vitaal?*, <http://thissen.net/rural/Noord-Brabant/>, accessed 3 July 2017.

<sup>53</sup> De Groot, 'Fluide vormen'; H. Streib, 'Religious Praxis – Deinstitutionalized. Theoretical and Empirical Considerations', in: H. Streib (ed.), *Religion Inside and Outside Traditional Institutions*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 147-174, there p. 163; Mirella Klomp, Marten van der Meulen, 'The Passion as Ludic Practice - Understanding Public Ritual Performances in Late Modern Society: A Case Study for the Netherlands', in: *Journal for Contemporary Religion* (32:3), 2017, pp. 387-401.

<sup>54</sup> Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw*.

## Chapter 1

Various functions of religion are fulfilled in other places than the church,<sup>55</sup> which can create an overlap between church and other domains in society. I will introduce Pière Bourdieu's concept of fields of practice to bring into view the intertwining of church with other social domains.<sup>56</sup>

Several scholars, both theologians as well as researchers in the field of religious studies have formulated theoretical concepts to understand this phenomenon. Theologian Pete Ward introduced the concept of 'liquid church', which 'suggests a way of seeing the church as a place of divine action in the wider society.' It leaves open the possibility of seeing church in other ways than as a meeting which characterises the traditional solid church. 'What liquid church does argue is that fluidity is a characteristic of both divine being and of human culture.'<sup>57</sup> The liquid church has a network structure, which emerges from a connection to the spiritual desires and preferences of those outside the church. The concept of 'liquid church' may turn out to be helpful for describing new patterns of church life, which leave room for variety, apart from the traditional Sunday services.<sup>58</sup> On a number of occasions during my fieldwork I came across alternative church places and incidental inclusive communities, which 'display many characteristics of being a parallel congregation,' where people experience God and community with each other.<sup>59</sup>

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman uses the term sacred consciousness to bring into view religious practices in everyday life, which shape people's lives and give meaning to them. The concept of 'sacred consciousness' enables us to see the presence of religion in places and situations that are also secular.<sup>60</sup> Ammerman's notion of sacred consciousness and Pete Ward's concept of liquid church can both be seen as efforts to transcend the binary thinking regarding religious and secular space. Taking the voice of ordinary people seriously also means leaving open the possibility that religious village life is not limited to the field of the church. There is a possibility that people find moments of ritual, meaning making, and community building in various places. This is also part of lived religion in a rural context and should be taken into consideration when we want to understand more about the meaning of religious practices for the quality of life.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Streib, 'Religious Praxis', pp. 168-169; F.X. Kaufmann, *Religion und Modernität, Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektive*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1989, pp. 82-88.

<sup>56</sup> Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology, An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge*, New York, Palgrave Press, 2014, pp. 19-30; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

<sup>57</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Truth*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2017, pp. 9-10.

<sup>58</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2002, pp. 2-5.

<sup>59</sup> De Roest, *Huis voor de ziel*, pp. 150-195, 263; Christine Dutton, 'Unpicking Knit and Natter, Researching an Emerging Christian Community', in: *Ecclesial Practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (1:1), Leiden, Brill, 2014, pp. 31-50, there pp. 45, 50.

<sup>60</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, p. 298.

<sup>61</sup> Meredith McGuire (ed.), *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; Bonnie Miller McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2012, pp. 103-104.



### 1.4.2 | Theology and Ethnography

In the field of practical theology the pastoral or practical theological circle is often applied, most notably in the field of congregational studies.<sup>62</sup> Richard Osmer distinguishes four key tasks in a practical theological interpretation, a process which he envisions as a spiral, rather than a circle. The spiral starts with the descriptive-empirical task of gathering information about praxis, a situation and the context: what is going on? Next is the interpretative task of drawing on theories to explain why this is going on. Then follows a normative stage of theological reflection, using theological concepts as a mirror to answer the question of what ought to be going on. Finally there is the strategic stage with the pragmatic task of formulating revised practice.<sup>63</sup>

Most publications in the field of Dutch rural theology tend to focus primarily on the strategic stage of the practical theological circle (see appendix A). I intend to start at the beginning and provide a detailed description of village church life within the context of rural Brabant and Groningen, based on thorough empirical research. This means that this research focusses on the first two stages of the practical theological circle by analysing the current praxis and cultural context of village churches. James Hopewell argued for the use of ethnographic methods in studying congregations, such as participant observation to delve into a parish culture. According to Hopewell to 'sound the depths' of a congregation it is worthwhile to have an eye not only for sermons and the written material within a parish, but also look for jokes, conversations that follow ritual, or the use of space.<sup>64</sup> My analysis provides some interesting new perspectives on how church practices in relation to the rural context may be revised, and maybe even revitalized.

#### *Ordinary Ecclesiology*

Since I am using ethnographic methods and applying concepts from social geography and sociology of religion, the question can be asked as to what extent this research can be considered theological. Among practical theologians in the field of ethnographic ecclesiology there is a debate as to whether, and if so how, ethnographic research can become theological. Is theology a way of reflecting on ethnographic data or is theology already involved in the way a researcher looks at the field? John Swinton remarks that ethnography is about observing. 'But ethnographic looking is not a neutral, value-free endeavour. [...] That which drives, motivates, controls and acts on people's ecclesial lives cannot be seen, it can only be grasped by faith.'<sup>65</sup>

This research springs from a genuine concern about the future of rural churches and the very practical question of how to keep on singing the praise of God.<sup>66</sup> According to practical

<sup>62</sup> Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, Linda Woodhead, *Congregational Studies*; Elaine Graham, et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, London, SCM Press, 2005; J. Swinton, H. Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London, SCM Press, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008, pp. 4-12.

<sup>64</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregation, Stories and Structures*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, pp. 88-89; Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 209-210.

<sup>65</sup> John Swinton, 'Where is your Church?' Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in: P. Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, pp. 71-92, there p. 76.

<sup>66</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, p. 356.

theologian Don Browning, practice should be considered the starting point for theology, since from the outset practical questions shape theoretical questions.<sup>67</sup> In this research project my point of departure is not a specific theological framework or biblical concept about what church should be, but everyday church life in two Protestant village churches. This means that my research can be positioned in the field of ordinary theology. And since the main concern of this research is to study how people understand the role of the church, the project can be characterised as ordinary ecclesiology.<sup>68</sup>

In order to take the voice of ordinary believers seriously it is necessary to participate and observe people closely. Interviews, focus groups, surveys, and participant observation reveal not only a whole range of (implicit and sometimes conflicting) notions of church, but also questions about what church is actually about. There are various ordinary ecclesiological questions which arise in the field. First there are questions such as: how do ordinary villagers see the local church and what do they expect of a church? What is their conception of church and to what extent does the village church coincide with that conception? Second, within a declining church which has to close a church building, stop activities and share a minister, the question becomes inevitable: when does a church disappear?<sup>69</sup> Or, to put it the other way around: what is essential for a church? Thirdly, when church becomes liquid and overlaps with art, education, or care, the question arises as to where the domain of church ceases and another domain starts.<sup>70</sup> These kinds of questions give input for the third and fourth stages of ongoing theological reflection on church in the countryside.

### 1.5 | Exploring the Field

For an in-depth analysis of the processes and developments around village churches, ethnographic research in case studies seemed most appropriate. I elaborate on the methodology in chapter 2. Because this research has a fundamentally contextual approach, it was important to investigate Protestant congregations in two diverging contexts in the Netherlands: one in North-Brabant and the other in Groningen. Since the Eighty Years' War in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the north of the Netherlands has been predominantly Protestant, while below the rivers the vast majority of the population has been Catholic.<sup>71</sup> For centuries the Protestants have had a minority position in this area, which for De Loor was a reason to leave aside Brabant and Limburg in his description of the position of the *Nederlandse Hervormde* Church in the Dutch countryside.<sup>72</sup> The history of Groningen is coloured by the schisms within Protestant churches, which has led to a diversity of denominations. The most notable include the schism between the *Hervormde* and *Gereformeerde* church, which was begun in 1834 by Hendrick de Cock in Ulrum, and the *Vrijmaking* during

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<sup>67</sup> Miller McLemore, *Christian Theology*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>68</sup> Astley, 'Ordinary Theology for Rural Theology'.

<sup>69</sup> De Roest, *Huis voor de ziel*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>70</sup> De Groot, 'Fluide vormen', p. 253.

<sup>71</sup> Hans Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland: Omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1992, p. 174; Gerard Rooijackers, *Rituele repertoires: Volkscultuur in oostelijk Noord-Brabant 1559-1853*, Nijmegen, SUN, 1994.

<sup>72</sup> De Loor, *De kerk*, p. 50; Hamoen, 'Weldadig, maar onzichtbaar', p. 7.

the Second World War, which ran through families and village communities.<sup>73</sup> This contextual difference has led to a striking difference in how the merging between the *Hervormde* and *Gereformeerde* churches in the last decades developed in both regions.<sup>74</sup> In Brabant Protestant congregations were too small to be divided, therefore *hervormden* and *gereformeerden* already started to cooperate in the 1970s and 1980s, while in various Groninger villages the *Samen op Weg*-process is still ongoing.<sup>75</sup>

### *About the Case Studies*

In choosing the cases to study I used several criteria. First, the congregations being investigated needed to belong to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, being one of the main denominations in the Netherlands. Second, since the research focussed on village churches it seemed logical to search for these in rural areas, at least 15 km from larger cities with more than 20.000 inhabitants. I wanted to avoid villages that are effectively suburbs of larger towns. But in a densely populated country like the Netherlands cities are never far away (see appendix illustrations figure 2). Still, both cases lie in areas which in terms of population density, landscape characteristics and accessibility can be considered rural.<sup>76</sup> The villages of the Brabant case study each have a population of approximately 10,000 inhabitants, which makes them considerably larger than the Groninger villages with 600 - 1,500 inhabitants. Nevertheless, since Protestants form a minority in North Brabant, smaller villages were not suitable, because no Protestant churches exist there. Third, I looked for congregations which encompassed several villages, because contemporary rural church life is characterized by processes of regionalisation and cooperation. When a congregation has to divide attention and activities over several villages, the question of how to relate to these villages becomes more urgent. In previous research cooperation is often presented as a strategy, but there has been little reflection on its consequences for the relation between church and village and how it shapes rural church life.

Fourth, I looked for congregations with a minister, who could function as a discussion partner, key informant and contact point with the congregation. Furthermore, a minister is important for the representation and visibility of a church community in the village. Fifth, I preferred congregations that were not preoccupied with processes of amalgamation or choices of church buildings. This would increase the chance that the congregations had resources available for being church in the village. Finally, it was necessary for the congregations to show some signs of vitality, which meant that they were not teetering on the brink of closure and were developing some new initiatives. New initiatives can include starting new activities, initiating cooperation with other organisations or involving people in new events. The Protestant congregation Asten Someren was suggested by members of the *klankbordgroep* (sounding board group) of the *Maatschappij van Welstand* who are familiar with con-

<sup>73</sup> Van Zuthem, *Harde Grond*.

<sup>74</sup> Barend Wallet, *Samen op Weg naar de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland: Het verhaal achter de vereniging*, Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Lodewijk Dros, Haro Hielkema, Leen de Ruiter (eds.), *Samen op Weg: Een lange strijd om vereniging*, Amsterdam, Trouw, 2004, pp. 27-28, 66, 228-231, 237.

<sup>76</sup> Steenbekkers, *Thuis op het platteland*, pp. 18-20; <http://cbsnl.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=05920abc0abd4cb18c4ed75dc4fd9554>, accessed 6 October 2016.

gregations in North Brabant. The Groninger case, the *Hervormde* congregations of Schildwolde, Overschild, Hellum, and Noordbroek, learnt about the research via a newspaper article and were eager to participate.<sup>77</sup>

Although the congregations lie more than 300 km apart, which leads to contextual differences, there are also similarities. The congregations in both areas are facing decline and are concerned about the future of the Protestant church in their villages. Because it is difficult to find new members for the church council, it is not possible to maintain all church buildings, and initiatives such as Sunday school are forced to stop. Both congregations are exploring possibilities to cooperate with other *PKN/PCN* congregations in the region. There are meetings between church councils, communal worship services are held a couple of times per year and a regional programme of lectures is organised. Cooperation across a broad region raises various questions about accessibility and visibility: should there be worship services in every village, which means that people have to travel each week to another church or should the activities be centralised in one or two churches, which could make the church less visible in other villages? Being church in a larger region depends on the mobility of people and in an ageing community mobility is decreasing. This means that in both case studies the question being asked is how to increase the role of the church in the village, how to become more a church of and for the village? These questions coincide to a large extent with the main question of this research project: how do churches affect the quality of life in the rural context of Groningen and Brabant?

### 1.6 | Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into a theoretical and an empirical part. First, in chapter 2 I explain more about the methodology I have chosen, the way I gathered and analysed my data, and give some reflections on my role as a researcher. In part I (chapters 3-5) I present my theoretical approach. Chapter 3 addresses the first sub-question about changes in the Dutch countryside against the backdrop of the developing concepts of liveability and quality of life. I explore how the theories of Thissen and Rogerson can help to interpret the data I gathered. I also present an analysis of regional newspapers from Groningen and Brabant to introduce the main liveability questions in the regions. In chapter 4 I analyse how in the second half of the twentieth century processes of secularisation, differentiation, and deinstitutionalisation changed the position of church in society. The marginalisation of the church affects how people perceive the role of religion in society and what they expect of the church. Chapter 5 is devoted to an exploration of rural theology in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. I take up Walker's fourfold theological model of belonging and explore how this model relates to Thissen's theory about the development of quality of life. It also helps to discover a change of perspective in thinking about the future of a village church. Furthermore, I reflect on the question of how the church can relate to questions about quality of life. In order to do so I take up the line of newspaper analysis I started

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<sup>77</sup> Janita van Hoeven-ten Voorde, 'De verbinding zoeken tussen kerk en dorp', *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 20 February 2012.

## Introduction

in chapter 3, but scrutinize church newsletters from the two case studies to see how the congregations relate to aspects of quality of life.

In part II (chapters 6-9) I present analyses of the empirical data gathered in Brabant and Groningen. In chapters 6 and 7 I analyse the data from North Brabant and in chapters 8 and 9 the data from Groningen. Chapters 6 and 8 are descriptive and introduce the case studies: in chapter 6 the Protestant congregation Asten-Someren, in chapter 8 the *Hervormde* congregations Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild, and Noordbroek. In chapters 7 and 9 a change of perspective is applied which reveals how the churches become intertwined with other fields of practice. In the case of Brabant four fields appear: first, the contacts between the Protestant and the Catholic churches; second, the interaction between church and the field of care and welfare; third, the school as a place for religious practice; and finally, the exchange of ideas and practices between the fields of church and culture. In Groningen the fields of education, care, and welfare, and culture also appear. The fields of memorial and the contacts with other churches and village organisations around Christmas are further explored. Finally I examine how churches respond to the liveability questions which are raised by the earthquakes in the province.

In chapter 10 I relate the observations from the field to the various theoretical insights discussed in chapters 3-5 and attempt to answer the main research question. Additionally, I offer some extended reflection on how this research project is relevant for theology and what a practical theological perspective can add to the discussion about quality of life.



# Chapter 2

## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

In this chapter I describe how the research developed and the methods I used for the collection and analysis of the data. In section 2.1 I first explain why I used a case study approach as a strategy for practical theological research. Second, I describe how I gathered the data in both case studies through participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and from textual and digital sources. By looking at the use of the church building, cooperation partners, and participation in village activities and regional networks, I was able to gain insight into the role and meaning of church in the village communities. Finally, I explain how I analysed the data. In section 2.2 I offer some reflections on the research process, beginning with the questions that arise when entering the field and concluding with the performative effects of the research process.

### 2.1 | Case Study Research: Reading the Field

#### 2.1.1 | A Case Study Approach in Empirical Practical Theological Research

Research projects such as *God in Nederland* describe the general trends of declining church membership and a growing number of people who call themselves religious or spiritual without being a church member.<sup>1</sup> But what do these developments mean at a grassroots level? Ethnographic research enables us to see the 'qualitative processes behind the quantitative trends.'<sup>2</sup> Small-scale in-depth case studies allow for a 'close reading' of everyday life to uncover 'hidden social patterns: the things that typically go unremarked, but structure

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<sup>1</sup> A.P.J. Bernts, J. Berghuijs, *God in Nederland, 1966-2015*, Utrecht, Ten Have, 2016; Paul Ruiter, Nico de Fijter, 'Grenzen tussen religie, spiritualiteit en zingeving vervagen', *Trouw*, 13 March 2016; Bas Blokker, 'Nederland twijfelt nu vooral over God', *NRC Handelsblad*, 14 March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A. Droogers, 'The Power Dimension of the Christian Community: An Anthropological Model', in: *Religion* (33:3), 2003, pp. 263-280, there p. 263 in: Martine Vonk, *Sustainability and Quality of Life: A Study on the Religious Worldviews, Values and Environmental Impact of Amish, Hutterite, Franciscan and Benedictine Communities*, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 2011, p. 47.

## Chapter 2

the social lives of people living together.<sup>3</sup> Through observation, participation, conversation, and text analysis I dived deeply into the social and cultural worlds of the communities around village churches.<sup>4</sup> According to sociologist Kathleen Jenkins, ethnography requires one 'to hang out' in a context and linger on for some time, which is difficult in quantitative research.<sup>5</sup>

Ethnographic case study research is very suitable for grasping the dynamics in and around village churches. According to economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg, case study research makes it possible 'to approach the complexities and contradictions of real life.'<sup>6</sup> Martyn Denscombe confirms this statement, pointing out that case study research is able to unravel how 'relationships and processes within social settings tend to be interconnected and interrelated,' instead of investigating a phenomenon in isolation.<sup>7</sup> Because case study research is conducted in close contact with the field, it is possible to develop theories which are rooted in the practice of everyday life and developments in society. According to Flyvbjerg, researchers are only able to understand the viewpoints and the behaviour that characterise social actors when they place themselves within the context being studied.<sup>8</sup> Case study research allowed me to closely observe how the rural context shapes both the practices and the theology of village churches. Practical theologian Bonnie Miller McLemore refers to philosopher Otto Maduro, who states: 'All theology is theology of specific life experience and attempts to respond to particular, not universal, experience.'<sup>9</sup> In the context of rural Brabant and Groningen, practices and stories of villagers reveal world-views, (implicit) theologies, and processes of meaning making.

Case studies are always context-bound, which raises the question how representative the results are for the broader class of things and suitable for generalisation. Flyvbjerg raises the question whether generalisation is always desirable, because it requires summarizing which inevitably disrobes 'existence of its rich ambiguity.'<sup>10</sup> Flyvbjerg further argues that case studies are fundamental in the process of falsification, to test scientific propositions. One case is sufficient to revise or reject a theory, which makes case study research suitable for both the generating and testing of hypotheses.<sup>11</sup> In the same way I think that case studies are useful for investigating whether policy measures have the desired effect or might need revision. The case studies in this research seem to indicate, for example, that the development of cooperation between churches can be questioned.

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<sup>3</sup> James V. Spickard, 'The Porcupine Tango: What Ethnography Can and Cannot Do for Theologians', *Ecclesial Practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (3:2), 2016, pp. 173-181, there p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen E. Jenkins, 'Faith in Ethnographic process', in: *Ecclesial practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (3:2), 2016, pp. 182-189, there p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research', in: *Qualitative Inquiry* (12:2), 2006, pp. 219-245, there p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small-scale Social Research Projects*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2003, pp. 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings', pp. 232-234.

<sup>9</sup> Bonnie Miller McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2012, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings', pp. 220, 223, 237.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, pp. 228-229; Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 30.



The two Protestant congregations selected for this research might be considered paradigmatic case studies, cases that highlight some characteristics of village churches.<sup>12</sup> As explained in the previous chapter, I chose two congregations that seemed typical examples of Dutch rural churches today.<sup>13</sup> Despite their decline in numbers, they are searching for ways to continue. Because I studied churches in two different parts of the Netherlands I was able to incorporate a comparative element. This enabled me to see similar developments, but also take into consideration the role of the context in shaping practices and processes.

The cases in this research are two rural Protestant congregations within their village context. Both congregations are actually multi-side churches, with people living in various places, gathering in various church buildings and organising activities and participating in projects in various villages. I did not study these congregations in isolation; the cases also include the context of the churches. This means that the (in)formal networks of the Protestant congregation are part of the case, which include other congregations, religious and secular organisations, village clubs, informal groups, and regional networks.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1.2 | Fieldwork in Two Case Studies

Again Flyvbjerg writes that 'good case studies should be read as narratives in their entirety,' and the process of carrying out a case study research is a story of its own.<sup>15</sup> Now, doing ethnographic case study research is traveling into *terra incognita*. You have some idea of what you expect to find and how you will explore the field, but along the way, you may have a puncture, sights can be closed, and you can also discover places which were not mentioned in the travel guide.<sup>16</sup> In this section I will describe how I fared on my travels through Brabant and Groningen. The main part of the fieldwork in Brabant was done between September 2012 and October 2013. Between December 2013 and January 2015 I gathered data in Groningen. I used the following year for data-analysis and follow-up interviews. One of the advantages of case study research is that 'it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, a variety of types of data and a variety of research methods as part of the investigation.'<sup>17</sup> This was an opportunity I grasped with both hands.

The fieldwork process comprised roughly three stages. First, an exploration of the field to become acquainted with the congregations and village communities. I entered the case studies with several points of interest: the activity programme of the congregations, the network of the church communities, the involvement of congregations in village activities and liveability issues, and the use of the church buildings. In this way I tried to establish an overview of how church - and village life were related through people, places, and events; in shared interests, but also in conflicting expectations. I studied documents, websites,

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<sup>12</sup> Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings', p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> I use the term 'congregation' when I refer to the Protestant congregation Asten-Someren, and the *Hervormde* congregations Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild and Noordbroek. I use the term 'church' when I speak about (village) church(es) in general.

<sup>15</sup> Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings', p. 241.

<sup>16</sup> Jenkins, 'Faith in Ethnographic', p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 33.

## Chapter 2

and church newsletters to answer the question of how the congregations saw themselves. Participant observation enabled me to carry out in-depth observation, to build trust, and follow developments. In order to be able to observe people in their ordinary patterns of activities it was important to become a regular face, so that they became used to my presence (see appendix B.II).

In the next stage I carried out focus groups and interviews to reflect with respondents on their practices and involvement, or lack thereof, with the church (see appendix B.I and IV). Conversations during participant observations and interviews offered the opportunity to bring in interpretations of observations, thereby checking preliminary conclusions. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and roughly coded regarding quality of life and ecclesial aspects.<sup>18</sup> I return to the process of coding and analysis in paragraph 2.1.5. For triangulation I conducted a survey among church members and villagers about their experiences and expectations of the church. This meant that I could compare my field notes from the participant observations, the transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, the survey outcomes, and documents with each other.<sup>19</sup> Finally I studied the context, by visiting non-church activities in the church building, joining village meetings, and speaking to cooperation partners. The aim was to see what outsiders notice of the congregations and how they envision the role of the church. The focus group formats, interview schedules, and surveys can be found in appendix B. For a list of participant observations, see the primary data sections in the bibliography.

A significant number of people from both case studies were not only interested in the research, but also very supportive in offering practical assistance and providing valuable information. In both case studies unique opportunities occurred.<sup>20</sup> When I arrived in Brabant the church council already had the intention of carrying out a study in the congregation to learn what people expected of the church. This meant that there was an intrinsic motivation to participate in my research project. Therefore it was possible to carry out the focus groups and the survey of the congregation in close cooperation with a couple of church members. However, this also meant that I had to be aware of how my research agenda and that of the church council coincided and differed from each other. An important difference was that my research was more directed at the church within the village context, while the church council focussed more on the church's internal relations. In Groningen I participated in the preparation of two church services in Noordbroek. This offered the opportunity to work together with several respondents and reflect on what was being done. During the research I was also surprised to discover that *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* (Platform Church and Earthquake) developed a very similar quest to find ways in which the church could contribute to the quality of life in Groningen.

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<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Perspectives*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 35.

### 2.1.3 | Traveling to the Peel Area in North-Brabant

The fieldwork in North-Brabant started in October 2012 with a telephone call to the minister of the Protestant congregation Asten-Someren. She indicated that the research fitted in with a question that the church council intended to explore among church members: what do you expect of the church (i.e. the Protestant congregation in Asten and Someren) and what can the congregation expect of you? During the introductory talk with the church council it was agreed that this question could be incorporated into my broader research project.<sup>21</sup> The church council suggested that I cooperated with Bart, a former church council member who was prepared to carry out the research.<sup>22</sup> The congregation was informed about the research via an article in the church newsletter and I introduced myself during a congregational evening.

In the autumn of 2012 I spent a couple of days in the area almost every week, staying with church members. My aim was to become familiar with the congregation and village societies. I asked people to tell me about church activities and village events I should not miss. I visited church services, church council meetings, activities, meals, and discussion evenings. During these participant observations I particularly focussed on references to cooperation partners, involvement with village life, and liveability issues. In this way I tried to map the network of the congregation from the inside. I learned about the ecumenical contacts with the parishes in Lierop and Someren and with the convent in Asten. I heard about the so-called *Koepelkerk* Concerts in Lierop and the involvement of the minister with the former Protestant school and the so-called *Ziekentriduüm*, a three-day festival for sick and elderly people. At the same time I followed the local news site *Siris* for interesting activities which enabled me to form an image of the village context.<sup>23</sup> I visited a lecture organised by the history society and an afternoon of the *KBO* (Catholic Union for the Elderly) in Someren-Heide. Furthermore I took a regional perspective, interviewing a congregation advisor and visiting regional meetings.

#### *Focus Groups and Survey*

In April 2013 I joined a church council meeting to report my first findings. The church council agreed to the plan which Bart and I had designed to map what church members expected of the church. We suggested forming a couple of focus groups in which church members could discuss their notions of church. Initially we planned to organise focus groups for different age groups and in different villages. The questions were formulated with a workgroup of 4 church members (see appendix B.IV). People were invited in the church newsletter and personally approached by members of the work group. However, it proved difficult to find people who were willing to participate. With some effort three groups were formed with a total of 19 participants and on three evenings in May 2013 the focus groups were carried out. The discussions were led by committee members and I joined the meet-

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<sup>21</sup> With the church council a list of agreements was settled and signed by president church council, prof. de Roest and myself.

<sup>22</sup> The names of the respondents are anonymized.

<sup>23</sup> *Siris*, <https://siris.nl/nieuws>, accessed 1 September 2012-30 June 2018.

ings as a listener. The participants valued the discussions and wondered why they did not have these kinds of conversations more often. My intention was to interpret the transcriptions together with the work groups, but the members lacked the time so I transcribed and coded the recordings of the focus groups to discover dominant themes.

Bart and I presented the results of the focus groups to the church council in October 2013. The members were disappointed about the response because they had hoped to receive reactions from a large group of church members, in particular from non-practicing members. It made the church council wonder how representative the results were. As a research team we suggested drawing up a survey. Via the survey the main findings from the focus groups could be tested.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore a broader group of people could be asked what they expected of the church. It also enabled me to gather data about people's involvement with church and society and the role of church and faith in daily life. In the spring of 2014 the survey was finalized (see appendix B.V). To generate as much response as possible contact persons were found who were prepared to distribute the surveys among the 400 church members and collect them in person after two weeks.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of E-mail addresses had made a digital survey impossible. Therefore the paper surveys were digitalized by Johans Brink, a student assistant, who also assisted me with the SPSS analysis. I analysed the data by looking at age, church involvement and place of residence. During a congregational evening in October 2014 we presented the results of the survey. Subsequently church members were invited to talk further about a theme which they found most interesting: preparing a special service, publicity, cooperation with other (Protestant) churches, looking after each other within the congregation or a diaconal project. Afterwards I read in a church newsletter that the brainstorming about a diaconal project had resulted in a fundraiser for an educative cultural project in Gambia through the organisation of a world meal, during which Gambian dishes were served.<sup>26</sup> The event made clear that diaconal work entails more than collecting money during the church service.<sup>27</sup>

### *Looking at the Context*

In October 2013 I returned to Brabant, where I interviewed a pastor of the convent in Asten and visited an evensong, Holy Communion, and morning prayer in Catholic churches in Asten and Someren. In order to form an image of the most urgent liveability questions I went to a meeting of the *KBO* in Asten about the changes in care provision and spoke with a local councillor. In December 2013 I had a telephone interview with a local councillor from Someren.

In September 2014 I visited the *Ziekentriduüm* in Someren. In 2012 the *Ziekentriduüm* had been the cause of a heated discussion about ecumenism. I found the *Ziekentriduüm* interesting for my research, because it is one of the moments that the Protestant congregation becomes more visible through the participation of the minister in services and the Mary Homage. I interviewed a church member who had managed the church archive for many years, spoke with the pastor of Lierop, and joined a meeting of the *Koepelkerk* concert committee.

<sup>24</sup> D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, London, Sage Publications, 2013 p. 267.

<sup>25</sup> The survey was returned by 141 people: 78 respondents live in Someren, 32 in Asten, 8 in another village and 23 did not fill in the questionnaire.

<sup>26</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Wereldmaaltijd in gemeentecentrum Someren', *Siris*, 28 February 2015.

<sup>27</sup> *De Brug: Kerkblad voor de Protestantse Gemeente te Asten-Someren* (51:9), October 2016.

## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

In April 2015 I concluded my fieldwork with a couple of interviews with 'outsiders'. I spoke with a welfare worker, teaching staff of the ecumenical primary school, members of a Catholic choir, and the pastor of a nursing home where the minister has led Christmas and Easter services since 2014. During these semi-structured 'outside' interviews (see appendix B.I) I asked about the organisations' aims and how they worked. Subsequently I asked what these respondents noticed from the (Protestant) church and to what extent there was cooperation. These conversations offered insight into the way 'outsiders' perceive the (Protestant) church.

### *Involved from a Distance*

In the summer of 2013 the church building in Asten was closed. For my research interests this was an intriguing moment: how would people experience this closure and what would it mean for the role the Protestant church played in village society? However, because I was on maternity leave I was not able to follow the developments from a close distance. Therefore I decided to ask six church members to keep a diary about the closing of the church. To help them on their way I sent an E-mail every fortnight with a question (see appendix B.III). The benefit of this approach was that the project led to a wonderful portrait of a memorable period. The respondents themselves indicated that answering the questions helped them to explicate their feelings and provided them with new perspectives. I interrupted my leave to attend the closing service in August 2013.

In 2016 I followed at a distance via church newsletters and local media how the Protestant and Catholic churches organised a play about refugees. In June 2016 Someren and Asten were hit hard by a hailstorm, leaving no roof undamaged and causing a lot of distress for farmers who saw their crops and buildings damaged.<sup>28</sup> I called the minister to ask how the church responded and how she as a minister dealt with the situation. She told me that she had paid a number of pastoral visits, but also that Dankdag (*Thanksgiving day*) that year gained new meaning, because a number of people had literally lost their crops and some were worried about the continuation of their farm.<sup>29</sup>

### **2.1.4 | Wandering through the Groninger Ommelanden**

Already in August 2012 I had an introductory interview with a church council member and the minister of the *Hervormde* (Reformed) congregations in Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild, and Noordbroek. Eventually I started the fieldwork in December 2013 in more or less the same way as in Brabant. I presented myself and my research during a church council meeting and wrote about the research plans in the church newsletter.<sup>30</sup>

In the first half of 2014 I visited church services in the four village churches, and the nursing homes in Slochteren and Noordbroek. I followed the activity program of Bible -

<sup>28</sup> 'Hagelstenen als tennisballen in Asten en Someren', *Siris*, 23 June 2016; Tim Hanssen, 'Verbijstering na hagelstorm', *Siris*, 24 June 2016; 'Miljoenschade in Zuid-Oost Brabant na noodweer, kassen en oogsten verwoest', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 23 June 2016; Ruud Spoor, 'Jaar na verwoestende hagelbui in Someren en Luyksgestel: ongerust bij elke code geel', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 17 June 2017.

<sup>29</sup> 'Dankdag voor gewas en arbeid: 6 November', *De Brug* (51:10), November 2016.

<sup>30</sup> With the church council a list of agreements was settled and signed by the president of the church council, prof. de Roest and myself.

## Chapter 2

and discussion groups, singing group, Sunday school, meals, and maintenance work on church yards. I went to church council meetings, gatherings of ministers, workgroups, and regional meetings of Protestant churches. I also visited non-church events in the village churches: the concerts in Hellum, the cultural day and the Christmas walk in Noordbroek. Subsequently I looked for places where the congregation organised activities outside the church building to trace cooperation partners. As in Brabant I interviewed representatives who, as involved outsiders, could tell me more about the dynamic between churches and villages, such as a teacher of the primary school and the minister of the *Gereformeerde kerk Vrijgemaakt* (Reformed Liberated Church). In February 2016 I attended the handing over of the church of Noordbroek to the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* (Foundation Old Groninger Churches). The congregation was no longer able to maintain the building so it was transferred to this heritage foundation, which owns 84 churches in Groningen.<sup>31</sup>

### *Looking at the Context*

From the beginning I tried to find my way in the four village communities. During participant observation I asked people to which village events, groups, and places I should go if I wanted to get to know the village. In this way I heard about the Overschild village play, an ad hoc concert in a barn in Schildwolde on Liberation day, and a meeting of bell ringers in Noordbroek. In Hellum I went to the Remembrance service on the 4th of May, the Advent celebration in the public school, the performance of the drama club, and the monthly café in the village hall. I contacted the village societies to join one of their meetings to get an impression of the liveability questions they faced. At the time of my arrival the tower of Schildwolde was to be transferred from the church to a village foundation.<sup>32</sup> I was interested to know more about the implications of this transfer and to see how the church community would be represented in the new foundation. But when I asked to join a meeting, the request was refused, because one of the members objected to my presence. This was the only occasion that access was denied. Many other people were willing to cooperate. I interviewed the president of the Schildwolde village club, the mayor of Slochteren and a local councillor of the municipality Menterwolde, to which Noordbroek belongs, about the most urgent liveability issues and their (lack of) relation to the church. I visited activities of a municipal inspiration festival in March 2014 to see what questions about quality of life were asked on a regional level.<sup>33</sup> I had telephone interviews with village organisations such as the social team of Slochteren and the public school in Schildwolde.

After the first explorations in the spring of 2014, I used the summer to dig somewhat deeper. I wanted to know more about the meaning people attributed to church, the role of the church community, or the church building in their daily life. Together with a group of church members, I prepared a church service in Noordbroek, in which the medieval fresco of Saint Christopher had a central place. A focus group interview with the guides led to an interesting initiative: to repeat the Saint Christopher service on Heritage day in September.

<sup>31</sup> *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*, <http://www.groningerkerken.nl/index.php?s=1&m=1&id=77>, accessed 15 October 2016.

<sup>32</sup> 'Stichting Juffertoren Schildwolde stelt zich voor', *t Bokkeblad*, 15 July 2015.

<sup>33</sup> *Open Inspiratie Festival 2014*, <http://www.oif0598.nl/>, 10 February 2014.

## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

This was an example of how cultural heritage intertwines with religious tradition and how village and church found common ground. I also followed how in Hellum the church council explored possibilities for cooperation with the cultural committee, but this cooperation proved difficult.

Gradually I discovered that the church was part of various local and regional networks. In the autumn of 2014 I attended the start of an interchurch diaconal platform within the municipality of Slochteren, which was triggered by the changes in legislation regarding care and welfare in the 'participation society' (see further chapter 4.2). I visited a church service and discussion evening of the *Vereniging Vrijzinnig Protestanten* (Society of Liberal Protestants), of which the church community of Noordbroek forms a part. Afterwards I interviewed the pastor and visitors who had taken part in the liberal church service. I also saw how the Christmas preparations started in the villages. The church council searched for possibilities to organise a Christmas service with the villagers of Hellum. A meeting with the activity committee in December 2014 resulted in a service with a living nativity scene only four weeks later. The service took up the theme of the Advent celebration in the public village school. In Noordbroek I joined the preparations for the Christmas walk by several village groups. These various meetings revealed intriguing insights into what church and religion mean in daily life. It also offered opportunities for impromptu group interviews to ask people about their conceptions of church: their experiences with and expectations of the church, in short their ordinary ecclesiology.

### *Focus Groups and Survey*

After I had followed the congregation in Groningen for a full calendar year I had gained an overview of what the 'village ecclesial year' consisted of. But what did it mean for people? I organised a couple of focus groups, one with church members of Schildwolde, Hellum and Overschild. Another was with the guides of Noordbroek, who are mainly outsiders to the church community (see appendix B.IV). I used the spring of 2015 for follow-up interviews and participant observations. I approached the group who had prepared the 2013 Christmas service in Overschild to ask them about their involvement. The 4th of May committee in Hellum allowed me to join their preparations and I also had interviews with a group of church members in Noordbroek. I wanted to know more about the ideas, aims, expectations, and reception of the various activities (see appendix B.I).

In the same period I repeated the survey that I had used in Brabant with church members, although with slightly different questions (see appendix B.V). The survey was conducted in various stages. In January the survey was distributed and collected again together with a request for church members to give their yearly financial contribution in Schildwolde and Overschild. In Hellum non-church members could also be approached in this way. Because the response was disappointing, I carried out an adjusted survey among churchgoers of the *Vrijgemaakte* church in Schildwolde in April 2015. In Noordbroek the survey was dispatched together with the church newsletter which is also read by non-members.<sup>34</sup> In the

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<sup>34</sup> In total 187 surveys were returned, of which 71 came from the Reformed Church Liberated. Of the remaining 116, 56 respondents were not members of the SOHN congregation and 5 were registered in another church. Of the total respondents, 69 live in Schildwolde and Overschild, 51 in Hellum and Siddeburen, 44, mainly Reformed

accompanying letter people were also offered the opportunity to fill in the survey digitally. In August 2015 I presented the results to the church council and published a series of 5 articles in the church newsletter.

### *Church and Earthquakes*

Kathleen Jenkins remarks that sometimes 'the field may throw you an unexpected gift of data that begs inclusion, despite the additional labour.'<sup>35</sup> The development of *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* was such an unexpected gift, although one I would gladly have returned, because of the enormous negative impact of the earthquakes on the physical and social environment of Groningen. From 2013 onwards the discussion about the environmental, economic, physical, and social consequences of the earthquakes caused by the natural gas extraction in Groningen increased. Within the community of ministers in the *classis* (regional consultation of Protestant congregations) North-East Groningen the question was raised whether the churches should do something. In cooperation with the Protestant Theological University a conference was organised in May 2014 which led to the ecumenical *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*.<sup>36</sup> I joined the platform as an advisory member, because it offered an excellent opportunity to see how churches tried to respond to a liveability question. As will become clear in chapter 9.5 the contribution of the church in this debate is far from self-evident. 'Church and earthquakes' became the theme of a practical theology course for bachelor students in 2015 and 2016. The students carried out interviews among people from different parts of Groningen who were more or less involved with the church. The interviews provided valuable information for both the Platform and my research.

### **2.1.5 | Perspectives for Coding and Analysis**

The work of a researcher consists largely of piecing together fragments of text, much like an archaeologist pieces together fragments of pottery or parts of a poem by Sappho.

The world is full of loosely connected texts, bits and pieces, scraps of paper, all with a meaning: tickets, posters, and postcards. It is random who gets written in and what image is shown. People/events/times and places are written in and out of history, it happens all the time – depending on who found what stories and who does the editing.<sup>37</sup>

This confronts the researcher and writer not only with the relativity of his position, but also with the epistemological requirement to write yourself into the research. To make clear from what standpoint you look, which filters are used to select relevant data and how insights are derived from the data. This means that the process of coding already starts during the fieldwork, when a researcher is selecting what information is relevant for the research question. In my case the concepts of quality of life and church were constantly in the back of my mind, functioning as lenses through which I looked at the field.

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Liberated respondents, live in Slochteren and 23 in Noordbroek.

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins, 'Faith in Ethnographic', p. 186.

<sup>36</sup> Symposium *Kerk op een bevende aarde*, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Groningen, 13 May 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Speedy, 'Staring at the Park', Key-note lecture *Emotional Geographies Conference*, Edinburgh, 10-12 June 2015.



## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

The concept of quality of life directed the way I looked at village life and which people and organisations I approached, such as village associations and municipality representatives. I tried to form a picture of the main liveability questions in the area, but also of the initiatives which people thought important for their quality of life. With the liveability questions of the regions in mind I looked for places where church interacted with these issues, such as the *Ziekentriduüm* and the village hall board with a church representative. I scrutinized the church newsletters and church practices to see what quality of life issues were addressed, such as poverty, refugees, care, and earthquakes in Groningen.

From the perspective of church I was looking for moments, places, people, and events which made something of the church visible in village life. I was looking for practices that could be related to the church communities and had an effect on the quality of life. A practice can be linked to the church because of where it takes place, for example in a church building, but also because of the people who are involved, the moment it takes place, the actual act that is performed or because of the aims for which it is initiated. In these practices church can often be related to another sphere or domain of society such as care, culture, or school. At these crossroads the position of church and religion in society and the meaning of ritual and reflection for quality of life become apparent.

### Data set

These combined perspectives led to the use of multiple methods: I looked at newspapers which report not only how disappearing public services and mobility problems threaten the liveability in villages, but also how initiatives are developed to maintain or increase the local quality of life. I analysed local and regional newspapers in which both policymakers and ordinary country people speak about liveability in everyday language. In this way they express not only how they understand a concept such as quality of life, but also their ideals and worldview. I searched for the concept '*leefbaar(heid)*' in the regional newspapers *Peelbelang* and *Eindhovens Dagblad* from Brabant and '*t Bokkeblad* and *Dagblad van het Noorden* from Groningen. Next I categorized the topics to which the concept was related: such as mobility, services, and community initiatives in relation to care and maintenance of the physical environment.

Furthermore, I used participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. I made field notes of the participant observation in Dutch. I also took photos to study the use of space, objects, and material culture.<sup>38</sup> The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed in Dutch. The survey results were analysed and coded in Excel worksheets. Participant observation and focus groups among various groups, in combination with the use of various other methods made triangulation possible. During interviews my interpretation of observations could be checked with respondents and the analysis of the focus groups contributed a couple of statements that were incorporated into the surveys. This made it possible to ascertain to what extent opinions were shared by more people and helped me to enhance the validity of my data.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Silverman, *Doing Qualitative*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>39</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, pp. 131-134.

### Coding

The analysis of data already starts in the early stages of the research, when data are gathered and transcribed.<sup>40</sup> During this process choices are made regarding which data are relevant and which are not. In the analysis the theories and the data interact with each other in the development of a coding system. An exploration of the concepts of liveability and quality of life (see chapter 3) brought into view various aspects, such as mobility, health, physical environment, and social network, to which I added the aspects of worldview, and well-being. The theory of Frans Thissen brought codes such as physical meeting place, social capital, and community initiatives. In relation to the concept of church, David Walker's fourfold model of belonging, distinguishing between place, people, activities, and events was helpful. These theories provided me with initial codes which enabled me to get a grip on the data.<sup>41</sup> Gradually codes from the field were added, which enriched, and questioned the initial codes.

Working through the data it became clear how the codes 'worked' in daily life, how they related, and intersected with each other. The concepts of meeting place, and belonging through place could be related to the church building, but also to other places where the church community was present. I looked at how the church building is used as a meeting place, and contributes to the physical environment. This revealed how people attribute meaning to places, and how these meanings shape their practices. The concept of social capital and belonging through people could be connected to (in)formal cooperation between church community and other groups. I discovered how church can create both social cohesion and social segregation. Looking at community initiatives brought into view activities and events organised by the church or in which the church participated.

Practices reveal implicit worldviews and theological perspectives. When people talk about what they do and why, these worldviews can be brought to the surface and explicated. The field notes and the transcripts of focus groups and interviews provided me with narratives. I analysed how people talk about, characterise, and understand what is going on. In Emerson's view, following a constructionist approach, 'the meaning of events is not transparent, but is actively constructed by participants.'<sup>42</sup> The narratives provided me with the meanings that are attributed to places, people, or practices through which church and quality of life could be related to each other.

## 2.2 | Reflections on the Research Process

Ethnographic fieldwork is surrounded with questions and dilemmas for the researcher. The first question is how to introduce the research to the respondents. Second, what attitude should I take as a researcher during participant observation? Third, what is the best way to record data? Furthermore I had to deal with a couple of differences between the case studies. Another question was how to give feedback to the participating communities in order to check interpretations of data. And finally what are the effects of the research activities on the field?

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<sup>40</sup> Silverman, *Doing Qualitative*, pp. 150, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, pp. 174-175.

## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

### *Introducing the Research*

When I arrived at a place for the first time I had to introduce myself and the research. For ethical reasons people have to know that they are being observed. Respondents in focus groups, interviews, and discussion groups were asked to sign an informed consent form.<sup>43</sup> I also explained that I would use pseudonyms for the respondents. Opening up about the aim of the research often makes this the subject of conversation. At such occasions the researcher influences the practices being studied, which left me wondering what would have happened otherwise. This dilemma makes clear the added value of hanging around for some time. When the researcher becomes a familiar face the events can take their ordinary course.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, these mini-interviews about church in the village provided valuable information, and often put me on the trail of other interesting meetings, practices, and activities.

Related to this is the question of which language you use when you enter the field. The choice of discourse and the way concepts are explained determine the course of the research. It guides the way respondents look at and speak about practices. When a researcher uses vague and abstract terms, people may not understand what the research is about. For example scientific terms like liveability and social capital are not generally understood. But when more concrete and specific concepts are used, the researcher runs the risk that some aspects are overlooked which might have been relevant. Terms like church, diaconal, and missional are susceptible to a specific interpretation and can evoke some aversion. Therefore, when I introduced my research I usually said that I was investigating the role of the church in the village. I deliberately left the term church open, because I wanted to see which aspects of church people associated with the term. Sometimes I also used the concept of liveability, to give the general question about the role of the church a bit more focus.

### *Reflexivity of the Researcher*

During the fieldwork I observed the events closely; I listened to what people were saying, but also participated in the events, sometimes even taking the role of a leader. The position I took differed from situation to situation. In most cases I found myself on the one hand trying to participate as any other participant, just chatting along, showing an interest in the lives of other people, but also telling stories about myself to gain some trust and mutual recognition. These stories often comprised a mixture of personal details like where I live and research questions. If I had just remained sitting in a corner, my presence would probably have been more 'disturbing'. People would have been more aware of my presence as a researcher and might feel observed. The method of chatting along made it possible to gain information about how and why things were done and how people experienced events.

During church council meetings I usually listened, but I also asked questions when terms or decisions were unclear. The church council meetings were also opportunities to discuss research plans, keep people informed, acquire consent, report research results, and ask for

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<sup>43</sup> Idem, pp. 257-259.

<sup>44</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, pp. 65-66.

feedback. During discussion evenings my first aim was to follow the course the conversation took, to map the path people were walking together. But it was not unusual for me to also enter into the discussion at some point, often during the second half of the evening. Sometimes I was asked to give my opinion, tell about my experience or to draw on my expertise concerning a certain topic. On other occasions I was the one who took the initiative for the intervention by asking a question, for clarification, or to invite people to elaborate further on a certain topic when I thought it might be of interest for the research.

On a number of occasions I took a leading role, for instance when I took up the invitation to prepare a church service in Noordbroek with some people from the congregation. We had several meetings, during which I acted more as a panel chairman, or minister, rather than a researcher. The notes I made were more related to the content of the services, and the arrangements we had made than to the information people had shared with me. But still, the process of preparing the Saint Christopher church services proved valuable for data gathering. Working with a group of non-churchgoing guides in preparing the reprise of the service was especially interesting, because the preparation revealed some interesting notions they had of church and church services.

In the whole process one question was constantly in the back of my mind: how does and how can the congregation connect with activities, needs, and interests in the village context? The result was that I sometimes received concrete suggestions from respondents, which I passed on to the church councils. For example the president of the village association in Schildwolde suggested announcing the traditional morning walk on Ascension day in the local newspaper. On other occasions I came across activities, which could also have been organised by the church. Examples include celebrations at a primary school in Helsum or courses on personal development or coping with grief by a welfare organisation in Someren. Sometimes during the process the feeling came over me that the church was losing more and more ground – when a Protestant school closed or a nursing home where the church was active, or when a church building was transferred or a jumble sale stopped. It was sometimes difficult to avoid the risk of becoming actively involved in the survival attitude within the congregations to bring more people into the church.

### *Gathering Data*

Participant observation involves actions such as looking, listening, and talking, which also raise practical questions. First, there is the place from which the researcher views the events. It is inevitable that you miss certain things, so what is the best place to sit during a church service or a concert? Is it in the front where you can see exactly what is happening 'on the stage', but where you miss how people are reacting behind you? Or is it in the back where you are also able to see some other people's reactions, but you might also miss a part of the performance?<sup>45</sup>

I was also aware of the fact that I only heard the stories of some people, but not of others. During my fieldwork I also noticed that I sometimes ended up talking to people I had talked to before. Sometimes people recognized me and came to inquire after my work and

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<sup>45</sup> James V. Spickard, 'The Porcupine Tango', pp. 177-178.

## An Ethnographic Exploration of Two Case Studies

on other occasions I was unintentionally drawn to familiar faces. This meant that I probably missed some chances to hear other stories, but it also showed me how outsiders find their way in a new community: when you have got to know some people, it is very easy to catch up with them when you meet another time.

The activities I attended were of diverging nature. This also influenced the way I recorded my data. During church council meetings I usually made notes on a laptop. Because conversations in discussion groups often take place in an atmosphere of confidentiality, it seemed inappropriate to use an audio recorder or laptop. Most often I made notes with pen and paper, which I would later transcribe. Interviews and focus groups were all audio-recorded, with the consent of the participants, in order to enable detailed analysis.

Sometimes I was not able to record directly. Events like a walk or a meal were not suitable for making notes. During church services and concerts I often wrote down short notes on a leaflet or booklet. This could lead to curiosity among people sitting around me, which in some cases led to interesting conversations. Sometimes I used an audio recorder during a church service or concert. This enabled me to participate as an ordinary listener, trying to see the reactions of other people and experience the atmosphere of the moment. During coffee breaks and afterwards I often had small conversations with other visitors, asking them how they experienced the event. Although I did not make notes during these conversations as a reporter, most people were aware of my role as a researcher. People often asked what I was doing here, either because they had not seen me before, or because they saw me making notes. I realised that careful gathering of data sometimes meant recording and making detailed notes, while on other occasions this would have led to awkward situations or formed a threat to the confidentiality.

### *Unevenness between Case Studies*

One of the problems during the fieldwork was the unevenness between the case studies. In Brabant I had to look at the role of the church in two villages, while in Groningen four church-village relations were explored. A more crucial factor was the difference in distance. From my home in Groningen, it is more than a three hours' drive to Brabant, while I could join a church service or concert in the province of Groningen in half an hour. The result is that the number of participant observations and interviews is much higher in Groningen than in Brabant. Nevertheless, the long distance to Brabant had the advantage that I was usually forced to stay there for one or two nights, which meant that I got an impression of what it was like to live in Asten and Someren.

In practice it was difficult to really keep in touch with the congregation in Brabant. I tried to follow the developments by reading the church council minutes and the church newsletter, visiting the local news website, and by calling the minister and Bart from time to time. I realised that I was dependent on respondents to keep me informed of what was going on. Although I repeatedly asked people in person and in the newsletters to tell me about interesting events, I seldom received suggestions. It was necessary to be physically present to discover ideas for further participant observation and interesting respondents. In Groningen this was easier than in Brabant. An attempt to repeat the diary project, by

## Chapter 2

asking people to write about their daily interaction with the church community failed. This was partly due to the fact that by that time in 2014 I had started the fieldwork in Groningen, which required most of my attention.

There are two other differences between the data from Groningen and Brabant. First, the survey in Brabant was only taken by church members, while in Groningen I was also able to approach people who were not members of the Protestant church. Due to time constraints I was unable to return to Brabant to conduct the survey among other groups. Second, in the Groninger context the earthquakes brought on an urgent liveability question with which the churches sought to engage. Although the Protestant congregation in Brabant showed concern for several social issues, an equivalent to the crisis caused by the earthquakes was (fortunately) lacking. The hailstorm of June 2016 disrupted village life significantly, but I was not able to carry out detailed participant observations, because I had concluded the fieldwork.

### *Feedback*

An important step in the research process is to return to the respondents with the tentative results for feedback to discuss the interpretation of the data.<sup>46</sup> On several occasions I offered feedback to the community. After the explorative phase I presented my impressions to the church council. The results of the focus groups and surveys were discussed with the church council and reported to the congregation, in Brabant during a congregational evening and in Groningen via the church newsletter. In the final stage I sent the fieldwork chapters to the respondents and asked their consent for the references to them. People indicated that they recognized the narratives and one of the ministers was also surprised and empowered by the accounts. It proved difficult to mobilise people to really become co-owners of the research project, because they lacked the time.

Gradually I became aware that the question of how the church plays a role in the village was interpreted in various ways. The church councils primarily wanted answers about how they could survive as a church in the village. I, however, wanted to know how the position of the congregations in the villages could be strengthened by looking at the needs and questions in the local context. For example, after the presentation of the survey results a church council member remarked: "Can we go on now? We have not got around discussing our own things." Yet the survey was executed in consultation with the church council and also included a couple of questions which they had contributed. Although the congregations felt an urgency to find new forms of being church and indicated that they wanted to be church in the village, their primary concern was with surviving and not with exploring the needs in the context.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Silverman, *Doing Qualitative*, p. 267.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

### *Performative Effects of the Research Process*

I noticed that my presence in the congregations and the villages, asking questions, bringing people together, and making connections between various circles led to some alterations. It raised awareness in the congregations about the meaning of church and religion in the village. The very act of asking questions and systematically observing changed the congregation's life.<sup>48</sup> My research clearly exerted some influence. In an ageing congregation the arrival of a young female with an unfamiliar face called for some explanation.<sup>49</sup> When I explained the research question, this often resonated with my conversation partners. This could also mean that the research question became the central subject of the conversation, which also influenced the character of the meeting.<sup>50</sup>

I also found that after several months of turning up at various places in the Groninger case study I was more known than the minister, who with a part time appointment lacked the time to be present at all village events. It also seemed that I sometimes gained access more easily to groups and events than people who were more connected to the local church. Although there was sometimes considerable scepticism about the church, I found little opposition in my fieldwork. Most people were willing to contribute. I also heard that people were willing to fill in the survey out of a sense of loyalty to me. This means that my research work in itself, visiting various village groups and regional organisations, provided insights into how village churches can build networks and revealed both opportunities and resistance.

What struck me time and again was the performative effect of interviews and focus groups.<sup>51</sup> Questions from a researcher or remarks by other focus group members could lead to new insights. Because I asked questions about how the church is involved in local livability, the minister in Brabant went to the rehearsal of a village brass band after a young man had died in a tragic accident.<sup>52</sup> Focus groups often changed relations between people, strengthening bonds within the congregation, because people got to know each other better. Focus groups also led to new ideas and practices. The focus group with the guides of Noordbroek led to the organisation of a special service on Heritage day. Fiddes speaks about transforming practice, in which the researcher and respondents develop a shared habitus in which practices are reinterpreted together and maybe altered.<sup>53</sup> My questions often triggered a thinking process with the respondents which led to suggestions about how the congregation could mean more for village society or at least become more visible.

The research project enabled me to follow the developments within two Protestant congregations for several years. I became acquainted with many people, who not only allowed me to join them in various activities, but also shared their life stories. After I had concluded my fieldwork, the developments continued and people carried on with their lives.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners*, Berkeley, University of California, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Silverman, *Doing Qualitative*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>50</sup> Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> H.P. de Roest, 'The Focus Group Method in Practical Ecclesiology: Performative Effects and Ecclesiological Rationale', in: *Ecclesial Practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (2:2), pp. 235-254.

<sup>52</sup> Annual report minister Someren, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds', in: P. Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology*, pp. 13-35, there p. 35.

## Chapter 2

Some people moved away, some people died, children were born, and new people joined the congregation. Life also went on in the villages. A school and a nursing home closed down and new initiatives were started. This means that some of the situations I describe no longer exist as such. In time this contemporary sketch of village church life will have become part of church history. Nevertheless, I hope that it provides new insights and unexpected perspectives on the meaning of churches in a rural context.



# Chapter 3

## Rural developments and Quality of Life in North-Brabant and Groningen

The sketch of my family history in chapter 1 illustrates the significant changes that have taken place in the countryside over the past decades, both in the rural way of life and in agriculture, including agricultural specialisation, upscaling, and mechanisation. These developments have been described by Geert Mak in his bestseller *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd* (How God disappeared from Jorwerd).<sup>1</sup> The title has almost become a proverb indicating the transitions in rural society. Mak describes how a society that was wholly dependent on agriculture and predominantly self-sufficient, changed.<sup>2</sup> The village population gradually altered. Social geographer Frans Thissen characterises this transition as a shift from an autonomous village, where people had their house, work, social contacts, and facilities, to a residential village (*woondorp*).<sup>3</sup> Increased mobility enabled people to live in one place and go elsewhere for their work, social life, shopping, and also church, in some cases.<sup>4</sup>

The arrival of people from cities and an increase in cars also brought another, more urban, way of life. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman argues that this lifestyle 'is not best characterized by a decline in the number and closeness of a person's ties, but by the fact of their choice and their embeddedness in a larger matrix of [...] segmented relationships.'<sup>5</sup> Life becomes fragmented between various circles of people, which do not necessarily overlap.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of Mak's book is often paraphrased: 'Hoe God verscheen in de lage landen', *Het verleden van Nederland*, 19 October 2008; Harriët Salm, 'Hoe God verdwijnt uit de school', *Trouw*, 1 October 2009; Regnerus Steensma, 'Hoe God opnieuw verschijnt in Zeerijp: Vormen van Godsbeleving in een oude kerk', in: Justin Kroesen, et al. (eds.), *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland: Observaties en interpretaties*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2010, pp. 14-21; E.P. Meijering, *Hoe God verdween uit de Tweede Kamer: De ondergang van de christelijke politiek*, Amsterdam, Balans, 2012; D. Otten, *Hoe God verscheen in Friesland: Missie en macht in Frisia*, Deventer, Deventer Universitaire Pers, 2014; Teri van der Heijden, 'Hoe God verdween uit de winkelstraat', *NRC*, 20 July 2015; 'Hoe God (bijna) verdween uit Nederland', *NOS*, 13 March 2016, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2092498-hoe-god-bijna-verdween-uit-nederland.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Geert Mak, *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd: Een Nederlands dorp in de twintigste eeuw*, Amsterdam, Atlas, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Frans Thissen, 'Leefbaarheid en vitaliteit van dorpen: mythes en uitdagingen', Gouda, 2009; W. Ostendorf, Frans Thissen, 'Dorpen als woonmilieus in Nederland', *Ruimte en planning* (21:4), 2001, pp. 327-329, in: Korrie Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio: Regionale leefbaarheid en identiteiten in Noord-Groningen tijdens de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw*, Groningen, Stichting Groninger Historische Publicaties, 2013, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Dirk Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen: Een sociologisch onderzoek naar het platteland van Noord-Groningen*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1997, p. 351.

People are no longer tied to the place where they live for their work, school, shops, and social life.<sup>6</sup> The boundaries between urban and rural have become fluid and this has consequences for the social infrastructure and social cohesion of villages or, in more general terms, the liveability or quality of life. This means that people relate to their living environment in different ways, as I will explain below.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter I address the first sub-question: How are liveability and quality of life in the countryside of Brabant and Groningen conceived? I start with a characterisation of the countryside and how various dimensions can be distinguished that shape rural areas. In section 3.2 I describe how the concept of liveability became closely connected with the countryside. I explore the theory of social geographer Frans Thissen as a tool for understanding liveability. An analysis of regional newspapers from Brabant and Groningen helps to uncover how liveability is experienced in the regions around the case studies. In section 3.3 I address the question about the extent to which liveability is a useful and suitable concept for analysing the role and meaning of village churches. I argue that it is necessary to take a broader perspective, which the concept of quality of life offers.

### 3.1 | Characterisation of the Countryside in Brabant and Groningen

When working on research about the countryside, the first question is how one defines 'countryside'.<sup>8</sup> Where should one draw the line between urban and rural? When leaving a city, it is often unclear at what point the countryside begins. A general characteristic of the countryside is the fact that less people live there. However, cities are often surrounded by rather anonymous industrial areas where very few people live, but which are not described as countryside – more often the reverse. Most people envision the countryside as green and spacious. Furthermore, expanding towns tend to incorporate smaller villages, turning them into suburbs. Can these villages that adjoin new estates and from which the advancing city is visible, be considered rural? The answer depends on what perspective is used.

#### *Dimensions*

Social geographers like Ruth Panelli distinguish between various dimensions of the countryside. The rural environment is shaped by spatial, socio-economic, sociocultural, and political settings and processes, which constrain and/or enable people's lives.<sup>9</sup> First, the

<sup>6</sup> Paul Cloke, 'Conceptualizing Rurality', in: Paul J. Cloke, Terry Marsden, Patrick H. Mooney (eds.), *The Handbook of Rural Studies*, London, SAGE, 2006, pp. 18-29; Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, pp. 21-24, 142.

<sup>7</sup> David Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theological and Sociological Perspectives', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins (eds.), *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, London, Equinox, 2012, pp. 106-110.

<sup>8</sup> See also: Pim Kooij, *Town and Countryside in a Dutch Perspective*, Groningen, Nederlands Agronomisch Historisch Instituut, 2010, pp. 209-220; A. Steenbekkers, L. Vermeij (eds.), *De dorpenmonitor: Ontwikkelingen in de leefsituatie van dorpsbewoners*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2013; L. Vermeij, J. Gieling, *Dorpse doe-democratie: Lokaal burgerschap bekeken vanuit verschillende groepen dorpsbewoners*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Panelli, 'Young rural lives: strategies beyond diversity', in: *Journal of Rural Studies* (18), 2002, pp. 113-122; Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, pp. 71-99, 177-182, 228-231; Lianne Boomars, Marjan Hidding, *Leefbaarheids-effectrapportage: Leefbaarheid niet langer blinde vlek in de besluitvorming*, Wageningen, Afdeling Kennisbemiddeling, Fonds Wetenschapswinkel, 1997.

spatial dimension is determined by physical and relative distances, accessibility, and characteristics of the landscape. The countryside is a less-crowded place, with more nature and fewer buildings than a city. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) considers an area with fewer than a thousand addresses per square kilometre to be rural (see figure 2). Second, the economic dimension relates to possibilities for work and education. Some villagers are tied to a village by their work, such as farmers and shopkeepers, while others have to travel for their work and schooling. Lack of employment is a reason for people to leave the village. Third, the political dimension determines to a large extent the availability of services and work. As I explain below, the organisation of local politics is gradually changing. Finally, the sociocultural dimension refers to club life, church life, village festivities, family ties and social relations, and local identity such as local language or dialect, and music.

The sociocultural and spatial dimensions are the most relevant for this research. Panelli also remarks that these 'dimensions mutually shape each other and are played out in uneven spatial patterns and relations.'<sup>10</sup> Distinguishing between these dimensions helps to see how tensions arise when people attribute different meaning to aspects of the countryside. Newcomers tend to attribute more value to physical characteristics and contribute less to the social liveability of the countryside. They attach less importance to maintaining services and participating in club life than the locals might do.<sup>11</sup>

In the remainder of this section I take a closer look at a couple of developments that are characteristic of the countryside today. In these developments various dimensions interact and influence each other. First, I focus on the differences between the landscape in Groningen and Brabant. Second, I look at the demographic developments, since ageing and migration colour the population in the countryside. Finally, I show that mobility is of fundamental importance in the countryside, where people constantly have to switch between the local and regional levels.

### *The Spatial Dimension: Landscapes of Brabant and Groningen*

While the countryside in Brabant is characterised by woods and meadows, Groningen is known for its open, windswept landscape. The physical environment determines to a large extent how people can make their living. In the nineteenth century both Groningen and Brabant were mainly agricultural regions. Around 1849, 45 percent of the Brabant population and 38 percent of the population in Groningen worked in agriculture. The soil conditions determined which crops people could grow. On the fertile clay ground Groninger farmers could enlarge their farms and they employed many labourers to work on the land. In Brabant small farmers lived on sandy soil and had to grow a wide variety of crops and keep several kinds of animals to make a living. Consequently the socio-economic differences in Groningen were greater than in Brabant. In Groningen farms were usually larger than in Brabant, but Brabant farmers were more flexible in changing their products in reaction to the agricultural crises in the 1870s. After 1850 cattle, pig and chicken farming de-

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<sup>10</sup> Panelli, 'Young rural lives', p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 207—footnote 128; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis: Lokale binding en inzet van dorpsbewoners*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2015, p. 66.

veloped in Brabant, as moors were converted into meadows.<sup>12</sup> Later greenhouse farming developed in the area. In Groningen mainly grain, potatoes and sugar beets were grown (see figure 3-4).

In the second half of the twentieth century the number of farms has more than halved, from 200,000 to less than 100,000 in 2000.<sup>13</sup> Since 2000 the number of farms has further declined to 56,000 in 2016 (see figure 5).<sup>14</sup> This is caused by scaling-up and a lack of successors. Processes of land consolidation and scaling-up have shaped the landscape. The industrialisation of cattle farming in Brabant has led to a strong increase in mega stables, from 126 in 2010 to 259 in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Economic developments have also left their marks on the physical environment of rural Brabant.

Brabant is a landscape in discord: ugly and beautiful, spoiled and saved, squandered and cherished, pungent and fragrant, noise and silence lie always close to each other. Beauty is never unconditional; trouble always lies around the corner. And you are still drawn to it.<sup>16</sup>

Farmers need to expand to make a living.<sup>17</sup> However, the size of the stables, the high concentration of animals and the methane emissions affect the physical environment and can form a danger to public health.<sup>18</sup> Other farmers are forced to cease operations, leaving behind empty standing stables, which leads to *verrommeling* (messing up) of the countryside.<sup>19</sup> Still, the area around Asten and Someren is popular with tourists, because of its closeness to the *Peel* nature reserve.<sup>20</sup> The needs and interests of these various groups, farmers, ecologists, tourists and villagers can lead to tensions.<sup>21</sup> Villagers who live in the countryside to find some rest and quiet can be disturbed by the noise of machines of farmers who have to bring in the crops.

In Groningen the physical environment determines liveability in another way. Since the 1960s, billions of cubic meters of gas have been extracted from the ground, which has led to subsidence and earthquakes. In chapter 9 I explain how this affects various aspects of daily life.<sup>22</sup> While the woods draw many tourists to Brabant, the wide and open Groninger countryside, with its many medieval churches, is not a well-known tourist destination. Various efforts are made to invite people to come to the north, but the peripheral image is hard

<sup>12</sup> M.G.J. Duijvendak, G.M.T. Trienekens, 'Towards a Comparison between the Regions in Groningen and North-Brabant', in: *Historia Agriculturae: Jaarboek* (28), 1998, pp. 51-75, there pp. 58-63.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Schnabel, *Waarom blijven boeren?: Over voortgang en beëindiging van het boerenbedrijf*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> 'Landbouw in vogelvlucht', Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/economie/landbouw/landbouw-in-vogelvlucht>, accessed 17 August 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Edo Gies, *Analyse megastallen en megabedrijven 2005, 2010 en 2013*, Wageningen, Alterra, 2015; Kees de Vré, 'Aantal megastallen groeit in rap tempo', *Trouw*, 13 March 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Monica Wesseling, 'Door een dubieus Dommeldal', *Trouw*, 24 September 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon van Oost, 'Veel boeren leven al jaren in armoede', *Trouw*, 6 October 2016.

<sup>18</sup> 'Hoe de komst van een megastal en de angst voor Q-koorts een dorp verscheurt', *De Monitor*, 25 September 2016; 'Megastallen en gezondheid', *Buitenhof*, 23 April 2017; Interestingly farmers who could expand no further moved to Groningen ('Provincie kan bouw megastal Vlagtwedde toch schrappen', *RTV Noord*, 21 August 2015).

<sup>19</sup> 'Sloop wacht voor duizenden stallen in Brabant', *NOS*, 20 April 2016; Steenbekkers, *De dorpenmonitor*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Ine van Hal, 'Toeristen komen naar regio voor rust, ruimte en natuur', *'t Contact*, 1 August 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Yolanda te Poel, Anja Verweij, *Jonge dromen over het platteland: Een onderzoek naar de beleving van de reconstructie in Brabant*, Eindhoven, KDS, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> *Het verdwenen Groningen*, <http://hetverdwenengroningen.nl/>, accessed 18 August 2017.

to counter. The city of Groningen is a popular destination for students, but after they have finished their studies, most of them move to the Western part of the country to find a job. Ultimately, the interaction between the spatial and economic dimensions shapes the social dimension. Economic and spatial qualities draw people to certain areas and determine their way of life, but can also lead to conflicting interests.

#### *Economic-Political Dimension: Demographic Developments*

Urbanisation in Brabant and Groningen has followed different patterns (see figures 3-4). Processes of industrialisation in Brabant led to urbanisation around a ring of several cities. Brabant has developed into a transit region between the Dutch seaports and Belgian and German industrial towns, while Groningen, despite having a harbour, a railway connection to Germany, and the gas extraction, has become economically and socially almost a fringe area. In Groningen industrialisation concentrated around the city of Groningen and the peat district. Larger towns such as Veendam and Appingedam did not alter the dominant position of the city of Groningen.<sup>23</sup>

In relation to the liveability of the countryside, ageing and demographic decline are often mentioned.<sup>24</sup> This process is stronger in the peripheral areas of the country, in Groningen, Friesland, Zeeland and Limburg.<sup>25</sup> Young people leave these areas for study and work and often do not return (see figure 6-8).<sup>26</sup> And if they do, it can be difficult for starters on the housing market to find affordable houses.<sup>27</sup> Still, villages such as Asten and Someren in Brabant saw an increase in population in the second half of the twentieth century, because industries attracted people to the region and the birth rate among Catholics was high.<sup>28</sup> Rural areas around the city of Groningen, such as Slochteren, saw demographic growth from the 1970s onward, but other parts of the province were confronted with demographic decline (see figure 9).<sup>29</sup> In the villages in Groningen where I did my research only a few streets with new houses have been built in the past decades, but Asten and Someren have seen various new housing developments.<sup>30</sup> Possibly because the population in Asten and Someren grew much faster than in Slochteren, the arrival of new residents seems a more important theme in the Brabant case study than in the Groningen one.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Duijvendak, 'Towards a Comparison', pp. 51-55, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Anja Steenbekkers, Lotte Vermeij, Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Dorpsleven tussen stad en land: Slotpublicatie sociale staat van het platteland*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2017, p. 81; 'Wat is krimp?': *Kennisnetwerk Krimp Noord Nederland*, <http://kkn.vanmeernaarbeter.nl/wat-is-krimp>, accessed 15 August 2017; 'Leefbaarheid van Drenthe van alle kanten belichten', CMO Stamm, <https://cmostamm.nl/leefbaarheid-drenthe-van-alle-kanten-belicht/>, accessed 15 August 2017; 'Krimp en leefbaarheid', Provincie Fryslân, [https://www.fryslan.fr.nl/beleidsthemas/krimp-en-leefbaarheid\\_3595/](https://www.fryslan.fr.nl/beleidsthemas/krimp-en-leefbaarheid_3595/), accessed 15 August 2017.

<sup>25</sup> 'Bevolgingskrimp in kwart van de gemeenten', Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2016/32/bevolgingskrimp-in-kwart-van-gemeenten>, accessed 11 August 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Steenbekkers, *De dorpenmonitor*, pp. 47-66; Steenbekkers, *Dorpsleven tussen stad en land*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Melanie Stemerding, *Asten, Dordrecht, Heerenveen en Hoon: Sociale kaarten voor het onderzoek 'civil society en vrijwilligerswerk'*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland: Omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden*, Assen, Van Gorcum 1992, p. 171.

<sup>29</sup> Duijvendak, 'Towards a Comparison', pp. 51-55, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Stemerding, *Asten*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> The growth of the municipality of Noordbroek can be mainly explained by the joining with the municipality of Zuidbroek in 1969 and with the municipality of Muntendam in 1990.

*The Sociocultural Dimension: between Local and Regional*

Living in the countryside nowadays means constantly switching between local and regional levels, which colours the sociocultural dimension. Almost all villagers leave the village once a week, and a significant number nearly every day.<sup>32</sup> In my fieldwork I saw how people travelled between villages, not only for shops and services, but also to make social calls. I noticed that people continued to frequent a drama club, choir or church where they used to go before they moved to another town. The following chapters show that rural church life is characterised by the tension between being accessible, visible and involved (knowing what is going on locally) and the need to work on a regional level to find enough human and financial resources. This tension is not unique for churches, and also occurs in other areas of society such as education, municipalities and care.<sup>33</sup> Bettina Bock, professor of population decline and quality of life in the north of the Netherlands, argues that this tension demands a rethinking of social and spatial solidarity. Liveability problems should not be investigated on the level of a certain village, but should be perceived in the regional and socio-political context. Rural marginalisation is inextricably bound up with a process of urbanisation. 'Why is the responsibility of declining regions and provinces stressed and why is there little sense of a shared responsibility and a feeling of solidarity?'<sup>34</sup>

In the twentieth century the centralisation of government services decreased the relative autonomy of villages. Verrips describes how villagers became increasingly dependent on persons and institutions outside their field of vision.<sup>35</sup> In recent years the decentralisation policy of the government has made municipalities responsible for more tasks, such as care and social security. The aim is to bring the government closer to citizens. However, small municipalities lack the expertise, financial and human resources to execute their tasks.<sup>36</sup> Consequently municipalities like Slochteren, Menterwolde, and Hoogezand in the province of Groningen have merged in 2018.<sup>37</sup> This could enlarge the distance between council and citizen. At the same time municipalities are trying to make villagers themselves responsible for the organisation of village services, physical environment and care for each other.<sup>38</sup> The municipalities set themselves up as facilitators for new local initiatives. In section 3.2.1 I deal with how this works out in the regions of our case studies.

<sup>32</sup> Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 55; Boomars, *Leefbaarheidseffectrapportage*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> M. Rijkers, J. Westerlaken, J.L.L. Cox, *Leefbaarheid begrepen*, Den Bosch, PON Brabant, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Bettina Bock, *Leegte en ruimte: Over bevolkingsdaling en leefbaarheid in Noord-Nederland*, Groningen, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2016, p. 12; Bettina Bock, Rural Marginalisation and the Role of Social Innovation: a Turn towards Endogenous Development and Rural Reconnection, in: *Sociologia Ruralis* (56:4), 2016, pp. 552-573, there p. 553.

<sup>35</sup> J. Verrips, *En boven de polder de hemel: Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp, 1850-1971*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff, 1983, pp. 227-228, 230.

<sup>36</sup> J.M.J. Berghuis, M. Herweijer, W.J.M. Pol, *Effecten van herindelings*, Deventer, Kluwer, 1995; Th. A.J. Toonen, *Gemeenten in ontwikkeling: Herindelings en kwaliteiten*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1998; Peter Ekamper, 'Twee eeuwen gemeentelijke herindelings in Nederland', 2009, <http://members.ziggo.nl/ekamper/gemeenten/gemgrens.html>, accessed 15 August 2017; H.J.G. Waltmans, *Gemeentelijke herindelings in Nederland van de Franse tijd tot heden*, Hoogezand, Stubeg, 1994; 'Aantal gemeenten in 2016 gedaald naar 380', Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/01/aantal-gemeenten-in-2016-daal-t-naar-390>, accessed 4 January 2016; Ad van der Meer, Onno Boonstra, *Repertorium Nederlandse gemeenten vanaf 1812*, Den Haag, Dans, 2011, pp. 18-19, 97, 99, 103; Anouk van Kampen, 'Lokale democratie wordt bedreigd door samenwerking gemeenten', *Nrc*, 13 January 2014; Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, pp. 149, 153, 164.

<sup>37</sup> 'Raden stemmen in met nieuwe gemeente Midden-Groningen', *RTV Noord*, 25 April 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Steenbekkers, *De dorpenmonitor*, p. 260; I. Verhoeven, 'Alledaags politiek burgerschap en de overheid', in: P.L. Meurs, E.K. Schrijvers, G.H. de Vries (eds.), *Leren van de praktijk: Gebruik van lokale kennis en ervaring voor beleid*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp. 119-142.

This shifting between local and regional levels leads to certain discrepancies in how administrators and residents understand and experience liveability.<sup>39</sup> Regional cooperation often develops where groups experience a shared threat from outside. This can occur at various levels. Melis describes how municipalities in the second half of the twentieth century cooperated to protect regional autonomy against the influence of national and provincial government. Administrators tried to improve liveability by organising services on a regional level with the help of rural residents.<sup>40</sup> When cooperation between villages is required from 'above' this is often complicated, because people have little social and local bonding with residents from other villages. However, through personal contacts common regional interests may be discovered. An active local group of residents can develop regional identities, strengthen awareness among other people, and motivate them to participate. This is more easily realised on a local level, where the urgency and the effects on liveability are more strongly felt.<sup>41</sup> In this light the question can be asked: is church cooperation based on a shared threat or on a common interest or ideal? Chapter 5 reveals that village churches are also struggling with the tension between acting on a regional and on a local level.

### 3.2 | A Liveable Countryside<sup>42</sup>

As explained in chapter 1, I use the concept 'quality of life' to develop a contextual perspective on the meaning of churches in village life. I understand 'liveability' as an aspect of quality of life. The concept has become closely connected with the perception of the Dutch countryside. An analysis of how the understanding of liveability has evolved over time provides valuable insights not only about a changing countryside, but also about developing perceptions of society.<sup>43</sup>

Liveability (*leefbaarheid*) is used to describe the socio-spatial quality of a particular region or place.<sup>44</sup> In the literal sense liveability means that circumstances enable people or animals to survive, but over time it has developed into a normative concept that is grounded in the underlying ideal of a long and happy life.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, liveability not only refers to the actual material environment, but also has to do with how people evaluate their environment: the experienced liveability.<sup>46</sup> The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (*SCP*)

<sup>39</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio* p. 281; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, pp. 159, 168, 280-281.

<sup>41</sup> Idem, pp. 143, 174, 273, 282. A dance festival as Op Roakeldais in Warffum stresses more the qualities than the problems of the region; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Section 3.2 is based on J.K. Gelderloos, 'Quality of Life and Liveability in Everyday Discourse: Views on Leefbaarheid in the Dutch Countryside', in: Elisabeth Hense, Christoph Hübenal, Willem Marie Spielman (eds.), *The Quest for Quality of Life*, Münster, Aschendorff Verlag, 2017, pp. 141-168, there pp. 146-154.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Arwert, 'Leefbaarheid, een veranderend begrip in een veranderende context', in: *Konvooi: Jorwerd bijvoorbeeld*, (39:3), 1999, pp. 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> R. Veenhoven, *Leefbaarheid, betekenissen en meetmethoden: Studie in opdracht van Ministerie WVZ*, Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit, 2000, pp. 6, 9, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Frans Thissen, *Leefbare dorpen: Van raamwerk tot ontwikkelingsmodel*, Amsterdam, 2006, <http://www.nwt.be/nieuws/UiteenzettingThissen.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2015; Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, pp. 131-148; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 10.

defines a liveable countryside as a rural region where people are satisfied about their life and where recurring problems, worries and irritations are limited.<sup>47</sup> A closer look at how the concept is adopted by various disciplines reveals that liveability is also related to the spatial, political, social, cultural and economic dimensions described in the previous section.

Rural geographers and sociologists started to use the concept of liveability in the 1950s. They were exploring the living conditions in Dutch rural areas in view of modernisation processes and urbanisation.<sup>48</sup> In this period liveability was primarily used in a materialistic way, which is not surprising against the background of the post-war reconstruction. Employment and the housing market were seen as important indicators for liveability, as was the presence of public services in a village.<sup>49</sup> From 1960 onward, the social and ecological environment became more important because, despite the economic growth, people's social well-being had not improved. The sociologist J.P. Groot distinguished several liveability aspects: social security, public services, the physical living environment, the social environment, participation in civil administration, and lastly accessibility of the area and services.<sup>50</sup>

Gradually a 'subjective turn' took place. Sociological research on liveability focussed more on questions such as, are people themselves able to satisfy their needs, and what circumstances harm their experience of a good life?<sup>51</sup> Thus, liveability is about the relation between the physical and social environment on the one hand, and personal well-being and satisfaction on the other. According to Boomars it is necessary to distinguish between various layers of liveability. First, there is the practical level, the functional aspect of liveability which relates to services.<sup>52</sup> However, because people think differently about the value they attribute to various aspects of life, liveability is subject to opposite and conflicting interests.<sup>53</sup> These discussions relate to the second layer, the way people perceive liveability and the third layer of appropriation, the feeling of belonging in the living environment.<sup>54</sup> In chapter 5 I return to this concept of belonging in relation to church and show that churches have a role to play on the functional, perceptive and appreciative level of liveability.

In the 1990s local 'liveability parties' arose out of dissatisfaction with local policymaking, and liveability became a popular term for politicians. In their view, local branches of national parties had lost contact with local society. Not all liveability-parties have the same political interests. Concrete local issues, ranging from congestion problems to the integration of ethnic minorities, often formed the reason for the development of local liveability

<sup>47</sup> Lotte Vermeij, Gerald Mollenhorst, *Overgebleven dorpsleven: Sociaal kapitaal op het hedendaagse platteland*, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> H. Kaal, 'A conceptual history of liveability: Dutch scientists, politicians, policy makers and citizens and the quest for a liveable city,' in: *City* (15:5), 2011, pp. 532–547, there pp. 536–537.

<sup>49</sup> Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>50</sup> K.G. Melis, *A threatened existence in North-Groningen: The perceptions of local actors on the concepts identity and livability in the case of North-Groningen, the Netherlands, after the second world war*, Paper presented at the ESTER Research Design Course, Barcelona, Spain, 28–31 July 2009, p. 15; Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, p. 131.

<sup>51</sup> Vermeij, *Overgebleven dorpsleven*, p. 23; See Research Projects Kenniscentrum NoorderRuimte, <https://www.hanze.nl/nld/onderzoek/kenniscentra/kenniscentrum-noorderruimte/kennisbank/kennisbank/onderzoeks-rapporten>, accessed 15 March 2015; *Local Quality of Life Counts: A Handbook for a Menu of Local Indicators of Sustainably Development*, London, Defra Publications, 2000, <http://www.nefconsulting.com/our-services/evaluation-impact-assessment/prove-and-improve-toolkits/about/>, accessed 14 January 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Boomars, *Leefbaarheidseffectrapportage*; Arwert, 'Leefbaarheid'.

<sup>53</sup> U. Janssen, R. Lammerts, *Leefbaarheid op het platteland: Sociale en culturele ontwikkelingen op het platteland over de periode 1989–1998*, Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 1999, pp. 145–147; Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 270; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> Arwert, 'Leefbaarheid'.



parties.<sup>55</sup> Other parties have also adopted the concept of liveability in their party manifestos as one of their main spearheads. The Christian Democratic Party (CDA) in Groningen strives for a 'committed, dynamic and liveable municipality'. The party connects liveability to the availability of basic services, road safety, improving sustainability, and a limitation in the production of gas, because it causes earthquakes.<sup>56</sup> Another party, *Leefbaar Asten* (Liveable Asten), stresses active citizenship, meeting places, and services close to home, municipal cooperation with preservation of local autonomy, and improving sustainability. In the political context liveability has developed into an ideological concept that has to be maintained and sometimes even protected against threat.<sup>57</sup>

### *Liveability in Discussion*

How the concept of liveability is understood depends on the context, the *Zeitgeist*, and also people's social position. This can be illustrated by a line of enquiry on liveability in Groningen. In 1959 the social-geographical study *Bedreigd Bestaan* was published, on the social, economic and cultural situation in Groningen. The study predicts a bleak future for the Groninger countryside because young people are leaving the area. According to the authors farming should industrialize to create more employment.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the independent study carried out by the villagers of Kloosterburen gives an interesting response to *Bedreigd Bestaan*. The study criticizes *Bedreigd Bestaan* for paying too little attention for the meaning of *levensbeschouwing* (worldview) for liveability. In particular, the villagers point to 'the value of personal social relations in a village.'<sup>59</sup> Half a century after the publication of *Bedreigd Bestaan* Korrie Melis investigated how the circumstances in Groningen had changed and how ideas about liveability had developed since 1959. In her study she focusses on how generations of women and youngsters envisioned their lives, their living conditions and the region where they lived. Melis signals a discrepancy between policy-makers who understood liveability primarily in terms of services and villagers who focussed more on the social environment.<sup>60</sup>

The problem is that liveability is a kind of a suitcase term. It is often presented as an aim in itself, while it remains unclear what people actually mean by it. For example, it is often assumed that public services are a necessary condition for liveability. In the last decade researchers have questioned this assumption. Melis's respondents indicate that liveability depends not so much on services, but is more related to their sociocultural situation (feeling at home) and the possibility of making their own choices.<sup>61</sup> Bock states that community feeling, participation in collective activities and care for each other are of fundamental importance for liveability.<sup>62</sup> Gardenier shows in his study about liveability in North Groningen

<sup>55</sup> Kaal, 'A conceptual history', pp. 542-543.

<sup>56</sup> 't *Bokkeblad*, 12 March 2014, 26 March 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Kaal, 'A conceptual history', p. 544.

<sup>58</sup> P.J. Bouman, *Bedreigd bestaan: De sociale, economische en culturele situatie in Noord-Groningen*, Groningen, Niemeyer, 1960.

<sup>59</sup> H. Boerland, *Kloosterburen beziet zichzelf. Verslag van een bevolkings-onderzoek gehouden in de gemeente Kloosterburen*, Groningen, 1962, in: Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 129.

<sup>60</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 129.

<sup>61</sup> Idem, pp. 271-276.

<sup>62</sup> Bettina Bock, *Leegte en ruimte*, p. 7.

that, despite the fact that there are hardly any shops and services, the experienced quality of life is often higher in small villages than in the bigger villages where all these public services are available. How can this be explained? In the smallest villages 64 percent of the people come from elsewhere. These people have often decided to live in the countryside in full awareness that not all kinds of social and cultural services are available in these villages. They realise that they have to travel for work, school, and shops, and also maintain their social contacts outside the direct living environment.<sup>63</sup>

According to social geographer Frans Thissen, the development of liveability begins with investing in the living environment. If people are satisfied with their living environment they will develop community initiatives. They create their own services by organising activities and long-term projects and by maintaining and improving the physical environment.<sup>64</sup> The question is not so much what there is, but what is being done. To develop community initiatives people first need a physical meeting place in a school, a village hall, or in the open air. Second, they need social possibilities in terms of resources, ideas, and contacts.<sup>65</sup> What is interesting about this approach is that the physical and the social world are directly related to each other. People need a physical place to gather, but a place with four walls and a roof does not become a meeting place by itself. A place has to look inviting, and needs a good atmosphere. The interaction between the physical and the social world can become visible when people work together to maintain the physical environment and, by doing so, strengthen social cohesion. Thissen's theory can be summarized as looking at place, people and practice, which are the three perspectives I used in gathering and analysing data.

#### 3.2.1 | Liveability in Newspapers

The preceding paragraphs gave an overview of the different aspects of liveability. This section examines which of these aspects are discussed in the regional newspapers in Groningen and Brabant. It may be assumed that the discourse used in the newspapers both reflects and shapes the way people think and talk about liveability. A search for the term 'leefbaarheid' in four regional newspapers resulted in a total of 101 articles.<sup>66</sup> Within the limited space of a newspaper article, it often remains unclear what exactly journalists and interviewees mean when they speak about liveability, but by looking at who uses the term and in what context some useful insights can be obtained. In the numerous surveys on local liveability, village councils and village societies inquire about the need for public services, accessibility and mobility, associational life, safety, social cohesion, and the physical environment.<sup>67</sup> With the focus on employment in the 1950s in mind, it is interesting to note

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<sup>63</sup> Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, pp. 21-24, 136-148.

<sup>64</sup> For example: 'Opening Dorpsboekenkast in Kolham', *'t Bokkeblad*, 11 June 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Frans Thissen, *Leefbaarheid en Vitaliteit*; Frans Thissen, Joos Droogleevers Fortuijn, *Het dorpshuis, van bewoners en voor bewoners: De maatschappelijke participatie van dorpsbewoners en de betekenis van het dorpshuis in de dorpen van Littenseradiel*, Amsterdam, Urban Geography Programme, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2012, pp. 16-17.

<sup>66</sup> *'t Bokkeblad*: 30 articles in 2014; *Dagblad van het Noorden*: 13 articles in period 2011 - 2013, 6 in 2014; *Peelbelang*: 33 articles in period November 2013-December 2014; *Eindhovens Dagblad*: 25 articles in 2014.

<sup>67</sup> E.g. 'Barometer over leefbaarheid Roden', *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 12 November 2011.

that this aspect seems to be absent from these surveys and is not such a dominant theme in the newspaper articles. Subjects such as employment and education, sustainability and nuisance control are only mentioned once or twice

What then are the main liveability issues? A recurring subject is the spatial dimension. Journalists describe the irritation of villagers about poorly maintained and unoccupied buildings. But they write also about the renovation and reuse of houses and public buildings, and the improvement of communal spaces.<sup>68</sup> In the village of Slochteren in Groningen politicians and villagers welcome the possibility of renovating the village centre after the DIY store has moved away to the outskirts of the village.<sup>69</sup> Other villages are looking for new ways of using vacant schools, nursing homes, and empty green spaces.<sup>70</sup> Investing in the physical environment, creating nature reserves, maintaining cultural heritage, and organising activities for both villagers and tourists, are considered important for the liveability of the region.<sup>71</sup> The idea seems to be that if a region has a clear identity, then people know what they can find there. This will attract not only new inhabitants, but also tourists, which is important for employment in the villages.<sup>72</sup>

Physical issues are often explicitly related to other liveability aspects. For example, improvements in the physical and the social environment are closely related in an article about community art in Sint-Oedenrode (Brabant). The initiators aim at increasing the social cohesion by bridging social differences, and bringing people together. Projects that improve the physical environment – by planting trees, making a piece of art, or creating an attractive place to sit in a neglected green space – also have a social component.<sup>73</sup> The same is true for maintenance work on the church yards and cemeteries in the case studies.

On the other hand, it is interesting to see what happens when the physical and the social are not brought into conversation with each other. The Brabant village of Moerdijk is in danger of being gobbled up by the Rotterdam harbour. Policymakers are looking primarily at the physical environment; they fear that the nuisance of the harbour and the degeneration of the built-up areas will lead to an unliveable village. In order to improve the liveability the mayor has renovation plans for the old village centre. The villagers, however, look at the social vitality and say: "We have a good social life, people know each other and young people are moving to the village to start a family."<sup>74</sup> So, we see again that liveability can be judged on different levels.

<sup>68</sup> 'Informatieavond herinrichting dorpskern Neerkant', *Peelbelang*, 3 November 2014; 'Opinie - Nog één kans voor Helmond', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 9 December 2014; Jeroen van de Nieuwenhof, 'Ommel heeft een nieuwe Kluis', *Peelbelang*, 7 January 2014.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. 'Vorstelijk aanbod Freylemaborg', 't *Bokkeblad*, 12 February 2014; 'Lijst 3, VVD', 't *Bokkeblad*, 12 March 2014; 'Coalitieakkoord gepresenteerd', 't *Bokkeblad*, 2 April 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Geert Job Sevink, 'Ulrum kan extra financiële impuls uitstekend gebruiken', *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 10 June 2013.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. 'Lijst 3, VVD', 't *Bokkeblad*, 12 March 2014; 'Vernieuwde projecten vanuit burgerkracht', 't *Bokkeblad*, 26 March 2014; 'Opening Dorpsboekenkast in Kolham', 't *Bokkeblad*, 11 June 2014; 'Coalitieakkoord uitgewerkt in een collegeprogramma', 't *Bokkeblad*, 11 June 2014.

<sup>72</sup> 'Lijst 3, VVD', 't *Bokkeblad*, 12 March 2014; 'Coalitieakkoord gepresenteerd', 't *Bokkeblad*, 2 April 2014; 'Kamer wil betere fietspaden: goed voor lijf en economie', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 24 November 2014; 'Breedband op het Hogeland en de gemeente Slochteren voor leefbare gemeente', 't *Bokkeblad*, 2 July 2014.

<sup>73</sup> 'MIK maakt Rooise buurt meer leefbaar', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 8 December 2014; 'Wijkbeheerders: extra ogen en oren in de wijk', *Peelbelang*, 6 March 2014; 'Zelf aan de slag voor een leefbare gemeenschap', 't *Bokkeblad*, 27 August 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Niels Markus, 'Kerk gesloten, kroeg weg, school weg en nu het hele dorp weg?', *Trouw*, 20 September 2013.

*Community Initiatives in Brabant*

Especially in the Brabant newspapers, it becomes clear that mobility, availability of public services, and community initiatives are inextricably bound up with each other. Increased mobility enables people to live their lives in different places and use shops and services elsewhere. But the closure of various shops and village services has created a problem for people who are less mobile and depend on public services close to home.<sup>75</sup> The ending of a bus route is therefore seen as a threat to the liveability, because people become limited in their mobility and autonomy. The announcement triggers direct protest and community initiative to investigate the need for the bus route, also in the evening and at the weekend.<sup>76</sup>

Community initiatives also arise when services such as day care, shops or schools are on the verge of stopping. People stress that these services are essential for the social vitality of a village. Day care is important for the development of children, and children get acquainted with their fellow villagers.<sup>77</sup> Through school life people become involved in local associational life, which strengthens their connection with the village.<sup>78</sup> In several villages community initiative has led to the establishment of shops, which are sometimes combined with a service centre. This improves the liveability, because children can learn to do an errand independently and elderly people can do their shopping themselves. In this way their autonomy is increased because they do not have to ask other people to help them.<sup>79</sup> In several villages people have started a village cooperation, which organises care close to home and provides public services, so people can continue to live in the village.<sup>80</sup> These community initiatives depend on the social participation of villagers, which is often seen as a condition for liveability. An important motivation for initiators to organise a village event or village cooperation is their wish to improve the liveability or to give people a good time. People say they think it is important that “we should look after each other more in these individualistic times.”<sup>81</sup>

These kinds of local initiatives reveal social innovation among villagers. According to Bettina Bock, social innovation is a mixture of citizen engagement and entrepreneurialism. It carries an element of resistance against the current state of socio-political affairs. Social innovation can be critical about policy measures which are counterproductive. ‘It is driven by an intrinsic motivation to improve the quality of life in communities and currently offered services’.<sup>82</sup> This intrinsic motivation is clearly visible in the initiatives described

<sup>75</sup> H. Cameron, J. Reader, V. Slater, C. Rowland (eds.), *Theological Reflection for human flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology*, London, SCM Press, 2012, p. xviii; ‘Steeds minder voorzieningen in dorp: minder bussen, winkels, onderwijs en pinautomaten’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 8 December 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Bas van Velthoven, ‘Someren zet in op behoud lijn 20, Raadsvergadering Someren’, *Peelbelang*, 2 December 2013; Eveline Lamers, ‘Buslijn 20 door Lierop blijft behouden’, *Peelbelang*, 7 January 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Eveline Lamers, ‘Voortbestaan kinderopvang Lierop in gevaar’, *Peelbelang*, 22 December 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Jeroen van de Nieuwenhof, ‘Waar moet ik nu met mijn kind naartoe?’, Verontwaardiging over aangekondigde sluiting St. Pieterschool Ommel’, *Peelbelang*, 28 November 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Bas van Velthoven, ‘Oprichtingsvergadering dorpswinkel Someren-Heide’, *Peelbelang*, 7 November 2013.

<sup>80</sup> ‘ED in gesprek met Willy Donkers, ‘de burgemeester van Elsendorp’’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 1 December 2014; ‘Dorpscoöperatie Lierop van start’, *Peelbelang*, 28 November 2014; Sevink, ‘Ulrum’.

<sup>81</sup> Kristie Raaijmakers, ‘Ploegfist draagt steentje bij aan leefbaarheid De Rips’, *Peelbelang*, 25 November 2014; Eveline Lamers, ‘Dorpscoöperatie Lierop van start’, *Peelbelang*, 28 November 2014; Joséphine Truijman, ‘We regelen onze zorg steeds vaker zelf’, *NOS*, 20 February 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Bock, ‘Rural marginalisation’, p. 562.

above. Social innovation tends to blossom at some distance from official policy, because in this space communities can discover their autonomy and resilience.<sup>83</sup>

*Conversations between the Physical and Social Environment*

Liveability in the newspapers is mainly connected to the quality of life in a community or a place, but it is not always possible to make a distinction. It is interesting that in the word 'village' the physical and the social meaning coincide. Again it becomes clear how closely the physical and the social environment are related. Liveability becomes tangible in how people come together to form the physical environment. Resources are invested both in physical and social regeneration. This confirms the statement made by Cameron that 'ultimately there is no policy choice between investing in people and investing in place. People both shape and are shaped by the place in which they live'.<sup>84</sup>

Despite the fact that research indicates that services do not determine the quality of life, the loss of public services is a real cause of concern in the newspapers, as are mobility problems and the absence of an internet connection. Studies by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) confirm this paradox. For people with a car the regionalisation of services is not a problem, but it creates serious problems for people who are less mobile. These are primarily young people without a licence and older people who depend on others to drive them. This can lead to a situation of isolation and loneliness and forms a threat to the social cohesion. It raises questions about autonomy and the possibility of being able to do what you want or need to do.<sup>85</sup>

In the northern newspapers liveability is mainly used by local politicians as a policy term. They relate the concept predominantly to the social infrastructure. The local council in Slochteren has made a *leefbaarheid* fund available for initiatives that increase the liveability in villages, neighbourhoods, and streets. The council directly relates the social participation of inhabitants to improvement in the liveability. They hope that if people become acquainted with each other they will be prepared to offer social support when this is needed.<sup>86</sup> This seems to be an attempt to give villagers more autonomy in how they want to organise their living environment. However, asking village communities to deliver public services themselves is also an economic saving measure, since the organisation of village halls and care provision used to be done by the state.<sup>87</sup> Policy makers seem to be well aware of Thissen's theory when they say that 'active inhabitants play a decisive role in the quality of life in villages, not the authorities or certain public services.'<sup>88</sup> Bettina Bock is critical about this 'shifting of public responsibilities to private initiatives and the localisation and individualisation of rural development and marginalisation accompanied by ignoring and neglecting the structural disadvantages and vulnerabilities created through state reforms.'<sup>89</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Idem, pp. 561-562, 569-570.

<sup>84</sup> Cameron, *Theological Reflection*, p. xxiv.

<sup>85</sup> Steenbekkers, *De dorpenmonitor*, pp. 295-296; Bettina Bock, *Leegte en ruimte*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>86</sup> 'Leefbaarheidsfonds', *t Bokkeblad*, 5 November 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Cameron, *Theological Reflection*, p. xxiii.

<sup>88</sup> Ine van Hal, 'Coalitiepartijen Deurne staan voor open bestuursstijl', *Peelbelang*, 4 May 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Bock, 'Rural marginalisation', p. 569.

### 3.3| Liveability and Quality of Life with regard to Churches

Rural studies, such as liveability studies from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) on developments in the countryside and the work of Verrips and Melis, describe the role of the church in various ways. SCP reports show how church members in villages are often active as volunteers. Furthermore, the church comes to the fore as a meeting place where newcomers become acquainted with the village community. Verrips and Melis describe how churches used to shape village society. Verrips investigates the relation between socio-economic changes, religious developments and theological beliefs. Church schisms, such as the one that resulted from the *Doleantie* (a Dutch nonconformist movement), run through families and reshaped social relations.<sup>90</sup> Among *Gereformeerden* social cohesion was much stronger than among *Hervormden*, who increasingly saw faith as a personal affair which related more to God than to the community. Melis's research reveals how religious and socio-economic dividing lines determined the structure and organisation of village life in Groningen. My family story reveals how this affected daily life in my mother's home, living in one village, but going to school and church in another. Through secularisation and suburbanisation these religious divides disappeared to a large extent.<sup>91</sup>

Various liveability studies pay attention to the role of the church as a social factor by offering a meeting place, a social network and a group of volunteers. But there is less attention for the church as a participant in village life, providing various services for rites de passage, maintaining the church building and offering a unique repertoire for reflection, celebration, and personal development. We have seen that the closing of schools, health care institutions, and shops are seen as a threat to the liveability. It is striking and telling that in reports and policy documents about present-day rural liveability the disappearance of churches is not often extensively investigated.<sup>92</sup> This illustrates the marginalisation of the church. It also suggests a lack of knowledge about the functions that a church can fulfil in village life as a service centre, a meeting place and a community. The disappearance and regionalisation of churches is seldom described as a threat to the liveability.<sup>93</sup> Maybe this is because the retreat of the church is a gradual process, in which congregations are assimilated in larger entities. So, is 'liveability' a useful and suitable concept for grasping the role and meaning of churches in the countryside? In this section I unravel how liveability and

<sup>90</sup> The *Doleantie*, led by Abraham Kuyper, resulted in a church schism in 1887 within the *Nederlandse Hervormde church*. Kuyper criticized the passive attitude within local congregations and favoured more self-assured, independent faith communities. In 1887 more and more orthodox congregations left the *Hervormde church*. (Herman Seldehuis (ed), *Handboek Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*, Utrecht, Kok, 2010, pp. 692-696).

<sup>91</sup> Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>92</sup> E.g. Enno Zuidema, et al., *Noord-Groningen Leeft! Woon- en Leefbaarheidsplan 2017-2021: Leefbaarheid en betrokkenheid, in krachtige buurten en dorpen die samen een toekomstbestendige en duurzame regio vormen*, Groningen, 2016; J. Rozema, *Adorp 2012: hoe waarden inwoners van Adorp hun leefomgeving*, Groningen, [s.n.], 2016, 2013 (Kenniscentrum Noorderruimte, <https://www.hanze.nl/nld/onderzoek/kenniscentra/kenniscentrum-noorderruimte/>, accessed 3 July 2017); Cox, *Leefbaarheid Begrepen*.

<sup>93</sup> The closure of schools and shops is described in research such as E. van Ruijven, M. Jokhan en L. Crommentuyn, *Leefbare dorpen zonder basisschool: Een analyse van verschillen tussen dorpen met een basisschool, dorpen zonder een basisschool en dorpen met een recent gesloten basisschool*, Leeuwarden, Partoer, 2012; Locatus, *Bereikbaarheid van winkelvevoorzieningen voor senioren op het platteland onder druk*, 2010; Steenbekkers, *De dorpenmonitor*; A letter by the *Vereniging Kleine Kernen Noord-Brabant* is one of the few sources that warns about the effect that church closing has on the livability. ('Kleine kernen willen parochies behouden', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 22 June 2012.)

quality of life relate to each other and how these concepts can be used to analyse the role of the church in village life.

### 3.3.1 | Liveability as a Lens

The concept of liveability enables me to place the research in a broader spectrum and helps to avoid the risk of ending up with a very church-centred perspective. First, the concept is used to analyse the aims and objectives of church activities and community initiatives to discover liveability questions with which the church is involved. Themes such as care and support, loneliness and social relations seem to be relevant. This also brings possible cooperation partners into view. The focus on liveability has drawn my attention to the fact that similar themes and questions arise in both churches and other fields in society: ageing, decline of commitment, of human and financial resources. It is striking that in church communities as well as in schools and municipalities the same lines of thinking are being followed. In all fields cooperation is being sought and in all these places questions arise, such as: how to compromise between working together and combining resources on the one hand and trying to protect the identity of a community and remaining visible and accessible on the other?<sup>94</sup> This also relates to bridging social differences and enhancing social cohesion.

Second, 'liveability' also functions as a lens through which the place of church in village society can be scrutinized. The SCP report *Het beste van twee werelden* describes how the church can function as a meeting place, especially in more remote villages.<sup>95</sup> In some villages it is a place where the whole village still assembles and where newcomers can become acquainted with the village community. In other places it is only the believing part of the community which gathers there. But even then the church can regain meaning when events take place which affect the whole village.<sup>96</sup> In this light it is not surprising that the *Vereniging Kleine Kernen Noord-Brabant* (VKKNB) is afraid of what the effects will be of the large-scale redivision of parishes within the Catholic Church. In the coming ten years 50 percent of the 500 churches in Brabant will become vacant.<sup>97</sup> The VKKNB fears that the closing will affect the liveability, because social cohesion and community feeling in villages will erode, not only because the church is an important meeting place, but also because a church building is valuable for the identity of a village community.<sup>98</sup>

This example illustrates how Thissen's theory is helpful for grasping the position of church in village society. It clarifies the function of the church in terms that are also understood in other fields. The spatial perspective on meeting places brings into view the use of the church building and other places in the village where the church is present. The church

<sup>94</sup> 'Samenvattend verslag van de bijeenkomst van 24 mei 2012 over de clustering van gemeenten in de classis Winsum, Commissie Regionalisering en Revitalisering', August 2012; Geert Jansen (ed.), *Grenzeloos gunnen, Advies over de maatschappelijk urgente vernieuwing van de bestuurlijke organisatie en de bestuurscultuur in Groningen: Eindrapport van de Visitatiecommissie 'Bestuurlijke Toekomst Groningen'*, Groningen, 28 February 2013; 'Ouders tegen scholenfusie Leens', *RTV Noord*, 28 February 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Steenbekkers, *Dorpsleven tussen stad en land*, p. 10.

<sup>96</sup> C. Simon, L. Vermeij, A. Steenbekkers, *Het beste van twee werelden: Plattelanders over hun leven op het platteland*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2007, pp. 91-92.

<sup>97</sup> J. Huisman, R. Spelier, *Vrijkomende kerken in Brabant*, Utrecht, Denkkraft, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> 'Opheffen van parochies leidt tot afbraak sociale cohesie', *Vereniging Kleine Kernen Noord-Brabant*, 15 June 2012.

building contributes significantly to the physical environment and thereby to the identity of a village. The building is also a place which can offer the congregation possibilities for building a network within the village and the region. This social perspective helps to reveal the network of the church community within the villages and the surrounding area. Finally, the focus on community initiatives sheds light on the effects of church practices. Thus, speaking about the church in a liveability discourse can help to 'translate' church practices into social-geographical terms. The concept enables to look at village churches in a new way, by using a broader perspective which also takes into consideration non-religious aspects of churches. In chapter 5 I analyse church newsletters by using Thissen's theory on meeting places, social environment and community initiatives.

### 3.3.2 | Quality of Life<sup>99</sup>

Although the 'translation' of church practices into social geographical terms is helpful and important, on its own the concept of 'liveability' is not sufficient for grasping all aspects of church life. It has the risk of reducing church practices to social-geographical terms, which could mean that churches can easily be exchanged or replaced by other social organisations.<sup>100</sup> This raises the theological question of what a church has to offer that other social organisations do not or cannot. Liveability is a helpful concept for uncovering the functions of church in society, but it says very little about the nature and content of the functions. Churches as places of faith and community have much to do with people's well-being.

#### *From Liveability to Quality of Life*

Is liveability a suitable concept for investigating the meaning of a village church? The English word 'liveability' refers primarily to living conditions in the built and natural environments, the educational, cultural and recreational possibilities.<sup>101</sup> The concept of liveability does not encompass personal well-being, although the idea of 'experienced liveability' to some extent takes people's well-being into account.<sup>102</sup> Therefore it seemed useful to take the broader concept of quality of life as a point of reference in the fieldwork and analysis. Interestingly, quality of life encompasses both Dutch concepts *kwaliteit van leven* and *leefbaarheid*. The literal translation of quality of life in Dutch is 'kwaliteit van leven.' In the Netherlands this term is most commonly used in the context of health issues, such as the quality of life for people living in a nursing home or for people with disability.<sup>103</sup> *Leefbaarheid* (liveability) not only refers to environmental issues, such as harmful substances, the extent of nuisance or the availability of public services, but also to the quality of life in a social group,

<sup>99</sup> This section is based on Gelderloos, 'Quality of Life and Liveability', pp. 141-146, 161-162.

<sup>100</sup> Gabriel van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke: Over geloof en kerk in de moderne maatschappij', in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk, et al. (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, pp. 417-434, there p. 419.

<sup>101</sup> See Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109302?redirectedFrom=liveability#eid>, accessed 14 January 2015; 'Recommendations Memo #2 Livability and Quality of Life Indicators', <http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/TD/TP/docs/lcp/livability.pdf>, accessed 14 January 2015.

<sup>102</sup> Frans Thissen, *Leefbare dorpen*; Gardenier, *Rijk met kleine dorpen*, pp. 131-148; Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis*, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> A random sample of Dutch newspaper articles reveals how the term *kwaliteit van leven* refers mainly to medical context. See <http://academic.lexisnexis.nl.proxy-ub.rug.nl/>, search term: *kwaliteit leven*, accessed January 2015.



like a village community.<sup>104</sup> I therefore want to unpack the concept of quality of life further. What does it mean and how can I make it operational within the context of this research?

In sociological surveys about perceived liveability, people are asked whether they are satisfied with the public services, the safety, and maintenance of their own living environment. A research programme such as *National Accounts of Well-being* tries to escape from this material focus, and aims at measuring people's personal well-being, their vitality, feeling of autonomy, and self-esteem. The point of departure is the individual and the extent to which (s)he feels a sense of belonging with and support from people around him/her.<sup>105</sup> It sees happiness as something that *happens* to us as an individual, without considering the effects of our actions on our personal well-being.<sup>106</sup> Nor does it seem to take into account how personal quality of life can be affected by the suffering of others. In my view, the support individuals offer to others and the way people's personal well-being is affected by the lack of well-being of others should also be acknowledged.

### A Good Life

What exactly is meant with 'quality of life'? Quality of life is a concept that is used in various disciplines. Through the ages people have looked for ways to achieve a good quality of life. The meaning that is given to the concept changes over time depending on socio-economic circumstances, and on what is seen as (most) important in life in a given cultural context.<sup>107</sup> Therefore it is useful to examine how the term 'quality of life' is used in various disciplines. The concept as such is relatively new, but the idea of a good life which underpins quality of life is as old as human history.

From a theological and philosophical perspective, quality of life is often described in terms of the good life or human flourishing. It is a fundamental concept, which dates back to ancient times. Aristotle, for example, writes in *Nicomachean Ethics* that the highest virtue in life is to have cognisance of what is noble and divine. This cognisance, which can be reached through philosophy and contemplation, can lead to the pursuit of wisdom and complete human happiness.<sup>108</sup> For a theologian like Augustine the good life is not so much about being happy, but more about living a virtuous life.<sup>109</sup> In this tradition the idea of the good life is connected with notions such as solidarity, community, caring for each other, and even suffering for a neighbour, but also with stewardship and striving for justice and peace.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Veenhoven, *Leefbaarheid*, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> Juliet Michaelson et al., *National Accounts of Well-being: Bringing real wealth onto the balance sheet*, London, New Economics Foundation, 2009 ([https://www.unicef.org/lac/National\\_Accounts\\_of\\_Well-being\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/lac/National_Accounts_of_Well-being(1).pdf), accessed 24 February 2015).

<sup>106</sup> M. Jansen, V. Küster, 'Human flourishing contested', in: *Reformed World* (59:3), 2009, pp. 149-161, there p. 150.

<sup>107</sup> Inglehart and Baker distinguish between the survival dimension of life involving materialist values and the dimension of self-expression containing post-materialist values and subjective well-being. (R. Inglehart, W.E. Baker, 'Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values', *American Sociological Review* (65), 2000, pp. 19-51 in: M. Vonk, *Sustainability and Quality of Life: A Study on The Religious Worldviews, Values and Environmental Impact of Amish, Franciscan and Benedictine Communities*, Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 2011, p. 39.

<sup>108</sup> Aristotle, W.D. Ross, L. Brown, *The Nicomachean ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 194-198.

<sup>109</sup> Jansen, 'Human flourishing contested', p. 149.

<sup>110</sup> Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, Eugene, Oregon, Pickwick Publications, 2013, pp. 73-75; Alan Smith, Jill Hopkinson, *Faith and the Future of the Countryside; Pastoral and Theological Perspectives on Rural Sustainability*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2012; Cameron, *Theological Reflection*, p. xviii.

### *Economy, Ecology and Human Well-being*

The concept 'quality of life' came into use after World War II. At that moment the dominant ideal was economic growth: to fight poverty and social inequality and to gain prosperity for everyone. On a more critical note, 'quality of life' was first used in the 1950s in socio-economic studies by Ordway and Osborn. They pointed out that belief in progress and economic growth formed a threat to the irreplaceable sources of energy and raw materials.<sup>111</sup> Ordway wrote:

What is the foreseeable end of this upward spiral of industrial expansion, or the down-ward spiral of our productive and land area? What has this industrial pattern already done to the quality of life?<sup>112</sup>

From an environmental point of view economic development became a threat to the quality of life, since it not only caused pollution of air, water, and soil, but also created worldwide social injustice.

This shift from an economic to a more environmental perspective formed the basis for social criticism of a materialistic worldview. It was pointed out that the Gross National Product cannot give real insight into the well-being of people, nor does it say anything about the distribution of goods among groups in the population.<sup>113</sup> Around 1970 'quality of life' came to refer to human well-being and was more related to the individual.<sup>114</sup> This development raised questions such as: are people satisfied about their life? What means and resources, such as healthcare, education, and social security, do people need to find life fulfilment?<sup>115</sup> Ideas about self-fulfilment and self-realisation led to a normative understanding of quality of life: people had to become the person they were meant to be. Quality of life became a must; if not, life had no meaning.<sup>116</sup> This idea can be criticized from a theological point of view: God accepts us no matter how much we feel unhappy or fail in our attempts to live well. This stands in opposition to what is usually expected of us by the social environment.<sup>117</sup> Another problem is that life satisfaction is difficult to measure, because people experience and evaluate similar circumstances in very different ways.<sup>118</sup> What complicates the situation even more is that, as Campbell has shown, quality of life is affected most by the intimate areas of life (such as relationships and how people live), which escape the influence of politics and policy.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>111</sup> S.H. Ordway, *Resources and the American Dream: Including a Theory of the Limit of Growth*, New York, The Ronald Press Company, 1953; H.F. Osborn, *The Limits of the Earth*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1954.

<sup>112</sup> Ordway, *Resources and the American Dream*, p. 45 in: A.W. Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven, criterium voor medisch handelen?*, Baarn, Ambo, 1987, pp. 17-18; Richard Farnell (ed.), *Faith in Rural Communities: Contributions of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy*, Warwickshire, ACORA Publishing, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> Kees Kooman, *Boerenbloed, Melkquota, megastallen en het verdwenen idyllische platteland*, Amsterdam, De Kring, 2015, p. 46.

<sup>114</sup> Vonk, *Sustainability*, p. 11; Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, p. 21; R.J. Rogerson, 'Environmental and Health-Related Quality of Life: Conceptual and Methodological Similarities', *Social Science and Medicine* (41: 10), 1995, pp. 1373-1382, there p. 1373.

<sup>115</sup> Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, pp. 23-24; Melis, *A threatened existence*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>116</sup> Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, pp. 28-31.

<sup>117</sup> Jansen, 'Human flourishing contested', p. 151.

<sup>118</sup> Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>119</sup> A. Campbell (ed.), *The Quality of American Life: Perceptions, Evaluations and Satisfactions*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1976 in: Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, p. 27.

From 1970 onwards the concept was also frequently used in the context of medicine. Health was deemed a necessary condition for quality of life. But at the same time, physicians and patients wondered whether the results of a treatment were worth the effort, pain, and distress. Research was carried out to measure the effects of treatments, such as the *Quality of life before and after transplantation*. The discussion was further triggered by the fact that life expectancy increased, while treatment and prolonging life could also cause an unwelcome continuation of suffering.<sup>120</sup> Around 1990 the concept of QALY (Quality Adjusted Life Year) was developed. This tool is used to determine what a year in good health may cost. The ethical discussion about this is still ongoing.<sup>121</sup>

### *Quality of Life in the Interface of Material and Personal Living Environment*

Quality of life has therefore become both a descriptive and a normative concept that can be used on different levels and in various discourses. The concept is used in different disciplines, like geography, sociology, medicine, philosophy, and theology. It can refer to personal health and well-being, to local social and environmental conditions, and to the sustainability of the quality of life worldwide, which includes demands for food, fresh water and energy.<sup>122</sup> Most often quality of life refers to a couple of main themes, like people's health, economy, employment, mobility, safety, social life, and living environment (see section 3.2)

The geographer Rogerson makes a distinction between the material life arena and the personal life arena that is very helpful for bringing these widely divergent aspects together.

The material life arena consists of a series of goods, services, and other attributes related to the social, physical, and economic environment in geographical space within which people live. [...] The personal life arena includes the subjective assessment of life quality measures in terms of satisfaction, pleasure, happiness or other preference ordering. It also includes the characteristics of people, which includes personal attributes (e.g. age, gender, social class), their past and current experiences and the impact of relationships with other people. All of which are influential in shaping value systems and preferences.<sup>123</sup>

These two life arenas interact with each other in the inner conversation people are having with themselves. It is in this inner conversation where people perceive and evaluate their day-to-day life that quality of life is developed. Churches can be places where people share these inner conversations. In these meaning making processes people develop a personal worldview and coping strategies, which strengthens peoples resilience.

In my view quality of life is created in the interaction between the environment and the individual. People are constantly in conversation with themselves, the world and the people around them. Individuals shape and are shaped by the physical and social environment they live in. Depending on how people envision their lives, and how they evaluate their living circumstances, they will either be able to do something about their situation or

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<sup>120</sup> Musschenga, *Kwaliteit van leven*, pp. 32-33; Willem Marie Speelman, 'Half her Knee: A Description of the Spiritual Dimension of a Physiotherapeutic Case', in: Hense, *Quest for Quality*, pp. 79-93.

<sup>121</sup> Rogerson, 'Environmental and Health-Related', p. 1380.

<sup>122</sup> Vonk, *Sustainability*, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> Rogerson, 'Environmental and Health-Related', pp. 1375-1376.

not. But at the same time, it should be taken into account that our dwelling places enable or hinder our pursuit of ideals.<sup>124</sup>

Therefore, it is important to be aware of the frame of reference people are using; in short, what their ideas and ideals about a good life entail. These kinds of ideas about how to achieve and maintain a high quality of life essentially make up people's worldviews. A worldview can be described as 'the overall perspective from which an individual or groups sees, understands, and interprets the world from which a complex of values, answers to existential questions, and ideas about desirable behaviour are derived.'<sup>125</sup> As mentioned above, Boomars distinguishes between liveability on a functional level, how it is perceived and appropriated, which determines how people belong to their living environment. In my view the attribution of meaning is crucial for understanding the relation between liveability and personal well-being. The way people perceive and make sense of their physical and social living environment depends on their worldview. I would argue that places where people's worldviews are shaped, community ties are strengthened and questions of contingency are addressed are of fundamental importance. Churches are examples of such places where quality of life is envisioned, enhanced and questioned.

## Conclusion

The countryside and the life of its inhabitants are shaped by spatial, socio-economic, socio-cultural, and political settings and processes. Although agriculture dominates the image of the countryside, the number of farms has declined by nearly 75 percent in the last 60 years, while the scale has increased. Socio-economic developments leave their marks on the landscape. In Brabant the growth of mega stables challenges the physical environment. In Groningen the gas extraction has led to earthquakes, which damage houses, buildings, and people. The rural population has also changed; in the peripheral areas of the Netherlands ageing and demographic decline raise questions about a sustainable liveable countryside. In other parts the arrival of new people from the cities can lead to tensions between villagers. Contemporary rural life takes place on a local and regional level, which raises questions about accessibility and visibility and stimulates the discussion about what a liveable countryside should entail.

Liveability is used in relation to various aspects of the physical and social environment. The way people experience liveability influences their personal well-being. People perceive and understand their environment in different ways, which leads to different and sometimes conflicting understandings of a liveable village. Frans Thissen's theory of liveability is helpful for understanding the interaction between the physical and social environment in relation to the development of community initiatives. The analysis of regional newspapers reveals that the quality of the physical environment and the level of services are recurring matters of concern, but underlying these are questions about social cohesion and community building to develop community initiatives and looking after each other.

<sup>124</sup> Daniel Boscaljon, 'Dwelling Theologically', in: David Jasper, *et al.*, (eds.), *Theological Reflection and the Pursuit of Ideals: Theology, Human Flourishing and Freedom*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 95-111, there p. 95.

<sup>125</sup> Vonk, *Sustainability*, pp. 11, 36.

Liveability is not only a useful concept for sketching the rural context of village churches, but also offers an interesting perspective for analysing the role of church in village life, as a meeting place, a community, and provider of various services. I use the concept when referring to the Dutch discussions about rural liveability, but it is insufficient for understanding the nature of ecclesial and religious repertoires and the meaning for people's personal well-being. Therefore, I have chosen to use the concept of quality of life, which encompasses both liveability and personal well-being. Following Rogerson's distinction between the material and personal living arena, it is interesting to observe how these arenas interact in village life. Individuals shape and are being shaped by the physical and social environments they live in. This reciprocity is a fundamental characteristic of religion, because religion offers both a worldview and a motive to act. In this study I focus primarily on the different meanings that people attribute to community. Analysis of the case studies reveals various perspectives on community and how people 'respond when ideas of community are challenged.'<sup>126</sup> The village church seems a good place to start to gain more insight into the way people perceive and relate to the physical and social worlds that shape their communities.

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<sup>126</sup> Ruth Panelli, Richard Welch, 'Why community?: Reading difference and singularity with community', in: *Environment and planning* (37), 2005, pp. 1589-1611, there p. 1589.



# Chapter 4

## Church in a Changing Society

This chapter focusses on the second sub-question: How has the differentiation and secularisation of society shaped perspectives on the role of churches in the public domain? It is important to be aware of the developments in society, because they can also be recognized in the case studies. They have shaped the way people perceive the role of the church in society, also with regard to liveability questions. I start in section 4.1 with an historical overview of how the position of church in society developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The church used to be connected with various domains in society. This gradually changed through the separation of church and state, and the decline of church membership. Section 4.2 sketches how processes of secularisation have led to uneasiness about the task of the church and the place of church and religion in the public sphere. These processes take place against the background of the development from a minimal state via a welfare state to a participation society. In section 4.3 I describe how these developments have influenced the way people think about the role of church in society. Finally, in section 4.4 I look at emerging religious repertoires in the public domain, which have stirred a discussion about how sacred and profane are related in the twenty-first century.

### 4.1 | Church from the Centre to the Margins of Society

The marginalisation of the church is not only caused by the process of depillarisation and secularisation, but also by a process of differentiation of society which already started in the nineteenth century. Since the Middle Ages the church had performed various social functions, but this gradually changed after the separation of church and state in 1795. In a process of differentiation public spheres such as science, education, and economy became more separate and independent.<sup>1</sup> Still, in the pillarised society of the Netherlands between circa 1870 and 1960, fields like education, care, leisure, media, and professional groups remained connected to various denominations. In the welfare state ties with the church were loosened as organisations of civil society became more independent from the church. The turn of the millennium brought a transition to a participation society, in which citizens were

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<sup>1</sup> Joop Simonse, *De teloorgang van het kerkelijk clubhuiswerk*, Baarn, Ten Have, 1997, p. 237.

asked to contribute more to the civil society.<sup>2</sup> These developments can be illustrated by examining the place and the use of the church building, because it reflects the position of the church in society.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1.1 | The Rise of Protestant Civil Society

Until far into the nineteenth century the Reformed Church was a centre for various social, cultural and administrative functions, of which traces are still visible.<sup>4</sup> In the time of the Dutch Republic (1588-1795) there was freedom of religion to a certain extent, but the Reformed Church was the public (and therefore privileged) church.<sup>5</sup> The ecclesial organisations facilitated burials, the church building and churchyard were used as a cemetery, and the sexton and the grave digger functioned as undertakers. The sexton was also the cantor in the church and often the teacher of the village school. In some churches, the bread benches for the distribution of food and clothing are still present. The Reformed Church provided the civil administration. The church wardens were also responsible for the waterways and the roads on the ecclesial grounds.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the church as an institution provided various services such as poor relief, schooling and public safety that are often seen as important for local quality of life today.

After the separation of church and state the close ties between the Reformed Church and the state were gradually undone. In 1811 the municipalities were created, which took over the civil administration. From 1825 it was no longer allowed to bury the dead in the church. News and official announcements were no longer read from the pulpit, but printed in the local newspaper. Among church councils, resistance to public announcements in the church services also grew.<sup>7</sup> Since 1806 the state had become responsible for education, but the majority of school councils were presided over by a minister and the teachers were often sextons or cantors in the church. In 1830 a royal decree stated that education in public schools should not be offensive to dissidents. This meant that religious education was no longer taught in public schools, but by the minister during catechism. The state financed public schools, which led to the school funding controversy in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Churches have always played a dominant role in poor relief. Often church attendance was a condition for receiving support. For instance, in the municipality of Slochteren every village church had its own poorhouse where elderly, orphans and people with disabilities were housed. The Law on Poor Relief (28 November 1818) placed institutions for poor relief, including ecclesial poor relief under state-control. The Reformed Church objected to this and in order to maintain social influence extended its support to birth members, the unbaptised

<sup>2</sup> Jan Jacob van Dijk, 'Het middenveld is dood. Lang leve het middenveld!', in: Govert J. Buijs, J. Hoogland (eds.), *Ontzilde bezieling*, Den Haag, Boom bestuurskunde, 2016, pp. 85-96, there pp. 89-99.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, 'Voor wie zijn kerkgebouwen bestemd?' in: Olav Boelens, Ton Meijers (eds.), *Het kerkgebouw als religieus erfgoed*, Tilburg, Universiteit Tilburg, 2009, pp. 23-48, there pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> The main Reformed Church in the Netherlands was called the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* from 1579 till 1795. This would become the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* in 1816.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Selderhuis (ed.), *Handboek Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*, Utrecht, Kok, 2014, p. 320.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobine Gelderloos, *Het kerkgebouw als publieke ruimte*, unpublished masterthesis, Groningen, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, pp. 102- 106, 132-141.

<sup>8</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 631, 685-686; John Exalto, Gert van Klinken (eds.), *De Protestantse onderwijzer: Geschiedenis van een dienstbaar beroep 1800- 1920*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2015, p. 8.



children of Reformed parents. The Poor Law of 1854 asserted that state poor relief was complementary to ecclesial poor relief.<sup>9</sup> But poverty increased so much that the churches were not always able to provide enough support. Churches tended to refer non-church members to the municipal council.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in Hellum the church traditionally cared for non-members as well; it was only in 1870 that the church decided to follow the policy of other village churches in this respect.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly so, the present church's habit of giving flowers to everyone in the village might be related to this tradition of care.

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the rise of Christian societies and social organisations outside the conventional domain of the church: schools, support centres, and housing organisations. These kinds of philanthropic initiatives stemmed from Christian ideals of care and solidarity.<sup>12</sup> In our research area, in Slochteren, the ministers founded a department of the *Maatschappij tot nut van het algemeen* (Society for the Common Good). They provided spinning wheels to fight poverty and opened libraries in village schools.<sup>13</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, after the restoration of the episcopal hierarchy, Catholics were emancipated in the public domain. Congregations that cared for the sick were allowed by the government. In Brabant, in villages like Asten and Lierop, congregations and orders started nursing homes, district nurses, and parish schools. Pastors developed different kinds of youth work. On the Protestant side, non-ecclesial societies were founded for the care of psychiatric patients, hospitals, and institutions for blind and deaf people. This meant that the churches stood at a distance from the charitable work.<sup>14</sup>

### 4.1.2 | From Pillarisation to Secularisation in the Twentieth Century

In the wake of the *Doorbraakgedachte* (literally 'Breakthrough thought'), a political movement that aimed at breaching the boundaries between the liberal, social, Protestant, and Catholic pillars, a group of 18 *Hervormde* and *Gereformeerde* ministers thought the separation between the churches was untenable.<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s the first steps were taken to bring together three Protestant churches (the *Hervormde*, *Gereformeerde*, and also the Evangelical Lutheran churches) together in the *Samen op Weg*-process (*SoW*; in English 'Together on the Way') unification process. In a time when ecumenism was blossoming, churches wanted to transcend denominational differences, because they were thought to lead to social segregation. Furthermore, the biblical ideal that the church should not be divided, but strive for unity, formed an important motivation.<sup>16</sup> The whole process of unifying local

<sup>9</sup> Hub Crijns, *Diaconie in beweging: Handboek diaconiewetenschap*, Utrecht, Kok, 2011, pp. 185-186; Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 615, 631-633, 684.

<sup>10</sup> Kornelis ter Laan, Martin Hillenga, *Geschiedenis van Slochteren*, Groningen, Oppenheim, 1962, Reprint: Groningen, Regio-Projekt, 2000, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, pp. 86-91.

<sup>12</sup> Ido Weijers, Evelien Tonkens, 'Christianization of the Soul: Religious Traditions in the Care of People with Learning Disabilities in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century', in: *Social History of Medicine* (12:3), pp. 351-370.

<sup>13</sup> Ter Laan, *Geschiedenis van Slochteren*, p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 635-638, 726.

<sup>15</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 806-808.

<sup>16</sup> *Van kerken tot kerk, hervormd-gereformeerd gesprek*, Amsterdam, Ten Have, 1961, pp. 9, 12, 26-27; Van Dam, *Achter de zuilen*, pp. 12-13, 19; G. Dekker, H.C. Stoppels, *Godsdienst en samenleving: Een introductie in godsdienstsociologie*, Kampen, Kok, 2009, p. 183.

congregations and national organisations took considerable time. In parts of Brabant it was already completed in the 1980s, while in other regions, such as Groningen, it is still ongoing. This can be explained by the historical position of the Protestant churches in these different regions. In villages in Groningen there were often two or three Protestant churches: *Hervormd*, *Gereformeerd*, and *Gereformeerd Vrijgemaakt* (Reformed Liberated). This Protestant differentiation is virtually absent in Catholic rural Brabant, because the number of Protestants is too small to organise different churches.

### 4.1.3 | Church in Decline

In the process of depillarisation and dechuraching, from 1965 onwards, the ties between churches and other social domains such as care and education loosened, church membership declined and religion lost its institutionalised social function.<sup>17</sup> Successive reports showed that institutional religion has been losing more and more ground. In the post-war period the churches gradually lost their authority and people no longer felt obliged to agree with the views of religious organisations.<sup>18</sup>

Since 1966 the study *God in Nederland* has tried each decade to describe the state of Christianity in Dutch society.<sup>19</sup> The research looks at church membership, church attendance, worldview, and ideas about church in society. The percentage of the Dutch population that are members of the Roman Catholic Church has declined from 35% in 1966 to 11.6% in 2015. The percentage of people belonging to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands<sup>20</sup> declined from 25% in 1966 to 8,6% in 2015. In total, in 2015, approximately 25% of the population consists of church members, making the church a minority in a secular country. In 1966 33% of the population was churchless, a percentage which according to Bernts has risen to 67.8% in 2015.<sup>21</sup> However, according the Central Bureau for Statistics 50% of the population has no church affiliation.<sup>22</sup> This illustrates how difficult it is to describe these kinds of social developments in figures.

It is hardly surprising that church attendance has also dropped (see appendix illustrations, figures 10-13). In 1966 50% of the population attended the church on a weekly basis; in 2015 only 12%. Since only 20% of the people born between 1986 and 2011 are church members, compared to 50% born before the Second World War, it is to be expected that the church will further decline. Involvement in church life is strongest among members of the smaller Protestant churches and lowest in Catholic circles. Protestants are also more content with the spiritual sustenance within their church than Catholics and have also become more satisfied than ten years ago.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke, over geloof en kerk in de moderne maatschappij' in: Van den Donk, *Geloven in het publieke domein*, pp. 417-434, there p. 418; Van Dam, *Achter de zuilen*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Van Dam, *Achter de zuilen*, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*.

<sup>20</sup> In 2004 the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* and the *Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk* formed the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN)*.

<sup>21</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> 'Helft Nederlanders is kerkelijk of religieus', Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 22 December 2016. (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/51/helft-nederlanders-is-kerkelijk-of-religieus>, accessed 15 June 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*, pp. 23-26.

### Cooperation processes

In 2004 the *Hervormden*, *Gereformeerden*, and *Lutheranen* (Lutherans) formed the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Figure 14 shows how in the last few years the number of *Hervormde*, *Gereformeerde* and *Lutherse* churches has gradually decreased in favour of Protestant congregations.<sup>24</sup> Despite the laudable ideals, the unification of the churches could not prevent further decline.

Parallel to the SoW process, cooperation processes within the denominations have developed. The regionalisation within the church runs parallel to the rural developments I described in chapter 3. Already in the 1960s *Hervormde* churches from several villages started to cooperate with the aim of remaining independent, because together they could afford a minister. In some cases, cooperation led to the formation of a regional congregation. Both processes could be rather tiresome. Differences in theology, organisation, identity, and liturgy had to be bridged. Another obstacle could be the church building. Often at a certain point one church building was sufficient to house the whole of the Sunday congregation. This meant that congregations had to choose which building(s) they wanted to close. For the people who had visited the redundant churches for years this was often rather painful. Church closure often led to loss of members.<sup>25</sup> The cooperation processes engendered an internal focus, which had consequences for the visibility and involvement of the church in village life.<sup>26</sup> In the next chapter I return to this tension between regional and local church.

## 4.2| Church between Welfare Society and Participation Society

What does the decline of church membership and processes of secularisation mean for the position of the church in society? Kim Knibbe observes that 'religion plays a smaller role in the organisation of society.'<sup>27</sup> Secularisation is often understood as declining church affiliation, church attendance, and adherence to 'traditional' articles of faith. But secularisation also refers to the transfer of power and activities from the church to the state. Consequently 'the state becomes a neutral entity, and this demand for neutrality is gradually extended to other institutions in the public sphere as well.'<sup>28</sup> This presupposition also recurs regularly in the fieldwork and determines the role that the church is allowed to play.

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<sup>24</sup> 'Ontwikkeling aantallen gemeenten naar denominatie' in: Ronald Bolwijn, *Statistische Jaarbrief 2017 van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, Utrecht, Dienstencentrum Protestantse Kerk, 2017, p. 24. (NB: Not all new Protestant congregations are the product of the merging of a *Hervormde*, *Gereformeerde* and sometimes a Lutheran church. In some cases, *Hervormde* or *Gereformeerde* churches simply rename themselves as Protestant church. This accounts for the fact that every year more Protestant churches appear than *Hervormde* and *Gereformeerde* churches dissolve. What remains unclear in this table is how many congregations actually disappear.)

<sup>25</sup> Harry Bisseling, Henk de Roest, Peet Valstar, *Meer dan hout en steen: Handboek voor sluiting en herbestemming van kerkgebouwen*, Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2011, pp. 258-262.

<sup>26</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, p. 900.

<sup>27</sup> Kim Knibbe, *Faith in the Familiar, Continuity and Change in Religious Practices and Moral Orientations in the South of Limburg, The Netherlands*, [s.l., s.n.], 2007, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Idem, pp. 2-3.

### *Church in a Welfare Society*

Before the Second World War the church was often still responsible for poor relief and performed various social functions. After the war the welfare state developed, which meant that the state acted as guarantor for the collective social wellbeing of its citizens.<sup>29</sup> In the post-war period churches took more of a prophetic role, critiquing state and society.<sup>30</sup> They set up centres for social welfare work, like the *Gereformeerde* foundations for *maatschappelijk activeringwerk* (social activation work) in the province of Groningen. Social activation work aimed at raising awareness in congregations to encourage members to become more involved in local society.<sup>31</sup>

In 1950 the *Hervormde* church started a sociocultural education centre in the North Groningen village of Breede. In line with the ideal to transcend confessional and ideological differences the centre aimed at bridging the divides between old villagers and new inhabitants, and between people from various churches.<sup>32</sup> The centre participated in the start-up of *Stichting Groningen Noord* (Groningen North Foundation), which aimed to bring prosperity to the region, not only by planning improvements, such as the opening up of the region and land reclamation, but also by addressing sociocultural problems. The foundation initiated the study *Bedreigd Bestaan* (see chapter 3) to gain thorough insight into the complex situation of problems in North Groningen.<sup>33</sup> This shows that some churches felt a strong appeal to enhance the local quality of life and to address issues such as social segregation. Interestingly these initiatives were subsidised by the government, which seems to indicate that the contribution of the church was appreciated and expected.<sup>34</sup>

### *Ecclesial Uneasiness*

Although there was an awareness that churches should be involved in social issues, internal division between churches made it difficult to arrive at a communal body of thought with regard to life and society.<sup>35</sup> Declining church membership further hindered the church from regaining a strong public voice.<sup>36</sup> The development of the welfare state and the process of depillarisation also influenced the role of church in society. The Social Security Act in 1965 released churches from their task of poor relief, which led to some confusion within the churches about their diaconal task.<sup>37</sup> Care and welfare were increasingly carried out by professional institutions with government support and thus transferred from the eccle-

<sup>29</sup> Crijns, *Diaconie*, p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', pp. 59, 68-70.

<sup>31</sup> *dat hebt gij voor mij gedaan": Vijfenvijftig jaar geschiedenis van de Ds. Th. Dellemanstichting voor gereformeerd maatschappelijk activeringswerk (1949-2004) in relatie met de Deputaten Diaconaat en Samenleving van de Gereformeerde Kerken in de provincie Groningen*,

<sup>32</sup> K.G. Pieterman, *Grepen uit de geschiedenis van de classis Middelstum*, Houwerzijl, Vliedorp, 2004; Van Dam, *Achter de zuilen*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> Korrie Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio: Regionale leefbaarheid en identiteiten in Noord Groningen tijdens de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw*, Groningen, Stichting Groninger Historische Publicaties, 2013, pp. 102-115.

<sup>34</sup> G.J. Kok, *Geschiedenis van het Provinciaal Gereformeerd Centrum voor Samenlevingsopbouw en Jeugdwerk Drenthe 'De Karspel' (PGSJ - Drenthe) voorheen: Gereformeerd Sociaal Centrum Drenthe 1954-2008 met Inventaris van het Archief, PGSJ*, Beilen, 2008, p. 9; Kok, "... dat hebt gij", pp. 25-26, 32-33.

<sup>35</sup> Dekker, *Godsdienst en samenleving*, p. 185.

<sup>36</sup> Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', p. 71.

<sup>37</sup> Crijns, *Diaconie*, p. 191; Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', p. 62; Simonse, *De teloorgang*, p. 237.

sial domain to the state.<sup>38</sup> Social organisations such as trade unions, agricultural societies, and care institutions were professionalised. Due to the decline in callings, Catholic orders no longer had the human resources to fill all posts in schools and care institutions. In the processes of secularisation and depillarisation various institutions with religious affiliation merged into 'neutral' organisations, which were open to everyone.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in 1975 the centre in Breede was succeeded by the *Stichting Maatschappelijke Dienstverlening Noord-Groningen* (Foundation for Community Service North Groningen).<sup>40</sup>

Gradually the connection between church and other social domains began to crumble, and the confessional identity of institutions disappeared.<sup>41</sup> The church's loss of function has led to what could be called ecclesial uneasiness.<sup>42</sup> According to Simonse, in his study on ecclesial youth work, it was the welfare work that I described above which led to estrangement. He sketches how church people from the middle classes lived in a completely different world from people in the margins of society. Church workers needed to adjust their value pattern and language to the culture of the streets. However, because most church members did not come along to the streets, this led to estrangement.<sup>43</sup> A study in 1990 among 35 *Gereformeerde* rural churches indicated that local social problems, such as unemployment, were not in view. Church council members did not see liveability issues as a responsibility for the church council, but for the local village society, in which individual church members could participate.<sup>44</sup> From the other side villagers in Brabant began wondering why the pastor should be involved in the schoolboard and housing issues.<sup>45</sup>

### *Church in a Participation Society*

Since the 1990s the welfare state has gradually been replaced by a participation society. The costs of the welfare state have been prohibitive because expenses are rising and the population is ageing. Therefore, the state is reorganizing health care on a free-market basis. The Social Support Act (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning - Wmo*) of 2007 aims at enabling as many people as possible to participate in society. The act sees a role for churches who, as part of civil society, contribute to liveability and social cohesion in neighbourhoods.<sup>46</sup> Since 1 January 2015 the state has not only transferred care for the elderly, youth and sick, but also unemployment benefits to municipalities.<sup>47</sup> In an effort to cut down on

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<sup>38</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 837-838; Hans Schilderman, 'Religie en zorg in het publieke domein' in: Van de Donk, *Geloven in het publieke domein*, pp. 395-416, there p. 401; H. de Waal, *Diaconaat en het ouder worden van kerk en samenleving*, Rotterdam, Stichting Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 9-10; Inez Schippers, *Sacred Places in the Suburbs: Casual Sacrality in the Dutch VINEX-district Leidsche Rijn*, Amsterdam, Groningen, Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies, 2015, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Van Dam, *Achter de zuilen*, p. 18; Simonse, *De teloorgang*, p. 238.

<sup>40</sup> Pieterman, *Grepen uit de geschiedenis*.

<sup>41</sup> Selderhuis, *Handboek*, pp. 838, 868-870.

<sup>42</sup> Crijns, *Diaconie*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>43</sup> Simonse, *De teloorgang*, pp. 238-239.

<sup>44</sup> G.J. Althuis et. al, *Rapportage van de projectgroep 'kerk en dorp'*, Assen, 1988, pp. 14, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Toon Cortooms, *De Koepel* (8:2), October 1970, <http://www.slaponline.nl/archief%20histori.html>, accessed 28 January 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> 'Decentralisatie van overheidstaken naar gemeenten', <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gemeenten/decentralisatie-van-overheidstaken-naar-gemeenten>, accessed 15 October 2016.

the costs for healthcare institutions, people are expected to live longer in their own homes. Society is called upon to take responsibility in providing social care and support, and only if necessary will the state provide support.<sup>48</sup>

In the last decades the church has been (re)discovered as a source for social engagement and social capital.<sup>49</sup> While churches are searching for a new role with regard to care and welfare: to what extent are they able to take on responsibilities? The congregations in this research are exploring possibilities of serving the local community, but limited human resources and uncertainties about their specific contribution make it a difficult task.<sup>50</sup> Yet there are various examples of churches that embrace the opportunity the *Wmo* offers to return to the stage in the public domain.

The project *Zorgzame Kerk* (Caring Church) reveals the role that the Protestant Church envisions for local churches. Church buildings can be used for activities for people in need and churches offer financial support for good causes.<sup>51</sup> Church communities can speak on behalf of people who are in need.<sup>52</sup> 'Religious organisations fight for social justice and empower people economically, socially, and spiritually'.<sup>53</sup> Churches address issues such as poverty and loneliness, and have an eye for existential questions.<sup>54</sup> Church members offer support in various ways. Repeatedly research has revealed that churchgoers work more often as volunteers than non-churchgoers and donate more to good causes.<sup>55</sup> According to sociologists Dekker and De Hart, churches, rather than other clubs, are places where people gain social skills. People who participate in the church are often socially active outside the church. There is a connection between church involvement and active citizenship.<sup>56</sup> Research by Marieke van der Meer points in the same direction, revealing that people who go to church are often integrated in the village community and actively involved in village life.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Herman Noordegraaf, *Kerk en Wmo, De eerst vijf jaren (2007-2011), Een onderzoek naar (kritische) participatie van kerken in de Wmo*, Groningen, Stichting Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 8-10; Schilderman, 'Religie en zorg', p. 402.

<sup>49</sup> Rein Brouwer, *Geloven in gemeenschap, het verhaal van een protestantse geloofsgemeenschap*, Kampen, Kok, 2009, pp. 96-188; J. Flint, Rowland Atkinson, Ade Kearns, *Churches and Social Capital, The role of Church of Scotland Congregations in Local Community Development*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow, 2002, ([http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/3677/social\\_capital\\_summary.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/3677/social_capital_summary.pdf), accessed 15 October 2013) p. 37; Robert Furbey (et al.), *Faith as Social Capital, Connecting or Dividing?*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2006; Herman Amelink, 'Wmo: nieuwe kans voor de kerken', *NRC*, 6 February 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Schilderman, 'Religie en zorg', p. 404.

<sup>51</sup> Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', pp. 71-72.

<sup>52</sup> *Kerk in actie*, <https://www.kerkinactie.nl/diakenen-zwo/zorgzame-kerk>, accessed 15 June 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Arie L. Molendijk, "'God Made the Country, and Man Made the Town': Some Observations on The Place of Religion in the Western (Post)secular City", in: Arie Molendijk, Justin Beaumont, Christoph Jedan, *Exploring the Post Secular, The Religious, The Political and the Urban*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 145-162, there p. 160.

<sup>54</sup> Herman Noordegraaf, *Kerk en Wmo: de eerste vijf jaren (2007-2011): Een onderzoek naar (kritische) participatie van kerken in de Wmo*, Groningen, Stichting Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 8-10; Henk van IJken, *Kerkelijke betrokkenheid bij ouderen: Een onderzoek in Groningen en Drenthe*, Utrecht, Kerk in Actie, 2007; Jorge Castillo Guerra, Marjolein Glashouwer (et al.), *Telje zegeningen: Het maatschappelijke rendement van christelijke kerken in Rotterdam en hun bijdrage aan sociale cohesie*, Nijmegen, NIM, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Henk de Roest, Herman Noordegraaf, "'We learned it at our mothers' knees': Perspectives of churchgoing volunteers on their voluntary service", in: *Reformed World* (59:3), 2009, pp. 213-226; "Protestanten vrijgeveiger dan gemiddelde Nederlander", *Trouw*, 25 November 2011.

<sup>56</sup> De Hart, Dekker, 'Kerken in de Nederlandse', pp. 141, 150-154.

<sup>57</sup> Marieke van der Meer, et al., *De sociale draagkracht van dorpen in Borsele: Leefbaarheid, sociale cohesie en community care in kleine dorpen*, Amsterdam, AMIDSt, 2008, pp. 41-42, 51, 67, 114.

Churches cooperate in *Wmo* projects, discovering common ground and shared ideals with welfare organisations. Jager-Vreugdenhil sees a distinction between churches as organisations participating in *Wmo* councils, which advise municipalities about the organisation of informal care, and churches as communities providing care and supporting people.<sup>58</sup> Inclusivism is fundamental in this field. To be eligible for subsidies church projects should be open to everyone, irrespective of worldview or religious background. Here a tension can appear between identity and neutrality, social and religious tasks. Churches are not allowed to use social work as an opportunity to evangelise. In order to qualify for a subsidy from the *Wmo*, the work of churches should be aimed at everyone, excluding no one. The churches want to seize this opportunity to show that they want to serve the whole community.<sup>59</sup>

### 4.3 | Perceptions on the Task of Church in Society

The perception of the role of the church in society has not only changed through the process of dechurching, but also through the continuing secularisation of the public domain and the development of the welfare state. In the welfare state the responsibility for social security, poverty, care, and education no longer lies with the church. Both inside and outside the church people no longer seem accustomed to the church playing a prominent role in society. Religion has hardly any institutional impact on society and many non-church organisations seem to have more social relevance.<sup>60</sup> People are no longer used to ecclesial presence in village life, resulting in an attitude of unfamiliarity and even suspicion towards church and religious rituals. This changed situation raises the question, both inside and outside the church: what is the relevance of a declining church for society nowadays?

#### *Growing Unfamiliarity*

Secularisation and dechurching has not only led to ecclesial uneasiness, as described in the previous section, but also to religious illiteracy. Theologian Anton Houtepen points to successive generations who have never heard of God or religion, and therefore do not exactly know what they are missing. Religious illiteracy also becomes evident in the caricatural image that people have of God, belief, and church. Houtepen states that many people who have left the church are unaware of the significant changes that religious beliefs and practices have undergone in the past decades.<sup>61</sup> The growing unfamiliarity with church becomes apparent in the fact that the percentage of the population that expects social criticism from the church has declined between 2005 and 2015.<sup>62</sup> Also, trust in the church has decreased,

<sup>58</sup> Marja Jager-Vreugdenhil, *Nederland participatieland?: De ambitie van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning (Wmo) en de praktijk in buurten, mantelzorgrelaties en kerken*, Amsterdam, Vossiuspers UvA, 2012, pp. 175-176.

<sup>59</sup> Amelink, 'Wmo: nieuwe kans voor de kerken'.

<sup>60</sup> Gerard Dekker, *Heeft de kerk zichzelf overleefd?: Beschouwingen over de rol van de kerk in de moderne samenleving*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2010; René de Reuver, 'God trekt een spoor van hoop in deze wereld', in: *Bries*, 2013, pp. 22-23.

<sup>61</sup> Anton Houtepen, 'De Secularisatie in het Westen en de "Terugkeer van God": Hoe God verdween uit de sociologie', in: *Religie en Samenleving* (1:2), 2006, pp. 65-85, there pp. 73-74.

<sup>62</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*, p. 41

especially after the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, there are the doubts about government support of religious organisations.<sup>64</sup> Religious illiteracy may also explain why there seems to be limited awareness among policymakers that the disappearance of churches might affect the liveability of the countryside. As a result, churches are hardly seen as discussion partners for governmental and welfare organisations.

The churches on the other hand, do not always seek active cooperation. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands sees its diaconal task as being to signal problems in society and point the state and society to their responsibilities.<sup>65</sup> Sinninghe Damsté observes that churches nowadays are often active in their own network, but hardly cooperate with municipalities and social organisations.<sup>66</sup> Among church members traces of ecclesial uneasiness can be noticed.<sup>67</sup> Diaconal work is primarily understood as providing financial support for people in need far away. They can be uncertain about what the church can and should do in the immediate environment.<sup>68</sup> This makes the church less visible in the public domain of civil society.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, as Harskamp remarks, questions about spirituality, values, solidarity, mental health, and social criticism are inherently connected to civil society.<sup>70</sup> Although the church may play a marginal role, these aspects still form the core business and primary concern of churches.

### 4.4 | Religious Repertoires in the Twenty-first Century

In the previous section, we saw that processes of depillarisation, secularisation, and the development of the welfare state contributed to the marginalisation of church in society. This seems to have shaped the way people think about the role of church and religion in society as belonging behind the front door. But religion and ritual are not that easily pushed into a private cage. While institutionalised religion is in decline, religiosity pops up in other domains in society. After a period in which the boundaries between various domains were strictly demarcated, now gradually the consanguinity between church on the one hand and fields of care, culture, memorial, and education are gradually rediscovered. Although the distinctions can simultaneously be maintained. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson points out that, in practice

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<sup>63</sup> Rob Bijl, Jeroen Boelhouwer, Marielle Cloin, Evert Pommer, *De sociale staat van Nederland*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011, p. 61; 'Nederlanders wantrouwen kerken', *Trouw*, 18 november 2011; Stijn Fens, "Een kleine kerk heeft ook voordelen", *Trouw*, 30 november 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> Vreugdenhil, *Nederland participatieland?*, p. 190; *De kerk en de democratische rechtstaat - een positiebepaling: Bijdrage aan het gesprek in gemeente en kerk*, artikel 97, Generale Synode Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, November 2009.

<sup>66</sup> W.A. Sinninghe Damsté, *Gedeelde zorg: De rol van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk / Protestantse Kerk in Nederland bij de bestrijding van armoede in relatie tot de overheidstaak*, PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011, p. 119.

<sup>67</sup> Simonse, *De teloorgang*, p. 237.

<sup>68</sup> Kennedy, "Van "staatskerk"", pp. 72, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Margot Berends, 'Kerk laat zich te weinig horen in het maatschappelijk debat', <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/actueel/Nieuws/nieuwsoverzicht/Paginas/Kerk-in-het-nieuws.aspx>, accessed 15 August 2016; T. Hoekstra, 'Hoe God van het platteland verdween', in: *Blijven geloven in de kern: Verslagbundel en werkmap naar aanleiding van een beraad van kerken in kleine plattelandsgemeenten*, 2000, pp. 7-11, there pp. 7, 10.

<sup>70</sup> A. van Harskamp, 'Religie, staat, samenleving en nog wat', in *de Marge - Tijdschrift voor levensbeschouwing en wetenschap* (14:2), pp. 23-30 in: Buijs, *Ontzilde Bezieling*, p. 99.



the borders between so-called Christian and non-Christian cultures are fluid and porous, easily ruptured and traversed. And this means that social and theological change can be generated and sustained by practices engaged both within and beyond the borders of what anyone might recognize or name as Christian. Because we live across multiple fields of practice at once, the faith in our bones is mixed together with our economics, gender performances, class consciousness, family and kinship networks, and eating practices, for example, all sedimented in the marrow.<sup>71</sup>

Wigg-Stevenson refers to Bourdieu's notion of fields of practice. Bourdieu points out how various fields of practice (e.g. philosophical, artistic, scientific, economic, religious) can be distinguished 'each characterized by the pursuit of a specific goal'.<sup>72</sup> A field of practice 'demarcates an interrelated network of social positions that different agents (people, organisations, institutions) can take up in different ways. Within a field of practice certain rules (*doxa*) are followed that are not explicit and codified. People conform their behaviour to these social norms and can also work creatively with and from these norms creating new strategies of thought and action.'<sup>73</sup> According to Ruard Ganzevoort and Johan Roeland, referring to Bourdieu 'the notion of praxis as a field, a patterned configuration of action, experience, and meaning, includes and transcends activities into a more integrative understanding of what is going on.'<sup>74</sup> What is relevant for this study is that according to Bourdieu multiple fields of practice intersect with each other in any given social space.<sup>75</sup> Therefore it is helpful to sketch the various relations between the ecclesial and other fields such as care and culture, also when the relation between religion and other fields of practice is discussed and sometimes questioned.

So, moments of ritual and reflection are transferring to other places and areas in society, such as education, sport, leisure, work, and care. This can be illustrated by looking again at the place and use of church buildings. Section 4.1 described how various cultural, social, and administrative functions could be found in the church, reflecting the central position that the church had in society.<sup>76</sup> What image arises when we use the church building as a lens to bring into view religious repertoires in the twenty-first century? Religion is not only leaving the institutional church, but also the church building, as we will see in chapters 7 and 9. This process makes the church less visible in public life. At the same time, other repertoires, such as concerts, art, lectures, and events are entering to fill the space that is no longer used for religious purposes.

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<sup>71</sup> Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 20-21.

<sup>72</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Idem, pp. 25-26.

<sup>74</sup> R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Johan Roeland, 'Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology', in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* (18:1), 2014, pp. 91-101, there p. 94.

<sup>75</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian*, pp. 49-50, 182-188.

<sup>76</sup> Gelderloos, *Het kerkgebouw als publieke ruimte*; W. van de Donk, J. Janssen, 'De kerk. De veranderde rol van kerkgebouwen in het publieke domein', H. Dijkstra et al. (ed.), *Bestemming gewijzigd: Moderniteit en stedelijke transformaties*, Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 40-59.

### Church Buildings

Until the 1960s, church buildings for various denominations were planned in new housing developments. These church buildings were still recognizable as churches by their bell towers.<sup>77</sup> They were often designed to house several services, such as day care and a community centre. Nowadays church buildings are no longer drawn in the plans for suburban areas, but interestingly, after some time people develop their own church places. In Lewenborg, a housing estate in Groningen from the 1980s, new residents could visit the *Hervormde* village church in Noorddijk. Although the space was created for ecumenical church life, the Catholics and *Gereformeerden* felt the need for their own church buildings. Together they built a new church in the centre of Lewenborg. This church looks more like a community centre, or a school, than a church. A simple cross next to entrance and a sign reveal that the building is in fact a church.<sup>78</sup> A church in The Hague, dating from 1985, also reflects this marginalisation of the church. The city council agreed to the building of the church, on the condition that the design would allow for different use in the future. The building is still used as a church and the large kitchen provides 50 people with a warm meal on a weekly basis. In other suburban areas dating from the 1990s and 2000s the church has become even less visible. In IJburg a congregation started in a corner house, in Leidscherijn a farm on the outskirts of the area was rebuilt into a church.<sup>79</sup> These buildings, which are not immediately recognizable as churches, stand in sharp contrast to the large, impressive and archetypal 'refodomes' of the orthodox *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* and the *Hersteld Hervormde* church that have appeared on the Dutch Biblebelt in the last decades.<sup>80</sup>

It is hardly surprising that secularisation has led to the closure of a significant number of church buildings. Between 1975 and 2008 approximately 550 Protestant church buildings were closed, some as a consequence of the *Samen op Weg* process.<sup>81</sup> The question arose as to what should be done with the disused church buildings. Some of them were demolished, often to the regret of former churchgoers, but also of residents of the surrounding area. Although an increasing number of people no longer regularly attend worship services, people are often still attached to church buildings.<sup>82</sup> In the meaning which people attribute to a church building seven aspects can be distinguished: the religious, social, emotional and historic meanings, the atmosphere, the look, and the functional possibilities.<sup>83</sup> Church buildings often remain sacred spaces and research has shown that the re-use of church buildings can be met with mixed feelings. People tend to prefer sociocultural uses, like a community centre or a bookstore, to more commercial functions, such as a supermarket or a disco. It seems that church buildings maintain something of their sacrality, even when

<sup>77</sup> Schippers, *Sacred Places*, pp. 14-15

<sup>78</sup> *Walfriedparochie in Groningen*, <http://www.walfriedparochiegroningen.nl/home>, accessed 18 June 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Marten van der Meulen, *Vroom in de Vinex*, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Anneke Pons (ed.), *Vensters op refodomes: Bevindelijk gereformeerden en moderne kerkbouw*, Apeldoorn, Labarum Academic, 2015, pp. 9-11, 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Handreiking religieus erfgoed voor burgerlijke en kerkelijke gemeenten, van kerkelijk gebruik tot herbestemming*, *Vitruvius Woord en Dienst*

<sup>82</sup> Henk de Roest, "'Losing a Common Space to Connect': An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods", in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* (17:2), 2013, pp. 295-312.

<sup>83</sup> Jacobine Gelderloos, 'Liever een boekwinkel dan een disco: Ratio en emotie rondom her- en nevenbestemming van kerkgebouwen', in: *Jaarboek voor Liturgie-onderzoek* (28), 2012, pp. 183-205, there pp. 191-194.

they are withdrawn from religious use. Naturally, the range of possible re-uses is larger when the church building is newer. Both practically and mentally, a church from the twentieth century with ample facilities can perform more functions than a monumental medieval church with benches.<sup>84</sup>

### *Sacred in the Profane*

Sometimes these churches are taken over by other congregations, such as evangelical communities. More often churches are re-used for artistic, educational, commercial, or care purposes. 'Parallel to the process of secularisation a trend towards sacralisation can be observed.'<sup>85</sup> On the one hand sacred places become profane, but on the other hand sacred places develop and are created in the profane world. Migrant and evangelical churches convert garage boxes, schools, or former DIY stores (temporarily) into ecclesial spaces for their services. There are also silence rooms in public spaces, like airports, nursing homes, and schools.<sup>86</sup>

Sacred spaces in profane places are, however, a broader phenomenon, where fields of practice can overlap. This stretches from the world of arts and music to memorial culture.<sup>87</sup> Art historian Henk van Os sees a renewed religious awareness among a new generation of artists and composers who draw freely from religious repertoires such as requiems or *Agnus Dei*. They approach religion unrestrained by prejudices or negative experiences with the church. Composer Anthony Fiurama sees a requiem as a "gothic cathedral where you can walk around without the obligation to join the prayer. You can light a candle, but you don't have to."<sup>88</sup>

Private memorial rituals become visible in the public sphere in the form of roadside memorials, for example.<sup>89</sup> Recently a reinvention of All Souls Day has been observed. Graveyards open up in the evening, offering people the possibility of visiting the grave of their loved ones, surrounded by music and rituals.<sup>90</sup> Another interesting phenomenon is the effect of the *Passion*, a media event on Maundy Thursday, which has taken place since 2011. The passion story is played out on a large square in a Dutch city and broadcast on national television. In 2015 3,8 million viewers followed the event and in various towns and villages local versions of the *Passion* were performed.<sup>91</sup>

Inez Schippers studied sacred places in a VINEX-neighbourhood like Leidscherij, a large new housing development on the outskirts of Utrecht, where originally no church building was planned in the design. Her research shows that people attribute meaning to historical

<sup>84</sup> Idem, pp. 194-203.

<sup>85</sup> Knibbe, *Faith in the Familiar*, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> J.C. Holsappel-Brons, *Ruimte voor stilte: Stiltecentra in Nederland als speelveld van traditie en vernieuwing*, Groningen, Instituut voor Christelijk Cultureel Erfgoed, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Lieke Wijnia, *Making sense through music: Perceptions of the sacred at festival musica sacra Maastricht*, [s.l., s.n.]; William Arfman, *Allerzielen Alom: Material Culture in an Emerging rite*, Leiden, Sidestone Press, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Sandra Kooke, 'Religie is geen taboe meer voor kunstenaars', *Trouw*, 2 November 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Knott, 'Cutting through the post secular'; Schippers, *Sacred places*; Arie Molendijk, Paul Post, *Holy ground, re-inventing ritual space in modern western culture*, Leuven, Peeters, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Arfman, *Allerzielen Alom*.

<sup>91</sup> Mirella Klomp, Marten van der Meulen, 'The Passion as ludic practice - understanding public ritual performances in late modern society: A case study from the Netherlands', in: *Journal for Contemporary Religion* (32:3), 2017, pp. 387-401.

sights, green spaces like parks and a birth forest, and places of art.<sup>92</sup> Schippers signals the rise of civil religion or the 'civil sacred': events that bring people together around a communal source of inspiration which generates enthusiasm, such as a football match, memorials, and royal weddings. 'Civil sacred refers to places and objects that are named sacred by groups of people not because of their connection to the divine, but rather because of their relationship with worldly institutions and natural processes.'<sup>93</sup>

Civil religion seems to form an alternative to traditional religion as a social binder because it has the ability to encompass several groups. Churches also participate in this field, offering social support and comfort in times of crisis.<sup>94</sup> After disasters, churches open their doors and offer a place for silence, a listening ear, or community.<sup>95</sup> This happened for example after the shooting of a police officer in the village of Baflo.<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, these public performances often have an interfaith character, underlining the wish to include everybody. De Hart observes a desire for belonging and collective ritual, around disasters, national festivities, etc., which leads to national solidarity, intercultural fraternisation, and informal help and support, a kind of stand-by solidarity.<sup>97</sup> It is interesting to note how in various secular spheres, activities with religious traits develop, around which ad hoc communities grow. This shows that the lines between sacred and profane practices are not as fixed as they were thought to be.<sup>98</sup>

Nancy Ammerman also challenges the tendency to place the religious and the secular in opposition to each other. She points to the presence of religion in fields that are also secular, such as work, health, family, and politics. In these fields 'actions, relationships, motives and meanings' can be recognized as religious, because they carry a 'more than ordinary dimension.'<sup>99</sup> This more than ordinary dimension comes in various forms, it can be found in the 'awesomeness of nature, the ideal of an inner self, the call of a meaningful life or the value of the bonds between people.' Ammerman refers to this 'consciousness of transcendence and the recognition of a sacred dimension that goes beyond the ordinary' as sacred consciousness.<sup>100</sup> Sacred consciousness is of fundamental importance for how people see and attribute meaning to the world around them, for people's worldviews.<sup>101</sup>

In the previous chapter I argued that people's worldviews determine how they perceive the quality of life, both personally and in relation to their environment. If sacred consciousness is inextricably linked to people's worldviews, this would mean that sacred consciousness may also have relevance for the liveability and the quality of life in the countryside. Churches

<sup>92</sup> Schippers, *Sacred Places*.

<sup>93</sup> M. Evans, 'The sacred: differentiating, clarifying and extending concepts', in: *Review of Religious Research* (45:1), 2003, pp. 32-47, in: Schippers, *Sacred places*, p. 57.

<sup>94</sup> Bernts, *God in Nederland*, p. 41; Open churches in Alphen aan den Rijn after shooting, Apeldoorn Queensday 2009; shooting Baflo/Bierum; memorial service after MH17 crash and interfaith service after Geert Wilders' statement about less Moroccans.

<sup>95</sup> Kennedy, 'Van "staatskerk"', p. 73.

<sup>96</sup> Jeroen Berkenbosch, 'Laurentiuskerk opent de deuren', *RTV Noord*, 14 April 2011.

<sup>97</sup> De Hart, 'Kerken in de Nederlandse', p. 158.

<sup>98</sup> Kees de Groot, 'Fluide vormen van kerk-zijn', in: Rein Brouwer, et al., (eds.), *Levend lichaam: Dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland*, Utrecht, Kok, 2011, pp. 240-280, there p. 250; Klomp, 'The Passion', p. 388.

<sup>99</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 288.

<sup>100</sup> Idem, pp. 292-293.

<sup>101</sup> Idem, p. 299.

can be places where sacred consciousness is socially created and sustained. But this chapter gives reason to suspect that this might also happen in other places in rural life. Ammerman proposes that we 'expand our understanding of the shape of a collective religious life.'<sup>102</sup> Sacred consciousness seems a useful concept for tracing religious tendencies in places that are also secular and for investigating the meaning of these places for the quality of life.

### Conclusion

Examining the place and the use of church buildings serves as a good opportunity to explore the position of church in society. In this chapter I quickly strode through the social religious developments of the last 200 years. I began at the end of the eighteenth century when the church building housed different social services and was used for various public events, and ended with the closure and re-use of church buildings for various purposes and the development of sacred places in profane spaces. In this way, it is possible to trace changing ideas about the role of church and religion in society.

It became clear that the marginal position of church in society is not only a consequence of secularisation and dechurching, but is also a result of the differentiation that started in the nineteenth century. Care, education, work, etc., were developing into separate domains, although these domains were still tied together in the main pillars of society. After the 1960s, the deinstitutionalisation of religion dissolved this connection between the various fields. In the welfare state the responsibility for social security, care, and education transferred to the domain of the state. As a result, the relation between church and questions concerning care, school, housing, and employment was no longer self-evident. Today people can find it difficult to explain what the specific and unique contribution of churches might be in relation to liveability questions. On the other hand, a growing unfamiliarity leads to religious illiteracy, which means that people have no idea or a limited understanding of what church, faith, and religion actually mean. In this respect, ecclesial uneasiness and religious illiteracy form two sides of the same coin.

Gradually a contrary movement can be detected. In the participation society there seems to be a reevaluation of the social work initiated, organised and inspired by churches. The last few decades have seen a re-emergence of religion in the public domain. Forms of civil religion develop during football matches and national Remembrance Day. There are also moments when ad hoc communities develop for a time of ritual and reflection, such as the *Passion*. The concept fields of practice enables to see how religion shares characteristics with the fields of memorial, heritage, and culture. Does this mean that church becomes exchangeable with cultural festivals and memorial rituals? It is an intriguing question that begs for an answer, although it remains to be seen if in this era of fluidity and shifting boundaries a clear answer will ever be found. Nevertheless, an analysis of sacred consciousness in the context of Dutch village churches may provide some clues to understanding the meaning of moments of ritual, reflection, and care on the borders of and outside the classical ecclesial domain.

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<sup>102</sup> Idem, p. 300.



# Chapter 5

## Village Churches in Rural Theology

After exploring the developments in the countryside in chapter 3 and tracing the changes in the position of church in society in chapter 4, I focus in this chapter on village churches, the specific challenges that they face and the way they relate to their environment. First, in section 5.1, I describe how the field of rural theology developed in the UK. This field sketches the qualities and questions of churches in a rural context. I further discuss two theories that attempt to capture the contribution of village churches: first, a model by David Walker, which identifies various ways in which people relate to a village church, and second, social capital theory, which is often used to grasp the meaning of churches for social cohesion and community vibrancy.

Next, in section 5.2, I focus on rural theology in the Dutch context. Since the 1960s a number of studies and reports have appeared, mainly proposing organisational solutions to counter the decline of churches. A recurring question is whether churches should cooperate and work on a regional level or whether they should focus primarily on the local context. Related to this is the question of how to respond as a church to rural modern society. In section 5.3 I argue that a fundamental change of perspective takes place when the developments in the countryside and liveability questions are taken as a starting point, rather than church decline. I conclude in 5.4 with an analysis of church newsletters to explore how the case study congregations relate to quality of life issues in their context. This section functions as a bridge to the actual ethnographic research in the following chapters.

### 5.1 | Rural Theology

Rural theology combines the traditions of natural theology, which focuses on God as the origin of creation, green theology, which emphasises care for the created order, and the ecclesiology of churches in rural environments, which looks at how the church takes shape in a rural setting.<sup>1</sup> Since this study describes how churches relate to the rural context, I focus on rural ecclesiology. What are the most characteristic qualities and important issues in the countryside with which the church is and should be involved? What is characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> William K. Kay, 'God in Creation, a Reflection on Jürgen Moltmann's Theology', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, Sheffield, Equinox, 2012, pp. 94-104.

of church in the countryside? These questions arose in the second half of the twentieth century, amid a growing awareness that rural churches were faced with specific challenges.

### *Village Church in Rural Theology*

Rural theology is especially strongly developed in the UK.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s the number of full-time professionals in rural Britain started to drop. It became clear that rural ministry needed revision. What form of organisation would be best to respond to the decline in churchgoers, services, finances, and ministers? In 1981 the Rural Theological Association was founded with the aim of sharing experiences and supporting both lay and ordained church members in meeting the needs of country dwellers.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas published *Faith in the Countryside*, which stirred the discussion.<sup>4</sup> The journal *Rural Theology* which the Rural Theological Association started in 2000 combines a descriptive and strategic approach. Drawing on theories of social capital and ordinary theology it studies attempts at outreach and church growth, as well as developments in village church life and the challenges that ministers face.<sup>5</sup>

Village churches are also studied in the German context.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schlegel remarks that 'the village can be seen as a social mixture of layers, which through its history, geography and tradition has a specific influence on its residents and in this way generates a village identity and community'.<sup>7</sup> Here again, the social and physical living environments are interrelated. Throughout history the physical environment has shaped a rural way of life. At the same time villagers have developed practices that have changed the living environment. A village culture, and identity develop from the interplay of place, people, and practices. The church as a building, a community, and a repertoire of activities is part of this village life and is taken as the point of departure in this research project. It is therefore worthwhile seeing what the role of a church is in village society from a rural ecclesiological perspective and uncovering the specific contribution of the village church.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Russell, *The Country Parish: Faith in the Countryside*, The Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, ACORA, 1990; Andrew Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside: A Model for the Future, Revised and Expanded*, London/New York, Continuum, 1994, 2003; Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach*, New York/Oxford, Bergahn Books, 1999; Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J. Francis, Peter Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2004; Tim Gibson, *Church and Countryside: Insights from Rural Theology*, Norwich, SCM Press, 2010; Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, Sheffield, Equinox, 2012; Alan Smith, Jill Hopkinson, *Faith and the Future of the Countryside: Pastoral and Theological Perspectives on Rural Sustainability*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Rural Theology Association: A Brief History', <https://ruraltheologyassociation.com/about/history-of-the-rt-a/>, accessed 15 June 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Faith in the Countryside*.

<sup>5</sup> *Rural Theology: International, Ecumenical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yr20>, accessed 15 June 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Möller, *Lasst die Kirche im Dorf!: Gemeinden beginnen den Aufbruch*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck& Ruprecht, 2009; Thomas Schlegel, Martin Alex (eds.), *Leuchtf Feuer oder Lichternetz; Missionarische Impulse für ländliche Räume*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Aussaat, 2012; *Kirchen im Dorf lassen: Erhaltung und Nutzung von Kirchen im ländlichen Raum*, Bonn, Deutsches Nationalkomitee für Denkmalschutz, 2012; Sebastian Borck, Astrid Giebel, Anke Homann (eds.), *Wechselwirkungen im Gemeinwesen: Kirchlich-diakonische Diskurse in Norddeutschland*, Berlin, Wichern-Verlag, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Schlegel, 'Regionale Ausstrahlung oder Dienst vor Ort?' in: Schlegel, *Leuchtf Feuer oder Lichternetz*, pp. 19-39, there p. 26.



### Tensions

As mentioned in chapter 3, it is inevitable that tensions can develop in a village community between various groups, people of different ages, newcomers, and locals, as well as different churches.<sup>8</sup> People of various backgrounds have different aims for living in the countryside and relate to the village church in different ways, ranging from the established and full-time residents to commuters, lifestyle shifters, and tourists.<sup>9</sup> Churches can discuss the relation between local people and new arrivals: are people from elsewhere welcome in the village community and do newcomers respect local traditions?<sup>10</sup> As Anthony Russell points out, because villagers come from different backgrounds, this can also lead to conflicting understandings of church.

There is a basic tension between those who see the church as a focus of the village community, which attempts to give a Christian understanding and meaning to the whole life of the village, which it in a sense represents, and those who see the church as a gathering of Christians out of the community to form a distinct, self-contained organisation with a degree of self-consciousness and definition. [...] The village church model sees community in terms of identification, while community in a gathered church model is seen in terms of participation.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore rural theology needs to reflect on processes of exclusion and inclusion, on conflict and reconciliation, on loneliness and forgiveness.

### Four Ways of Relating to a Church

Russell observes that, in the UK, 'every villager, whether he attends worship frequently, infrequently or not at all, is still thought of as in some sense belonging to the Church.'<sup>12</sup> This idea is further developed by David Walker in a fourfold theological model of belonging, which is helpful for uncovering how churches can have various roles and meanings in village life. Walker distinguishes between belonging through people, place, activities, and events.<sup>13</sup> Since belonging has the connotation of membership it is less suitable for the Dutch context, because the Protestant Church is not a state church like the Anglican Church in the UK. In order to make the notion applicable for this research, I use 'being connected' instead of belonging to distinguish between various ways of connecting with the church which helps to understand the position and meaning of a village church. However, this does not mean that belonging is no longer relevant (see section 6.4 and 6.5). In chap-

<sup>8</sup> Piet George van Hooijdonk, Jacobus Petrus Groot, *Platteland en kerkvernieuwing: Peiling in opdracht van de ABTB (Aartsdiocesane Boeren- en Tuindersbond), met medewerking van de KPO (Katholieke Plattelandsvrouwen Organisatie)*, Hilversum, Brand, 1968; Gibson, *Church and Countryside*, p. 27; Marian Sharp, 'Mobile Mission Bases in the Countryside: A Caravan in the Market Square', in: *Rural Theology* (5:1), 2007, pp. 31-40.

<sup>9</sup> David S. Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theological and Sociological Perspectives', in: Francis, *Rural Life*, pp. 105-118, there pp. 106-110.

<sup>10</sup> Lenie Vollebregt, Okkenbroek, waar ligt dat?', *Konvooi: Dorp in last*, (32:3), 1992, pp. 13-15; Trieneke van der Veer, 'Kerk op de terp', in: *Konvooi: Dorp in last*, (32:3), 1992, pp. 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, *The Country Parish*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>12</sup> Idem, p. 257.

<sup>13</sup> Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church'; David Walker, *God's Belongers: How People Engage with God Today and How The Church can Help*, Abbingdon, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2017.

ter 3 | stated that Thissen's theory on meeting places, social environment, and community initiatives could be summarised as looking at the role of places, people, and practices. This threefold perspective can also be recognized in Walker's model, practices being divided into activities and events.

First, there is connection through people, which Walker derives from the image of the covenant which is a mutual relationship: 'God the Trinity is a community of persons pouring out a liberating love and compassion in a real and historically located human context and empowering human beings to be drawn into and participate in such concrete community too'.<sup>14</sup> Community is the church's *raison d'être*, because it is founded in the Triune God. This does not alter the fact that within a congregation various groups and individuals have to relate to each other, which is not always easy - especially when various church communities have to become acquainted with each other in a process of regionalisation. To make a community visible and tangible people need moments to gather, which brings us to the second way of connecting with church: through activities. People need to see each other regularly to create ties and build a community.

The third way of being connected is through events and the church building. Walker states that people can feel connected with the church through events, such as baptism, weddings, and funerals, but also Christmas services and village events. For instance, harvest services continue to reach various kinds of people with implicit religiosity and communal ritual. As such, events like these provide the church with a public role, making the church more visible and showing the significance of religious practice.<sup>15</sup> The desire to be church in the village can be a strong motivation for opening the church to village activities and organising activities with and for the village community such as jumble sales and musicals.<sup>16</sup> This also ties in with village culture. Village history finds expression in activities that mark the village callender and the narratives connected with it. Some go back for centuries, others have been more recently (re)invented.

Finally, there is connection through place, which Walker primarily relates to the church building. The building often makes village history tangible and can also play a role as a meeting place and as such contributes to the quality of life. Villagers often feel connected with the church building as a place which is not governed by rules of efficiency and refers to the transcendent.<sup>17</sup> This resonates with what Grace Davie describes as vicarious religion churches and churchgoers enacting a memory on behalf of others, who see themselves as believing without belonging to a church. Characteristic of vicarious religion, according to Davie, is that on particular moments these people do find their way to the church. Many people visit the church around Christmas and at times of personal, regional, or national crises.<sup>18</sup> People who have left the village and live elsewhere can remain connected with

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<sup>14</sup> Michael, L. Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', in: Martineau, *Changing Rural Life*, pp. 21-43, there p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> David Walker, 'The Social Significance of Harvest Festivals in the Countryside: An Empirical Enquiry among those who Attend', in: Francis, *Rural Life*, pp. 266-280.

<sup>16</sup> Max Mesman, Janet van Dijk (eds.), *Klein en vitaal: aanstekelijke verhalen van kleine gemeenten*, Utrecht, Dienstenorganisatie van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2011, pp. 31-32.

<sup>17</sup> Möller, *Lasst die Kirche im Dorf!*, p. 105

<sup>18</sup> Grace Davie, *Europe, the Exceptional Case; Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, London, Longman&Todd, 2002, p. 5.

the village through memories and family ties.<sup>19</sup> Their relation to the church lies more in the building than in the activities. The results of the fieldwork reveal that especially in Groningen the church buildings are of fundamental importance for the place of the church community within village society. The building and the tower, the bells and the cemetery are carriers of the identity of a village.

### *Church as Social Capital*

A fundamental part of church life is community building. People who belong to a faith community can be embedded in a strong social network. Research has shown that people who go to church are more likely to show social engagement.<sup>20</sup> The use of the concept of social capital in rural ecclesiology can be understood as an effort to explain the role of church in society in language that is also understood outside the church. Research in the field of rural theology regularly draws on Putnam's theory of social capital.<sup>21</sup> Michael Langrish summarises the meaning of social capital as follows:

Social capital is a generic term used to describe a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. These include a culture of mutual support, a measure of altruism, the existence of informal networks, a source of local information and means of communication, energy and vitality, and a capacity to reach isolated people.<sup>22</sup>

Three types of social capital are distinguished. First, there is bonding social capital, which holds a group together through a common identity, a sense of shared values, and interests. A group rich in bonding social capital can also be a closed network, that is difficult to join. A classic example is a close-knit church community that seems to approach newcomers with some detachment. Bridging social capital develops through interaction between different groups. It can grow when there is an overlap in networks, interests, or practices and can help to expand each other's resources. Growing ecumenical contacts is an example of this kind of social capital. Finally, linking social capital refers to connections between groups who stand in a power-based relationship, for example when a church community successfully applies for a subsidy to maintain the churchyard.<sup>23</sup>

Outside the theological domain, the role of churches in the community development of neighbourhoods and villages is also recognised. Interestingly, the UK government is aware of this role. The department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funded research on the contribution of faith communities to social cohesion and community vibrancy. Social capital is the central concept in this research, which is operationalized in the question 'what are people of faith doing towards the creation and maintenance of active, caring, welcom-

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<sup>19</sup> Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church', p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Joep de Hart, Paul Dekker, 'Kerken in de Nederlandse *civil society*: institutionele grondslag en individuele inspiratiebron', in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk, *et al.* (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, pp. 139-170, there pp. 141, 150-154.

<sup>21</sup> Robert D. Putman, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Furbey, *et al.*, *Faith as Social Capital: Connecting or Dividing?*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2006, pp. 7-8.

ing and influential communities?'<sup>24</sup> The high levels of mutual care and support within faith communities, which in smaller villages also extend outside the parish, point to a high degree of bonding social capital. Bridging social capital is dependent on physical and social space. In this respect church buildings and ministers are important resources in the villages.

Linking social capital is understood in terms of influence by developing relationships outside of peer groups to increase community benefits. The government report seems to indicate that one of the main obstacles is recognition and awareness: people of faith need to overcome ecclesial uneasiness and be made more aware of their potential linking social capital. People 'find it difficult to identify the source of their motivation.'<sup>25</sup> Outside the church religious illiteracy hinders the recognition of the bonding social capital in faith communities. The report points out that government departments, regional agencies and local authorities are, as yet, insufficiently aware of the contribution and resources that congregations have to offer.<sup>26</sup> Bridging social capital might need both more recognition and awareness.<sup>27</sup>

### *Connections Generate Social Capital*

Walker's theory on being connected via people, practices, and places and the theory on social capital are both helpful for understanding the relations between churches and villages. Analysing the various ways in which people relate to a church reveals the broader network around the village church. It can provide insight into the meanings which are attributed to the 'ecclesial field'. A focus on social capital, which can be generated by churches, as a community, and in contact with other groups, helps to uncover the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and the development of bonding, bridging, and linking capital. It is therefore worthwhile investigating how various ways of connecting relate to different types of social capital in the case studies.

## **5.2| Rural Theology in the Netherlands**

Today, in many places, the clergyman responsible for the church lives as much as five miles away and is consequently rarely seen in the village; services are held at fortnightly intervals and the small congregation is oppressed by the financial burden of maintaining an ancient building. Of the annual programme of activities there is now almost no trace.<sup>28</sup>

This sketch of rural church life in Britain bears a resemblance to village churches in the Netherlands, although there are regions where the situation is not that bleak. Still, many churches are faced with a declining number of church members and less financial resources, which makes it difficult to pay for a full-time minister. It is no longer self-evident that the

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Farnell, *et al.*, *Faith in Rural Communities: Contributions of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy*, Warwickshire, ACORA Publishing, 2006, pp. 4-6.

<sup>25</sup> Farnell, *Faith in Rural Communities*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, *The Countryside Parish*, p. 235.

minister lives in the village where (s)he works, and when (s)he does, his/her time has to be divided between several villages. Regionalisation can lead to the less frequent use or even closure of church buildings. This makes the church less visible in village life. The struggle to keep things going makes it difficult to discern God's mission in a changing rural context.<sup>29</sup> The small groups of churchgoers increasingly have the feeling that the future of the church depends on them. The question of how to survive dominates church life. Gibson warns rural churches to be careful that their members do not become so absorbed in keeping the church running that 'they lose sight of the deep joy that comes from a life of discipleship.'<sup>30</sup>

The situation of churches in the Dutch countryside is surrounded by multiple challenges. In various publications, these challenges have been addressed from different angles. The few monographs on this topic, first, take their point of departure from the changed way of life in the countryside, as sketched in chapter 3.<sup>31</sup> Second, authors such as Ploeger and Ploeger-Grotegoed write to inform clergy about what is specific to the rural context of village churches, because young ministers often come from an urban background and are not familiar with the way of life in rural congregations.<sup>32</sup> Finally, series of articles have appeared on the question of how to counter the decline within village churches. Most of the authors look for organisational answers in cooperation and regionalisation (see Appendix A). In this section I describe the lines of thought and developments that can be traced in Dutch publications on village churches.

### Publications

In 1963, H.D. de Loor became one of the first to focus specifically on the church in a rural context in his book *De kerk en het moderne platteland* (*The church and the modern countryside*). The study was triggered by the urbanisation, agricultural and demographic changes, which have led to the church losing its function in village life. The church's role in shaping village social life is decreasing and De Loor addresses the question of whether this development creates possibilities for churches to dedicate themselves to the core of their pastoral and apostolic business. De Loor thinks that a minister for every village is no longer necessary. A regional approach is required to be able to pay for a minister and address social questions, such as industrialisation, declining population, recreation, and land consolidation.<sup>33</sup> In *Platteland en kerkvernieuwing* (*Countryside and Church Renewal*) Van Hooijdonk and Groot addressed the question of how the religious worldview of rural dwellers is affected by a changed way of life.<sup>34</sup> In 1993, Pim van de Kerk, a minister in North-Groningen,

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<sup>29</sup> Jim Mynors, 'Theological Reflections on Rural Change', in: *Rural Theology* (3:1), 2005, pp. 41-48; Bill Bennett, 'The Pastoral Imperative in Rural Ministry: Helping Rural People Discern God's Activity in their Midst', in: *Rural Theology* (5:2), 2007, pp. 75-84.

<sup>30</sup> Gibson, *Church and Countryside*, p. 122; Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', pp. 40-41.

<sup>31</sup> H.D. de Loor, *De kerk en het moderne platteland: Moelijkheden en mogelijkheden voor de kerk op het platteland*, Den Haag, Boekencentrum, 1963; Van Hooijdonk, *Platteland*; Pim van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern: Gids voor een zinvolle christelijke gemeenschap in een klein dorp*, Kampen, Kok, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Albert K. Ploeger, Joke J. Ploeger-Grotegoed, *De gemeente en haar verlangen: Van praktische theologie naar de geloofspraktijk van de gemeenteleden*, Kampen, Kok 2001; Rein Brouwer, et al., *Levend lichaam, dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland*, Utrecht, Kok, 2007, pp. 132-164.

<sup>33</sup> De Loor, *De kerk*, pp. 66-85.

<sup>34</sup> Hooijdonk, *Platteland*.

wrote *Geloven in de kern* (*Believing in the Core*). The study was inspired by the developments of rural theology in the Anglican Church and explored ways for a Christian congregation to contribute to the quality of life in villages. Below I discuss his contextual theology of incarnation in more detail.<sup>35</sup>

After *Geloven in de kern*, hardly any theological studies have appeared that focus specifically on rural churches. In a couple of handbooks the characteristics of village churches are explored. Ploeger and Ploeger-Grotegoed try to grasp in general terms the character of inhabitants of small, rather isolated the villages, like the Frisian village Jorwerd where people are not usually looking for renewal themselves.<sup>36</sup> Brouwer builds on Ploeger's argument in a chapter on rural churches in *Levend Lichaam* (*Living Body*) stressing the continuity and social cohesion in village society. Rural life urbanizes, but more recently there has been a tendency to strengthen local identity and cherish the cultural history of the region.<sup>37</sup>

An overview of the literature on rural theology in the Netherlands reveals a distinction between descriptive and more strategic studies. The descriptive studies aim to inform students about ministry in the countryside or to describe a specific aspect of village churches such as harvest festivals, Sunday school or the position of church ministers. The strategic studies explore areas for improvement and try to empower other congregations with inspiring examples of alternative, small-scale church practices. However, these studies sometimes suggest that village churches are failing in some respects, for instance in the ability to see other congregations as partners instead of competition or to relate to the local environment.<sup>38</sup> A part of the descriptive studies sound more appreciative, searching to grasp the essence and the irreplaceable value of village churches. In some cases the authors try to prove the relevance of the church, which also reveals a strategic perspective.

### Cooperation Processes

What is striking about these publications is that they hardly pay attention to processes of cooperation that have dominated rural church life for several decades. From the 1960s onwards a stream of policy documents from the *Gereformeerde* and *Hervormde* Churches, and later the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, has appeared about the future of small congregations. The focus was on the best course of action for congregations that could no longer afford a minister: should they remain vacant, join with a neighbouring congregation and find a minister together, or form a regional church?<sup>39</sup> Most often the advice was

<sup>35</sup> Van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*. The title refers to both believing in the village, as to believing what is central to the church.

<sup>36</sup> Ploeger, *De gemeente*, pp. 464, 479. This makes the current development of a new convent, a pioneering place of the Protestant Church, with the support of the local congregation of Jorwerd, quite interesting. *Nijkleaster* (*New Cloister*) is described as a place for silence, inspiration, meeting, walking, and searching for a new form of church (*Nijkleaster*, <https://nijkleaster.fr/>), accessed 18 February 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Brouwer, *Levend lichaam*, pp. 135-137.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobine Scholte-de Jong, *De koopman, de landman en de schatbewaarder: Op zoek naar een theologisch model voor de kleine gemeente*, [s.l., s.n.], Master thesis, 2014, pp. 83-84, 105.

<sup>39</sup> G.J.F. Leene, *Het probleem van de kleine kerken: Een sociologisch onderzoek naar de houding van de gereformeerden op Noord-Beveland ten aanzien van kerkelijke schaalvergroting*, Middelburg, Stichting Gereformeerd Sociaal centrum voor Zeeland, 1969; 'Problemen van de kleine gemeente', *Credo, maandblad voor evangelie en cultuur*, June 1981.

to seek cooperation and start working on a regional level.<sup>40</sup> This would lighten the financial burden, creates possibilities for activities for younger people, and result in more people attending the church services.<sup>41</sup> The policy of the national church bodies was clear, but on a local level congregations were hesitant. They wanted to maintain their independence and favoured the appointment of a part-time minister or church worker.<sup>42</sup> Verrips connects the resistance to cooperation and the formation of regional congregations with the fear of losing autonomy. He points out that in various domains, such as the management of farming, care, and education, people have become dependent on regulations executed by anonymous organisations, with which they have little contact.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to link regional developments and processes back to the local day-to-day level.

Processes of cooperation between congregations of the same denomination often ran parallel to or were followed by the *Samen-op-Weg* process between *Hervormde*, *Gereformeerde* and sometimes *Evangelisch-Lutherse* congregations. Although the idea of unity was inspiring and its pursuit praiseworthy, the processes were also difficult and tiresome.<sup>44</sup> The negotiations could estrange people from the church when painful decisions had to be made, such as the closing of a church building. When a process broke off, the effects were strongly felt in a village community when people start avoiding each other.<sup>45</sup> It also seems to have led to a more inward looking attitude, which may be one of the reasons why churches are not always very involved in outreach, as became clear in the previous chapter.<sup>46</sup> After the turn of the millennium it gradually dawned that the top-down approach of forming regional congregations with an overarching church council was not always successful, because upscaling decreased people's involvement. Nevertheless, cooperation was stimulated by a project initiated by the Protestant Church, called *Samenwerking Gemeenten* (Cooperation Congregations, abbreviated SAGE). The idea was that contact and exchange within clusters could help congregations to cooperate where necessary with the aim of remaining church in the village.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> J. Hendriks, et al. (eds.), *Ook kerken kunnen nauwer samenwerken*, Utrecht, Bureau Generale Deputaten kerkopbouw van de Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland, 1971; J. Hendriks, et al. (eds.), *Hoe komen kerken tot nauwere samenwerking?*, Utrecht, Bureau Generale Deputaten kerkopbouw van de Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland, 1971; F.C.M. Roodenburg (ed.), *Op kleine schaal toch vitaal: Eindrapportage project kleine gemeenten: Inventarisatie, onderzoek en conclusies van de 'Begeleidingscommissie Project kleine gemeenten*, [s.l.] Nederlands Hervormde kerk, 1990; 'Op kleine schaal juist vitaal', in: *Toerusting: Tijdschrift voor kerk en educatie met werkmateriaal*, (35:3), 1994.

<sup>41</sup> Leene, *Het probleem van de kleine kerken*, pp. 95-101.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> J. Verrips, *En boven de polder de hemel: Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp, 1850-1971*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff, 1983, pp. 231-232.

<sup>44</sup> Van der Veer, 'Kerk op de terp', pp. 16-18; Peet Valstar, *Kansen voor de kleine dorpskerk*, Utrecht, Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2004; B. van Hierden, *Samen werken, samen kerken?: Een kwalitatieve studie naar de betekenis van regionale samenwerking voor plaatselijke protestantse gemeenten*, Master thesis, 2010, pp. 49-50.

<sup>45</sup> Interview Mennonite minister Groningen, 13 June 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Henk de Roest, Sake Stoppels, 'Terug naar de kern?', in: *Handelingen: Tijdschrift voor praktische theologie en religiewetenschap: Missionair kerk-zijn in het dorp*, (2), 2015, pp. 62-69, there p. 64.

<sup>47</sup> Anja Bruijkers, 'Regionalisering: van gemeente naar gemeenschap'; Jaap van den Akker, 'Tweestromenland: tussen dorp en streek', Tea Rienksma, 'Samenwerking om eigen kernen te revitaliseren', in: *Toer: Samenwerking in de regio*, June 2003; Dick Vos, 'Samenwerking: noodzaak én recept', in: *Woord en Dienst*, May 2011, pp. 8-10.

### *Between Localisation and Regionalisation*

In later years, several articles proposed a two-track policy, with basic tasks such as church services and pastoral work organised locally and a centralisation of diaconal and youth work on a regional level.<sup>48</sup> Still, in congregations localisation and regionalisation are often understood as opposites. Although earlier studies stress the importance of remaining locally present as a church, reports on cooperation processes reveal a pressure towards regionalisation. The discussion of the last few decades seems to be dominated by an organisational approach that aims to develop a one-size-fits-all model. And there is limited reflection on the question of what the fundamental aim of the church in a particular context is. As a result, cooperation processes may have reinforced an inward looking attitude. It is hardly surprising that cooperation is mainly related to regional contacts with congregations of the same denomination, while local ecumenical contacts and possibilities for cooperation with non-church organisations in the village seem to have received far less attention. The strong organisational approach runs the risk of overlooking both the particular context of a congregation and the ideals and motives which stir community life.<sup>49</sup> The question of how to remain visibly present in each village is rarely the actual starting point of the discussion.

### *Turn to the Local*

In the last couple of years a turn to the local can be observed. Wim Beekman stated in 2011, in a well-received report *Leve de dorpskerk* (*Long live the village church*), that no matter what the church should remain present in the village, even if this means becoming a house church.<sup>50</sup> In the Synod of the Protestant Church there are discussions about the possibility of starting a house church after a congregation has been dissolved.<sup>51</sup> In 2011 the Protestant Church published *Klein en vitaal* (*Small and Vital*), a portfolio with the best practices of twenty village churches that showed vitality. The local church needs church activities, finances, a building, and human resources to become tangible and visible. In *Klein en vitaal* more attention is paid to cooperation with other denominations and with other village organisations.<sup>52</sup>

*Klein en dapper* (*Small and Brave*), another report published in 2016, offers portraits of small congregations which 'keep the fire burning' in local churches despite the low number of active church members. These portraits indicate that in some cases *Samen-op-Weg* or cooperation processes have failed, but church communities try to keep going. Sometimes they share a minister with another congregation; sometimes they have to do without. The emphasis of the leaflet is on staying visible in the local village community. Recur-

<sup>48</sup> Albert Noordegraaf, 'Kleine en grote schaal in samenspel', in: *Toerusting: Tijdschrift voor kerk en educatie met werkmateriaal* (35:3), 1994, pp. 19-23.

<sup>49</sup> Gert de Jong, *Doen alsof er niets is: Sociologische gevalstudie over een kerkelijke gemeente als dynamische configuratie*, Wageningen, Pronsen&Looyen BV, 2008, pp. 219-221.

<sup>50</sup> Wim Beekman, *Leve de dorpskerk: Verslag van een studie naar de mogelijkheden en beperkingen van kleine kerkelijke gemeenten in kleine dorpsgemeenschappen*, [s.l.; s.n.], 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Arjan Plaisier, *Kerk 2025: Waar een Woord is, is een weg*, Utrecht, Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2016, pp. 10, 25, 27; *Kerk 2025: Een stap verder*, Generale Synode Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, April 2016, pp. 20-22, 27; Sake Stoppels, *Notitie 'huiskerk'*, 2017, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/actueel/agenda/vergadering-generale-synode-2>, accessed 1 March 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Mesman, *Klein en vitaal*.



ring ideas include offering hospitality by opening the church building, organising regular church services and alternative moments for worship, and seeking contact with the local context through cooperation with village organisations. In this way people from outside the church community become involved and together activities and services for the village are offered.

The characterisation which arises from these publications is that churches can offer comfort, memorial, silence, identity, pastoral care, and a meeting place. In this way churches try to serve the community, connect with people who seldom visit a church, and deal with scepticism towards the church.<sup>53</sup> It is striking that the described practices mostly have a liturgical, cultural, and aesthetic character, or are aimed at providing pastoral care. Diaconal themes such as sustainability and changes in care provision are mentioned, but receive far less attention. This could be related to the observation in the previous chapter that post-modern life has become fragmented between various fields and domains. The relation between church and faith and other domains is not always clear and straightforward.

### *The Village Church*

Surprisingly, in literature on Dutch village churches there is still a tendency to speak about the village church without paying attention to how the relation between church and village has changed over the last few decades. This change has not only come about because of dechurching, but also because of policies of regionalisation, cooperation, and mobilisation. The (Protestant) church community and the village community hardly ever coincide – if they ever did. There are various aspects that should be taken into consideration. First, a smaller or larger part of the village population is not or hardly involved with the church. Second, there can be several churches in a village. In large parts of North Brabant most villagers are Catholic. Protestant churches have traditionally had a regional function. Not surprisingly, the density of Protestant churches in Groningen is higher than in Brabant.<sup>54</sup> In Groningen, village communities can be divided along the lines of various (Protestant) church communities. Third, rural churches can attract people from other villages in the region. This is strengthened by processes of cooperation, which means that congregations can encompass various villages. For some villagers, the result is that they rarely attend the church in the village where they live.

Thus, not only dechurching, but also cooperation processes trigger questions about building and sustaining a community. If most churchgoers come from outside the village, to which village community should the congregation try to relate: the village where the church building stands or where the churchgoers live? If there is only one church in a village, is it easier to take on the role of village church than when there are several churches? Where does the congregation gather and how does a church community remain visible in

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<sup>53</sup> 'Klein en dapper', *Kerkinformatie* (243), January 2016.

<sup>54</sup> In Groningen, 15% of the population is Protestant, compared to 4% in Brabant (2014). Congregations in Groningen are on average smaller than in Brabant: 478 members per congregation in Groningen versus 785 members in Brabant. Nevertheless, since the province of North Brabant is more than one and a half times larger than Groningen and populated by four times as many people, the density of Protestant congregations is higher in Groningen.

a village where the church building is closed and the congregation seldom organises activities? How does the congregation remain in touch with people who are not willing or not able to travel to another village? An awareness of the context within which a church operates is crucial because this has consequences for the identity of the church community and raises ecclesiological questions about how a congregation can be church in various villages in different contexts.

### 5.3 | Change of Perspective: from Church to Village

In the previous section I showed that publications about village churches tend to focus on designing an organisational structure in which the institutional church can continue. However, studies that look for ways to counter church decline rarely transcend the organisational level. Nevertheless, the decline makes it necessary to reflect on the question of how to respond as a church to a differentiated, secularised society. According to De Loor and various others the real problem is an attitude of apathy in rural congregations: people are concerned about the decline, but they do not know what the place of the church in a modern (rural) society should and can be. The ecclesial uneasiness, which I described in chapter 4, is highlighted by Andreas von Maltzahn. He detects, underneath the daily concerns, a fundamental crisis in which church communities find it difficult to speak about faith: a communal self-understanding of what the church stands for has been lost. He wonders where in all this uncertainty traces of God can be found and whether the church is still on God's road.<sup>55</sup> One of the problems he traces is that people are longing for the old days, as the Israelites in Babylon longed for their past life in Jerusalem. If the present situation is seen as a task set by God, then churches should not merely strive for self-preservation, but for what the village community needs.

#### *Changing Perspective*

In my view the present situation calls for faith communities to closely observe the livability questions in their rural contexts. How are people affected by living conditions, availability of care, education and services, and employment possibilities? What does it mean for people personally when they lack the mobility to travel to shops, friends, museums, or church? If people want to grow old in their own village, but have to move to a nursing home ten kilometres away, what does it mean for them? What are the effects on community life when a school is closed or when a village hall is lacking? When a congregation becomes aware of how socio-economic and political developments shape people's lives, then obscure factors become personal. This means that an attitude of apathy can be transformed into one of resilience. Then the question, "What can our church community contribute to our local society?" not only becomes inevitable, but also inviting and thought provoking. When village churches reflect on how the environment shapes people's lives, they develop a contextual rural theology.

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<sup>55</sup> Andreas von Maltzahn, "Weniger ist anders": Kirche und Gemeinden in ländlichen Räumen, *Theologische Deutungen und praktische Perspektiven*, in: Borck, *et al.*, *Wechselwirkungen*, pp. 186-198, there pp. 185-187.

If the changes in the countryside and liveability questions are taken as a starting point, instead of church decline, a fundamental change of perspective takes place. In the 1990s *Faith in the countryside*, the report of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas drew in the UK attention to unexpected poverty and conflicts between locals, new inhabitants, and urban visitors. The Commission saw here a task for the church to reconcile differences in the local community, but the threat of the church's withdrawal from the countryside is a problem.<sup>56</sup> Twenty years later an update of the report appeared called *Faith and the future of the countryside*. The volume makes clear that questions about sustainability and participation society have become more urgent. The need was felt to 'reinforce the commitment of churches to a meaningful and engaged presence in rural communities in a way which undergirds mission and ministry.'<sup>57</sup> Interestingly the decline and problems in the church are hardly mentioned in the book. I draw on this interesting change of perspective in this research, because it encourages an appreciative enquiry, stressing the possibilities a village church has to offer in terms of place, people, and practices.

### Contextualisation

A church has the task to serve the wider community.<sup>58</sup> This requires an analysis of the local situation, participation in decision making processes, and ascertaining what the contribution of the church is and should be.<sup>59</sup> It also means leaving the church building, being present where people live and work, in the café, in offices, from youth hang-out to golf course.<sup>60</sup> A similar plea is found in *Faith in the Countryside*: 'All too often spirituality has been felt to be confined to the home and leisure time. What is needed is a spirituality of the market place, the shop, the office and the traffic lights.'<sup>61</sup> In my view such a spirituality would make clear that church and faith should not be confined to the personal living arena, but have to be made relevant for the material living arena. And, more importantly, churches can strengthen awareness about how the personal and material living arenas are interrelated.

People continually swing back and forth between fortune and misfortune. Life brings chances, possibilities, but also problems and disappointments, and they occur in every aspect of life, at home, at work, in school, in social life, as I explained in chapter 3. The question is how to deal with it, when life does not go according to plan. This requires people to bring their life circumstances of work, gender, and social status in the material life arena in line with their personal expectations and life style, and vice versa. In religion, people look for sources of inspiration and meaning to make sense of their lives, their ideals, and circumstances, which can be beyond control or can be shaped and adjusted.<sup>62</sup> I think that

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<sup>56</sup> *Faith in the Countryside*.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Faith and the Future*, p. xiii.

<sup>58</sup> K.A. Schippers, et al., *Kerkelijke presentie in een oude stadswijk, Onderzoek naar buurtpastoraat vanuit behoeften en belangen van bewoners*, Kampen, Kok, 1990, pp. 181-189; Van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*, pp. 81-83; Roodenburg, *Op kleine schaal toch vitaal*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>59</sup> G.J. Althuis et al., *Rapportage van de projectgroep 'kerk en dorp'*, Assen, 1988, pp. 8-9; Van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*, p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Pim van de Kerk, *De geur van de herberg: Kijkje in de keuken van het missionair-diaconaal werk in Noord-Oost Groningen*, Delfzijl, Werkleerproject De Drukkerij, 2002; Schlegel, 'Regionale Ausstrahlung', pp. 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> *Faith in the Countryside*, p. 182.

<sup>62</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, p. 34.

churches are not only able to offer such sources of meaning, but are also called upon to do so out of concern for the world and the people who live in it. Churches are inspired by the ideal of the good life that is expressed in images of Paradise, the Promised Land, and the Kingdom of God.

Several studies warn that the congregation's motivation to serve the community should be a genuine concern for others and not merely its own survival.<sup>63</sup> In Dutch societies there are also wrongs and the church should strive for justice. The studies stress the need for local churches to be aware that social and political developments affect people in their personal lives. Urbanisation, changes in agriculture, tourism, and ageing all make an appeal to the church. Churches should have an eye for farmers and shopkeepers who have to close their businesses, for people with disabilities, and vulnerable people in need of care and mental support.<sup>64</sup>

Contextualisation, however, is easier said than done. The running of the church organisation requires much of the available time and energy of both ministers and the few active church members.<sup>65</sup> A survival attitude often limits the ability to see new possibilities.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, it takes courage and knowledge to reflect on the reasons why you want to be a church in a particular place and what the role of a church is and should be. But people find it difficult to express their reasons for going to church and subsequently to relate this to what the core business of their congregation should be. In some cases people become paralyzed, either by their longing for the past or their fear for the future.<sup>67</sup> The past with dozens of children in Sunday school and full churches forms the frame of reference for present day activities, while the idea that the church will cease to exist casts its shadow over what is currently done and devalues the meetings, experiences, and community.<sup>68</sup>

### *Vulnerable Villagers*

In *Geloven in de Kern* Pim van de Kerk regularly draws attention to groups of vulnerable villagers. Such as people who do not have the means to travel easily and immediately experience the effects of the closing of services. But also young people who have to leave the village because they cannot find work or afford a house. A church can raise awareness about how people can become trapped by these socio-economic developments. This can stir a discussion about different and conflicting interests within a community, in relation to the wider environment and society, but also about the suppositions and worldviews that underlie understandings of liveability.<sup>69</sup> When services disappear or social clubs are stopped, a church can feel called upon to keep a village liveable. For example, in the village of Okkenbroek the main motivation was to provide the structures to enable both elderly people

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<sup>63</sup> Gibson, *Church in the Countryside*, p. 95.

<sup>64</sup> J. Hendriks, *Ook kerken*, pp. 11-13; K.A. Schippers, 'De toekomst van de kleine kerken', in: *Ouderlingenblad* (686), 1981, pp. 14-17; Pim van de Kerk, 'Kerk in een dorp zijn: doe maar gewoon...meer dan het gewone!', *Konvooi* (32:3), 1992, pp. 11-12, there p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> De Roest, 'Terug naar de kern', p. 64; Gibson, *Church in the Countryside*, p. 122.

<sup>66</sup> Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', pp. 40-41.

<sup>67</sup> Remark minister Schildwolde, June 2016; Interview Nadine van Hierden, July 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', p. 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Faith in the Countryside*, p. 124; Van de Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*, pp. 106-108.

and young families to remain in the village. To realize this aim the church cooperated with a housing agency, a school, and the municipality.<sup>70</sup> Gibson also explicitly raises the question of how churches can support rural services or maybe even take them over by opening the church building for other uses such as a mortuary, a library, or an information centre.<sup>71</sup>

Hoekstra explores how churches can help farmers who have to sell their farms. The circumstances can be very different. Some farmers voluntarily decide to sell their farm, because they want to retire, while others are forced to sell, and this causes grief and anger.<sup>72</sup> Hoekstra states that people can be overwhelmed by a feeling of failure. Therefore, people need a place where they can tell their story and feel appreciated and valuable in God's eyes.<sup>73</sup> In response to the animal diseases in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the platform Church and Agriculture (*Kerk en Landbouw*) started to support fellow farmers. Provincial initiatives were started to bring the worlds of farmers and citizens together. In the countryside tensions can occur between farmers who need to make a living, biologists who focus on the need to care for the environment, and agricultural policy that aims at maximizing profit. The church can raise questions about the consequences of strictly applying the rules of efficiency and profit.<sup>74</sup> In Groningen something similar is happening around the *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* in which several churches draw attention to the personal, social, and ethical consequences of the gas extraction and the compensation for the damage (see chapter 9.5).

### A Christian Perspective

I see an important challenge for churches to explain what the Christian tradition has to say about various kinds of social issues. It is not only necessary for a church to have theological insights, but also to gain a thorough knowledge of various fields of society, such as agriculture, education, and care because it brings into view how people are personally affected by rural developments. I agree with Ploeger who perceives a lack of diaconal awareness in village churches and suggests that diaconal workers should become involved with social issues in the countryside, such as poverty among farmers, who are driven into a corner by animal diseases, environmental issues, and legislation.<sup>75</sup> Church members could be stimulated to relate their professional capacity and volunteer activities to their faith.<sup>76</sup> A regional church can have the means to appoint a full-time minister who has the time to become involved in regional social issues and represent the church in regional networks.<sup>77</sup>

The question, however, remains: why should a church become involved with the live-

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<sup>70</sup> Vollebregt, 'Okkenbroek', pp. 13-15; Mesman, *Klein en vitaal*, pp. 21-20, 41, 43-44.

<sup>71</sup> Gibson, *Church in the Countryside*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>72</sup> Jan van Huet Lindeman, *Pastoraat aan bedrijfsbeëindigers in de landbouw: Kerk als schuilplaats*, Arnhem, RDC Gelderland, 2003; (*Be)staan op eigen grond: Landbouw en pastoraat*, Utrecht, Dienstencentrum van de Protestantse Kerk, 2006.

<sup>73</sup> T. Hoekstra, 'Bedrijfsbeëindiging en geloof, maar welk geloof?', in: *GLTO Nieuws* (4:20), 1999.

<sup>74</sup> P. Meijer, 'Het leefbare dorp, het leefbare leven', in: *Konvooi* (32:3), 1992.

<sup>75</sup> Ploeger, *De gemeente*, pp. 481-482.

<sup>76</sup> K.L. van Stegeren, *De kerk in het dorp: op zoek naar een organisatievorm voor de kleine gereformeerde kerken op het platteland*, [s.l., s.n.], 1966, p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> Leene, *Het probleem*, p. 23.

ability of the village?<sup>78</sup> According to Kor Schippers, people need peace within themselves and to live in harmony with their fellow human beings. This striving for justice, peace, and wholeness is grounded in God's image of how life should be. As I mentioned before, liveability is ultimately related to how people see the world, in finding perspective to overcome apathy. A church striving for a liveable village is not imposing religious views, but tries to realise a religiously inspired ideal in the present context.<sup>79</sup> Or, as Van de Kerk remarks, the call to realize the Kingdom of God draws attention to social developments that threaten the quality of life.<sup>80</sup> Van de Kerk and Schlegel plead for an incarnational church, which tries to relate to what is going on in its context.<sup>81</sup> In a rural context 'the incarnational principle means that church communities need to listen, understand and fully enter into the complex reality of the area or network of people to which God has called them.'<sup>82</sup> A local church has the ability to relate directly to the situation, the way of life, the needs, and qualities in a village. The figure of Christ as the incarnation of God reminds the church community to have an eye for the context, to try to liberate people from difficult situations and disturbed relations, and to search for reconciliation.<sup>83</sup> In my view, such a change of perspective makes clear why churches can feel called upon to engage with the quality of life in the countryside. At the same time, it can also lead to another perspective on church.

### 5.4 | Quality of Life in Church Newsletters

As a bridge to the description of the ethnographic research in the following chapters I offer a preview of how the Protestant churches in the two case studies relate to quality of life. In order to get an idea of the situation, I analysed the 2014 volume of church newsletters from both congregations. The newsletter in Groningen combines *De Bron (The Spring)* from Schildwolde, Hellum, and Overschild and *Rondom d'Olle Dodde (Around the Old Dodde)*, in which 'Dodde' refers to the church tower of Noordbroek. The Brabant newsletter is called *De Brug (The Bridge)*, after the bridge that connects the two villages of Asten and Someren. Church newsletters not only offer practical information about the congregations, the activities, and the diaconal initiatives, but also give 'food for thought'. The ministers write meditations, and often empty space is filled with poems and prayers. Although the terms *leefbaarheid* (liveability) and *kwaliteit van leven* (quality of life) hardly ever occur in the church newsletters, several of the aforementioned quality of life aspects do appear. Even though the church newsletters may not reflect the practices in the whole of the ecclesiastical network around the church community, they still reflect some of the worldviews in the congregations. The analysis reveals, first, an interesting interaction between the physical and the social environment, second, an attempt to relate to the personal living arena where people

<sup>78</sup> Althuis, *Rapportage; Konvooi: Dorp in last*, (32:3), 1992; *Konvooi: Jorwerd bijvoorbeeld*, (39:3), 1999.

<sup>79</sup> Schippers, *Kerkelijke presentie in een oude stadswijk*, pp. 195-200; Kor Schippers, 'Kwaliteit van leven in dorp of wijk', in: *Konvooi* (32:3), 1992, pp. 6-10, there p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Van der Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*, pp. 66-68.

<sup>81</sup> Schlegel, 'Regionale Ausstrahlung', pp. 28-29.

<sup>82</sup> Sally Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside*, London, Church House Publishing, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> Van der Kerk, *Geloven in de kern*, pp. 61-65.

have to deal with life difficulties, in which the church communities strive to offer social support, and finally, a number of ideals about the good life. The analysis thus provides insight into the two ways of doing rural theology that Jeff Astley distinguishes: first, theologising about rural issues, liveability questions and how the environment shapes people's lives, and second, reflecting on how rural people talk about God, church, and faith.<sup>84</sup>

### 5.4.1 | Physical and Social Meeting Places

The president of the church council in Brabant describes the identity of the congregation as a combination of physical and social aspects: the church building and the cemetery on the one hand, and singing together, hospitality, drinking coffee, and activities for personal development on the other.<sup>85</sup> Judging from the church newsletter *De Bron*, the church building and the direct surroundings are important for the village identity. Much attention is paid to the maintenance of the churchyards and the cemeteries. Nearly every newsletter reports about repair projects, such as replanting sick trees or digging up old gravestones which are lying under the churchyard, because a vicar's wife does not like the sight of them.<sup>86</sup> The announcements about maintenance activities reveal ideas about a good-looking village, such as the need to renovate a wall or to renovate funerary heritage to preserve the atmosphere of the churchyard.<sup>87</sup>

When people work together on the churchyard or walk through the village on Ascension day, the physical environment becomes a social meeting place.<sup>88</sup> The social effect of working and talking together in the churchyards is emphasized: "We are not only planning a working day, but also a very sociable day." It is stressed that people are very welcome, even if they only come for a chat.<sup>89</sup> However, the availability of a physical space does not automatically lead to the development of a social meeting place. People need the opportunity, the time and a reason to gather. An example of a failed initiative is the municipality of Brabant's prohibition against renting the church community centre out for parties, because that would contravene local regulations. This prohibition hinders the congregation from offering a meeting place, as further discussed in chapter 6.<sup>90</sup> Another example of a failing community initiative is the ending of the Sunday school in Groningen after more than a century because there are not enough children and parents to continue the activities.<sup>91</sup> This reflects the dependence of the church on volunteers for the future of the faith community.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Jeff Astley, 'Ordinary theology for rural theology and rural ministry', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, London, Equinox, 2012, pp. 42-51.

<sup>85</sup> 'Van de voorzitter', *De Brug* (49:11), 2014, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> 'Groenlint project', *De Bron* (2:1), 2014, p. 22, 25; Interestingly Vermeij points out that mainly males, higher educated people and church members labor for the physical environment (Lotte Vermeij, *Dichtbij huis: Lokale binding en inzet van dorpsbewoners*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2015, p. 39).

<sup>87</sup> 'Berichten uit Hellum: Werkzaamheden op de begraafplaats', *De Bron* (2:1), 2014, p. 24; 'Werkzaamheden op de begraafplaats en rond de Walfriduskerk', *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> 'Gemeentenieuws – Dauwtrappen op Hemelvaartsdag', *De Bron* (2:4), 2014, p.13; 'Berichten uit Hellum – NL Doet', *De Bron* (2:4), 2014, pp. 20-21.

<sup>89</sup> 'Berichten uit Hellum – Werkzaamheden op de begraafplaats', *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, pp. 20, 31.

<sup>90</sup> 'College van kerkrentmeesters – gebruiksbeperking aan het gemeentecentrum', *De Brug* (49:9), 2014, pp. 10-12.

<sup>91</sup> 'Bericht van zondagsschool "De Regenboog"', *De Bron* (2:4), 2014, p. 17.

<sup>92</sup> 'Kerkbalans 2014', *De Bron* (2:1), 2014, pp. 15-16; 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:5), 2014, p. 13.

### *Bridging Social Capital*

At the same time, there are successful community initiatives in which other church communities or non-church societies are involved, such as a Christmas service, multi-faith discussion evenings, concerts, and a three-day festival for sick people.<sup>93</sup> In this way churches can raise bridging social capital which strengthens social cohesion. In an area like Brabant, where the differences between Catholics and Protestants were highlighted for centuries, cooperation is not self-evident and can still lead to heated discussions.<sup>94</sup> In secularised Groningen non-church members get to know the church community in the preparation of a Christmas service, which can be a good opportunity for conversation.<sup>95</sup> Topics such as loneliness and social cohesion are also addressed when churchgoers are asked to invite lonely people to a games afternoon.<sup>96</sup> The minister writes in *De Bron* that it is necessary for community well-being necessary to be hospitable to strangers, to meet people who are different, and to try bridging the differences to increase social cohesion.<sup>97</sup> Here we see how events are instrumental in building bridging social capital, while church members are encouraged to expand this attitude in daily life.

#### **5.4.2 | Personal Well-being: Dealing with Life Difficulties**

Characteristic of church newsletters is the focus on people's personal well-being. The minister in Brabant criticizes the lack of attention for the soul and the cutbacks on spiritual and mental health care. She stresses that it is necessary to look further than people's outside behaviour, and to take time for a conversation between yourself and God or someone else.<sup>98</sup> Themes like health and unemployment are brought to the level of the individual. The emphasis is mainly on health and death experiences: people are sick, they are anxious for results, or they are being treated in the hospital. In every newsletter, these people are wished strength and they are encouraged to trust.<sup>99</sup>

Closely connected to this theme are experiences of the loss of loved ones. Pain is acknowledged and people are called upon to offer support and to care for each other. In *De Bron*, a churchgoer expresses his gratitude for the support he received in the many good wishes and cards people had sent him after his wife had to move into a nursing home.<sup>100</sup> The newsletters also touch upon the loss of self-esteem and the uncertainty that comes with unemployment, relational problems, and feelings of insecurity.<sup>101</sup> On the other side of this spectrum attention is paid to people who are finishing their exams and entering a new stage of life. Furthermore, congratulations are offered on birthdays (of people older than 75), births, weddings, and jubilees.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>93</sup> 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:1), 2014, pp. 12-14; 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:6), 2014, p. 13; 'Berichten uit Schildwolde –Overschild', *De Bron* (2:10), 2014, p. 29; 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, p. 11; 'Concert in Koepelkerk', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, p. 18; 'Ziekentriduum', *De Brug* (49:8), 2014, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug*, (49:2), 2014, pp. 7-9; 'Oecumenische avonden over vernieuwing van kerk en geloof', *De Brug*, (49:10), 2014, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:6), 2014, p. 13.

<sup>96</sup> 'Spelletjesmiddag', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> 'Meditatie', *De Bron* (2:4), 2014, pp. 8-10.

<sup>98</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:8), 2014, pp. 6-7.

<sup>99</sup> *De Brug* issues 2014; *De Bron*, issues 2014.

<sup>100</sup> 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:9), 2014, p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> 'Meditatie', *De Bron*, (2:3), 2014, pp. 13-14.

<sup>102</sup> E.g. 'Verjaardagen 70 jaar en ouder', *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, pp. 28-29; 'Berichten uit de gemeente', *De Brug* (49:7), 2014, p. 9.



When life difficulties are mentioned in the church newsletters, it is mainly about health problems, the loss of loved ones, and the loneliness that comes with it. Much less attention is paid to other issues that might have a significant impact on personal well-being, such as unemployment and work stress, or nuisance in the physical environment and living conditions. The question can be asked whether churchgoers recognize themselves in the main themes of the church newsletters. Some of them might be more concerned about disrupted relationships with family or friends, work stress, feelings of insecurity, raising their children, or experiences of exclusion in school or elsewhere.

Therefore, it is interesting to see that the minister writes in *De Bron* about the living environment in relation to the earthquakes. Together with his colleague from another congregation, he makes an appeal to hold a prayer Sunday for the people affected by the earthquakes.

*People may react laconically, but under the surface they are boiling with anger. If you no longer feel safe in your own home, where can you?<sup>103</sup>*

Here the effects of socio-economic processes in the material arena on the personal lives of people become visible. The churches' aim is to listen to the people and to show that the church is involved. They want to pay attention to the problems, the fear, the insecurity, and the anger that people feel.<sup>104</sup> By advertising the initiative in the local media, the prayer Sunday gained the status of a public ritual, in which a wider audience was addressed.<sup>105</sup>

### *Dealing with Questions about Basic Needs and Contingency*

On several occasions, the church newsletters report about social initiatives in the region: a clothing bank, a refugee centre, and a place for the homeless, where people can find a cup of tea, a social meeting place, attention, and guidance, but also basic needs, such as washing, clothing, and food.<sup>106</sup> The church council in Groningen is in contact with the municipality about care and social networks. In both case studies the congregations are directly involved in collections for the regional food bank. A church member says that she prefers to give things rather than transferring money to an account number. This relates more to people; it might be for your neighbour across the street.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> "Mensen reageren misschien laconiek, maar onder de oppervlakte zit er veel woede. Als je niet langer veilig kan zijn in je eigen huis, waar dan nog wel?" ('Dominees bidden voor getroffen Groningers', *RTV Noord*, 28 January 2014.)

<sup>104</sup> Idem; 'Kerken strijden tegen onderhuidse boosheid over bevingen', *RTV Noord*, 12 February 2015; 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron*, (2:3), 2014, p. 21.

<sup>105</sup> Martin Stringer, 'The Future of Public Religious Ritual in an Urban Context.', Lecture during symposium The Future of Ritual: Spots and Shapes, February 2015, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

<sup>106</sup> Poverty in Oost-Groningen ('Diaconie', *De Brug*, (49:3), 2014, p. 11). Collecting plastic caps to save up for a guide dog (*De Bron*, issues 2014). Foodbank: collection of (packaged) food articles. In surrounding villages 70 families depend on the foodbank. The church community sees it as a diaconal task to bring the light of Christmas in these families ('Adventstijd: tijd voor de voedselbank', *De Brug*, (49:11), 2014, pp. 15-16). Refugees, who are sent back to their home country, but are not able to go because of the Ebola epidemic or other problems, are taken care of in Helmond. The foundation offers basic needs, care and support. ('Oecumenische dienst in Lierop', *De Brug*, (49:11), 2014, pp. 6-7); 'Kledingbank Maxima voor Veendam en Menterwolde', *De Bron* (2:10), 2014, pp. 21-22.

<sup>107</sup> 'Voedselbank', *RTV Noord*, 12 February 2015.

The awareness that people lack basic needs and medical care is placed in a worldwide context. Church members are called upon to contribute to a solution to the problems or to fund a good cause. The underlying thought is that this is not what is supposed to happen, this is not the good life, this is not how it should be. The congregations seem to be well aware of how important fundamental basic needs, such as food, home, education, work, and care are for personal development, well-being, and happiness. In the diaconal news in Brabant it becomes clear how these basic needs are interrelated: health problems can lead to social exclusion and limited possibilities for education.<sup>108</sup>

Countless meditations, pastoral announcements, poems, and prayers pose the question of how to deal with human vulnerability, failure, and disappointment, either close to home or somewhere else in the world.<sup>109</sup> Much attention is paid to the inner life, how people perceive their life, and how they might change their way of thinking.<sup>110</sup> The minister in Groningen draws a parallel with the disciples who got lost in the storm on the lake; they got stranded in the adventure which is called life.<sup>111</sup> To find your way back, you need trust, the experience of Easter. To know that God brings us to life, that we are connected with the people around us. This does not mean that it is easy to overcome problems and worries.<sup>112</sup> Simultaneously, images of the good life are explicitly described. The minister writes in *De Brug* how we are trying to realize God's kingdom here and now, and sometimes it is visible for a moment. Faith is about the tension between what life is now and how it should be, but is not yet. Church is about celebrating what is beautiful, inspiring, and encouraging. And in this effort the church can work together with other organisations that want to improve the 'quality of life'.<sup>113</sup>

### 5.4.3 | Personal Well-being in Relation to Others

The contact with and support offered by other people is seen as fundamental for dealing with these existential questions, but the social environment needs to be organised in order to be able to give the support people need. In the newsletters people are called upon to look after each other and to inform the church council if people are having difficulties.<sup>114</sup> This looking after each other and being there for other people is connected to one of God's names: "I am and I will always be there for you."<sup>115</sup> Around All Souls' Day the minister in Bra-

<sup>108</sup> An organisation like leprosy mission claims not only to offer care but also education and in that way helps patients to find happiness ('Diaconie', *De Brug*, (49:1), 2014, p. 11). Ministers in Africa need to support people with life questions dealing with extreme poverty and creating village communities ('Diaconie', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, p. 12). Improving the quality of life of disabled children in developing countries and orphans in Rwanda who lack a feeling of safety and are in need of a foster home ('Diaconie', *De Brug* (49:11), 2014, p. 12). Initiative to renovate houses in India in a sustainable way, which improves working possibilities, income and health ('Diaconie', *De Brug*, (49:2), 2014, p. 11); 'Meditatie', *De Bron* (2:10), 2014, pp. 12-13.

<sup>109</sup> M. Jansen, V. Küster, 'Human Flourishing Contested', in: *Reformed World* (59:3), 2009, p. 149; *De Brug; De Bron*, issues 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Anneke van Wijngaarden, 'Roep verborgen krachten wakker', *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, p. 2; 'In Memoriam', *De Bron*, (2:3), 2014, pp. 23-24; 'De Geest van God', *De Bron* (2:5), 2014, p. 8; 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:9), 2014, pp. 7-8.

<sup>111</sup> Luke 8:22-25.

<sup>112</sup> 'Meditatie', *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, pp. 13-14.

<sup>113</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:9), 2014, pp. 7-9.

<sup>114</sup> E.g. 'Gemeentenieuws', *De Bron* (2:1), 2014, p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> 'Meditatie', *De Bron* (2:6), 2014, pp. 10-12.

bant stresses the comfort people need when they are grief-stricken: "If there are people around us who dry our tears again and again, then we can learn to smile struggling through our tears".<sup>116</sup>

On the whole, the newsletters reveal how expressions of sympathy and commitment are embodied. People bring flowers to those who are ill or have suffered a loss, but flowers can also be a token of congratulation and gratitude.<sup>117</sup> By creating the opportunity to hand in personal intercessions or to light candles, the church in Brabant also offers certain services for people to express their feelings.<sup>118</sup> In both congregations the commemoration of the dead is highly appreciated. In Groningen the relatives of non-churchgoing villagers are invited to join the memorial service. During the service, the names of the deceased are mentioned, candles are lit, and people can share their grief.<sup>119</sup> Thus, churches offer rituals, prayers, social support, and attention for the inner life in relation to the other.

The church newsletters emphasize that supportive relationships, trust, and a feeling of belonging can contribute to personal well-being. The relation between the well-being of the individual and of others is also stressed: the joy of others brings happiness to the individual, while the suffering of others can stir feelings of guilt, sorrow, fear, and compassion.<sup>120</sup> People are called upon to think about the consequences of their deeds for other people, and they are encouraged to act out of solidarity and to try to lighten the suffering of others. Without neglecting the happiness of the individual, the church newsletters look especially to the well-being of others. The central question in a peace prayer ascribed to Francis of Assisi is: how can I contribute to the well-being of others?

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light.  
O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive.<sup>121</sup>

### *Quest for Well-being*

What is interesting about the church newsletters is that personal and community well-being are interwoven. In sociological surveys about perceived liveability, people are asked whether they are satisfied with the public services, the safety, and maintenance of their own living environment. A research programme such as *National Accounts of Well-being* tries to escape from this material focus and aims to measure people's personal well-being,

<sup>116</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, pp. 7-9.

<sup>117</sup> E.g. 'Berichten uit de gemeente', *De Brug* (49:11), 2014, p. 10.

<sup>118</sup> 'Nieuws uit de kerkenraad', *De Brug* (49:11), 2014, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, pp. 7-9.

<sup>120</sup> 'Uit de pastorie', *De Brug*, (49:7), 2014, pp. 7-8; A church member writes after a visit to a refugee center: "How glad you are when you can return to your own home, where it is safe and where you don't have to live with a whole family in a small room." ('Berichten uit Weer', *De Brug* (49:10), 2014, p. 17.)

<sup>121</sup> Prayer ascribed to Francis of Assisi, *De Bron* (2:3), 2014, p. 7.

their vitality, feeling of autonomy, and self-esteem. The point of departure is the individual and the extent to which (s)he feels a sense of belonging with and support from people around him/her.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, it sees happiness as something that *happens* to each one of us as an individual, without considering the effects of our actions on our personal well-being.<sup>123</sup> Nor does it take into account how personal quality of life can be affected by the suffering of others. In my view, the support individuals offer to others and the way people's personal well-being is affected by other people's lack of well-being should also be acknowledged.

The idea that supportive relationships can increase personal well-being is fundamental in the worldview of both church communities. Of course, there are ample sources of social support outside the church, but according to Merino the extra value of support from religiously based ties is that 'a shared religious worldview allows individuals to help one another make meaning out of their life experiences, reducing the sense of threat and uncertainty.'<sup>124</sup> Or, as Webster puts it, 'the distinctive thing that Christian spirituality has to offer is structures of meaning for the bad things that happen in life so that they too may be incorporated into a personal quest for well-being.'<sup>125</sup>

The church newsletters reveal the interpersonal and inner conversation about the relation between the environment and the individual. The material life arena is described from the point of view of the personal life arena. In thinking about improving the quality of life it is important to be more aware of how social, economic, and cultural structures affect the lives of individuals.<sup>126</sup> At the same time the individual is not a spineless object who is just the victim of life circumstances. The church newsletters especially address the question of coping with life's difficulties. This includes not only the problems people face personally, but also the unease and worry people can feel over the troubles that others are suffering. In this way, the church newsletters prove to be a valuable addition to the conceptualisation of liveability in newspapers and surveys because they describe the process of creating quality of life: how people personally relate to and deal with the world around them.<sup>127</sup> It is about making sense of what happens to us, both the good and the bad.

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<sup>122</sup> *National accounts of wellbeing*, <http://www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org/explore/indicators/zwbi>, accessed 24 February 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Jansen, 'Human Flourishing', p. 150.

<sup>124</sup> S.M. Merino, 'Social Support and the Religious Dimensions of Close Ties', in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (53:3), pp. 595-612, there p. 598.

<sup>125</sup> H. Cameron, J. Reader, V. Slater, C. Rowlands (eds.), *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology*, London: SCM Press, 2012, p. xxi.

<sup>126</sup> Cameron, *Theological Reflection*, p. xx.

<sup>127</sup> 'The question to be asked is: how can we negotiate being in unfamiliar or liminal places such that the experience is not ultimately one of powerlessness and meaninglessness but one that becomes a creative place that may yield new insights and may be transformative of practice?' (Cameron, *Theological Reflection*, pp. 11-12).

## Conclusion

Village churches are surrounded by tensions and challenges. The challenge of keeping things going draws heavily on the available resources and hinders church members from searching for ways to relate to the village context. This is directly connected to the tension between regional and local orientation and the rural ecclesiological questions that it raises. In a regional cooperation churches can form a larger group of Christians who can inspire each other and have more strength, but this has the risk of reduced local involvement and visibility in the village, which can make the church less accessible. Tensions can also develop when people relate to the church in different ways. Walker distinguishes between belonging through people, activities, events, and place. These various ways of being connected with a church are not always fully recognised and appreciated, which can lead to segregation and exclusion. However, the possibility of relating to the church in different ways also creates possibilities for the development of bonding, bridging, and linking capital.

In this chapter I propose a change of perspective, which does not take continuation of the church organisation as point of departure, but the needs and questions in the village context. Local churches can develop an awareness of how social and political developments affect people in their personal lives in order to better fulfil their calling to serve the wider community. The analysis of church newspapers shows that village churches already contribute to the quality of the physical living environment. Through cooperation with other churches and groups in the organisation of events, meeting places are created where bridging social capital can develop. Furthermore, it becomes clear that churches can add an important perspective to the concept of liveability by focussing on the question of how personal well-being is influenced by developments in the material life arena. The church can be a place where support is offered and found and where questions about dealing with contingency are asked and sometimes answered. This can lead to the development of a contextual rural theology.

# DE BRUG

Kerkblad voor de Protestantse Gemeente te Asten - Someren  
52<sup>e</sup> Jaargang, nr.10 : november 2017



Protestantse Gemeente  
Asten-Someren

1



5



„de BRUG“  
Kerkblad voor de Protestantse  
Gemeente te Asten - Someren

48<sup>e</sup> jaargang, nr. 6 : juni 2013

2



3



10



8



6



4



11



7



9

# Chapter 6

## A Protestant Church in Brabant

In this chapter I give an impression of rural Protestant church life in Brabant. What is going on in the Protestant village church of Asten and Someren? Section 6.1 briefly introduces the congregation and the villages. In section 6.2 I take a closer look and sketch a tale of two churches. Section 6.3 answers the question: how is the congregation dealing with decline? In sections 6.4 and 6.5 I try to unravel how people's expectations and experiences of the church community affect their personal well-being. I hope to uncover what meanings people attribute to their involvement with the church. Section 6.4 uses Jeff Astley's concept of ordinary theology to reflect on the ecclesial practices, while section 6.5 describes how people relate to the congregation in various ways. I apply Walker's fourfold model of connecting to the case study and discover two additional dimensions. Finally, in section 6.6 I return to Asten to see how the closing of a church building raises questions about the visibility of the church.

### 6.1 | Introducing the Protestant congregation Asten-Someren

In North Brabant I followed the developments of the Protestant congregation of Asten-Someren (PCAS). A key feature of the two villages is the bridge that connects them, which also gives the church newsletter, *De Brug (The Bridge)*, its name (see image 1 and 2). In the surrounding area lie seven smaller villages where church members also live. The church situation in the villages is typical of Brabant: in nearly every village there is (still) a Catholic church and in larger villages there is also a *Hervormde* church. *Gereformeerden* used to go to cities such as Helmond and Eindhoven to visit a *Gereformeerde* church. The *Hervormde* congregations of Asten and Someren have shared a minister since 1960, with services every Sunday in both churches. In the 1970s the villages expanded and new families joined the *Hervormde* church.<sup>1</sup> Anticipating the *Samen op Weg* process, *Gereformeerden* started attending the *Hervormde* church in their village.<sup>2</sup> This was also stimulated by the *Gerefor-*

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<sup>1</sup> Henk Berkens, Jan van Lieshout, *Asten over de grens van twee eeuwen*, Muiderberg, Lorelex, 2001, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Coenen, *Hertog Jan en de Zummerse mens*, Someren, Gemeente Someren 2001, p. 460; Frits Gerritsen, Eline van Iperen, (eds.), *Gedenkboekje Protestantse Kerk Asten, 1825-2013*, Asten, Protestantse Gemeente Asten-Someren, 2013, p. 22.

*merde* minister in Helmond: “Go support the Protestant church in Someren, they need people.”<sup>3</sup> However, in the 1980s and 1990s the arrival of so many new faces meant that a new balance had to be found between traditions and the need for renewal.<sup>4</sup>

In the 2000s a decline in members and financial resources led to a unification process between Asten and Someren. A cooperation process was set up to strengthen the bonds between the two congregations. From 2004 church services alternated between the two villages and in 2005 the union was made official. The community now has approximately 400 members, two thirds of which live in the area of Someren.<sup>5</sup> The part-time minister lives in Someren in the parsonage next to the church. Although the intention was to divide the activities between the two villages, most meetings and church activities, such as discussion groups, youth work, and meals are held in the new community centre behind the church in Someren.<sup>6</sup> In Asten activities of a slightly different character are held: meditation, meditative painting, and flower arranging. In the summer of 2013 the church building in Asten was sold. I began the fieldwork in 2012 and consequently start my descriptions of church life before the closure of the building.



<sup>3</sup> “De predikant van Helmond zei: ‘Ga de Protestante kerk in Someren maar steunen, die hebben mensen nodig.’ (Discussion group, 14 April 2015).

<sup>4</sup> It also raised organizational questions how *Gereformeerden* could be appointed as church council member in a *Hervormde* church (Discussion group, 14 April 2015); Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, pp. 7, 26-28.

<sup>5</sup> Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 4 April 2013.



### 6.1.1 | Village Walks

The villages of Asten and Someren both have approximately 10,000 inhabitants. Both villages fulfil a regional function for the smaller surrounding *kerkdorpen* ('church villages'). The municipalities are exploring possibilities for cooperation, but are keen to preserve their independence and identity. Local societies, such as bands, guilds, and social groups are important for the local network and village dynamics. In the smaller villages, a pride and commitment to invest in the village can be noticed.<sup>7</sup>

In Asten there is a school for HAVO/VWO (Higher General Secondary Education), and in Someren is the school for VMBO (Lower Secondary Professional Education). This may reflect a difference in the level of education between the two villages. Asten seems to be more a village of commuters than Someren. According to the coordinator of *Onis*, the regional welfare organisation, people in Someren tend to keep their problems to themselves and try to find support in the more closed social networks, while people in Asten are more open and will more easily ask for help.<sup>8</sup> Twice as much debt assistance is offered in Asten compared to Someren, but the coordinator thinks that the number of people with debts is higher in Someren. Quality of life questions are related to the future of primary schools and ageing. People wonder whether they will be able to remain in their own village. The coordinator of *Onis* observes that social networks are weakening. A decade ago people had four children living close by, but nowadays children have moved away to live in a city or somewhere abroad.<sup>9</sup> In a village like Lierop a care cooperation has started to provide care, practical support, and sociability.<sup>10</sup> A local councillor sees a paradox: people are attached to their independence, but are looking for community at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Physical environment*

In the past century, the face of the villages has changed significantly. The Second World War left its mark on the villages: a parish *kerkdorp* like Ommel, north of Asten, dates from the fifteenth century, but driving through Ommel I mainly see buildings from the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Someren Heide has a much shorter history. From the 1920s the moorlands of the Peel were drained quickly and the first farms were built. In the 1930s the village expanded further, a school was founded, and the first church was built in 1936.<sup>13</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century Asten and Someren expanded rapidly. Respondents tell about a housing shortage in the 1950s when several families lived together in one house.<sup>14</sup> The village centres of Asten and Someren are surrounded by housing estates from various decades. Both villages have industrial zones on the outskirts of the village. Agriculture has an industrialised character with megastables and green houses.<sup>15</sup> The agricultural industry is

<sup>7</sup> Interview local councillor Someren, 18 december 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Interview coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> *Lierop leeft*, <http://www.lieropleeft.nl/>, accessed 10 February 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Interview local councillor Someren, 18 december 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Berkers, *Asten*, pp. 66-69.

<sup>13</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 324-326.

<sup>14</sup> Meal for singles, Someren, 14 November 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 422-430, 466-472; Berkers, *Asten*, pp. 74-75.

important for local employment. Still, the meadows and woods in the south west give the region a rural character.

Entering the village of Someren from the north-east, you pass the secondary school before arriving at a square. Here there are various cafés, a supermarket, and the town hall. A shopping street leads to another square where a nursing home, community hall, and the Catholic church can be found. In the community hall there is also a welfare centre. The Holy Lambertus church dates from the 1920s. A number of steps lead the visitor to three wide doors and mounting round arch windows dominate the front. At the top of the front wall a cross is bricked in and to the right a tower rises up. The church is considerable larger than the Protestant church, which located outside of the village centre.

Crossing the bridge from Someren to Asten, it is hard to miss the sign in the form of a clock (see image 3). The royal bell foundry Eijsbouts is important for the identity of the village. The factory even made bells for the Notre Dame in Paris. The history of the region and of the town as 'Bell village' is explained in the *Klok and Peelmuseum*.<sup>16</sup> Around the village square in Asten are the village hall, a new shopping centre, a tourist information point, the Catholic church, a community centre, and a former convent, which has become an apartment complex. In Asten is also the former noviciate of the order of the Holy Heart, which is now a nursing home for religious. There are plans to convert the buildings into a multifunctional community centre.<sup>17</sup>

## 6.2 | A Tale of Two Churches

The place of church buildings reflects the position of the churches in local society. The skyline of Brabant villages is often dominated by a high tower or the magnificent dome of neo-gothic Catholic churches. Protestant churches are small and often situated on the outskirts of the village or sometimes even in the woods. The two churches of Protestant congregation Asten-Someren bear striking resemblances (see images 4-7). Both are small, rectangular churches, with a door in the front, round arched windows, a pulpit in the apse, an organ, and a table for communion. Both churches were built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### A Short History

In 1648, after the peace of Munster, the Protestants used the medieval Catholic churches in Asten, Someren and Lierop for their services. Despite being a minority in the south of the Netherlands, the Protestants had been able to maintain a dominant position in society,

<sup>16</sup> Berkers, *Asten*, pp. 36, 41-43; 'Asten klinkt in de Notre Dame', <http://www.museumklokenpeel.nl/nl/ontdek-en-ervaar/klok/spotlight-op-de-klok/astenklinkt-in-de-notre-dame/35>, accessed 10 February 2017; 'Klok Notre Dame in Asten gegoten', <http://nos.nl/artikel/418869-klok-notre-dame-in-asten-gegoten.html>, accessed 14 September 2012.

<sup>17</sup> 'Klooster Heilig Hart Asten', *Confederatie van de Vlaamse en Nederlandse Provincie*, <http://www.scj.nl/communiteiten/astent>, accessed 24 May 2016; 'Woonzorgcentrum H. Hartklooster', *De Waalboog*, <http://www.waalboog.nl/woonzorgcentrum-h-hartklooster>, accessed 24 May 2016. In May 2016, the plans were presented to locate a new community centre in the convent, leaving the inhabitants of the convent nursing home three years to find a new accommodation. Harrie van Horik, 'Nieuw Astens Gemeenschapshuis in klooster Heilig Hart?', *Siris*, 26 May 2016; Maarten Driessen, 'Patersklooster wordt nieuw gemeenschapshuis', *Peelbelang*, 26 May 2016.

## A Protestant Church in Brabant

because during the Republic only members of the Reformed Church were allowed to obtain public positions. The Catholics believed their church buildings were desecrated by the Protestants and this regularly led to acts of vandalism. Because of the separation of church and state in the Netherlands and the granting of equal rights to Catholics in 1798, the Protestant minority in the south of the Netherlands lost its position. In various villages, this led to cleansing rituals, such as the excavation of Protestant remains.<sup>18</sup>

In Asten the medieval church had been too large for the Protestant community and the Protestant administrators had used the choir as council chamber.<sup>19</sup> The Catholics gathered in a conventicle and in 1798 they bought back the medieval church and the parsonage. In 1807 the minister moved to the former Catholic parsonage and a room was used for church services. In 1825 the Protestants built their own church, where the conventicle used to stand (see image 4).<sup>20</sup> When the church became too small for the Catholic parish they built a huge neo-Gothic church in 1898 with the tallest tower in Brabant.<sup>21</sup>

The Protestant communities of Lierop and Someren formed one congregation and held their church services in the Lambertus church in Someren. The school was located next to it. The church in Lierop was left abandoned. The Catholics used conventicles, which they gradually expanded and refurbished. When in 1798 the acquisition of Catholic churches took place, the Catholics preferred to keep using their conventicle, which was more centrally situated than the medieval church. An arrangement was made in 1809 which meant that the Protestants could keep the medieval church. Around 1830 the Catholics replaced the conventicle with a neoclassical *Waterstaatskerk* (a church building that was built with financial support from the government). A century later this church had grown too small and a larger church was built. In 1868 the nave of the medieval church was demolished, since the Protestants only used the choir. In 1885 the choir was also pulled down and a new Protestant church was built nearby (see image 6).<sup>22</sup> The location of the former medieval church is still used as Protestant cemetery.

### 6.2.1 | Someren

The Protestant church in Someren is situated near a small triangular park. This part of the village is called the 'Protestant corner', because several Protestant farmers lived around the park.<sup>23</sup> Further down the road is the Protestant school, which was opened after the Second World War and merged with a Catholic school in 2011/2012. On the right side of the church is the old parsonage located, a beautiful white house, which dates from the nineteenth century and is one of the oldest houses in the village.<sup>24</sup> People living around the church have contributed to the purchase of a new bell for the church.<sup>25</sup> The minister lives

<sup>18</sup> Gerard Rooijackers, *Rituele repertoires: Volkscultuur in oostelijk Noord-Brabant 1559-1853*, Nijmegen, SUN, 1994, pp. 205-248.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>21</sup> Berkens, *Asten*, p. 27

<sup>22</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 258, 260, 262, 270, 352, 369.

<sup>23</sup> Visit Someren-Asten, 13-14 November 2012; Interview Lena (PB35).

<sup>24</sup> Visit Someren-Asten, 8 November 2012; Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, p. 369

<sup>25</sup> Interview PB 35: "Wij hebben een carillon en daar is een klok van de bewoners van het Speelheuvelplein. Die

in a parsonage, dating from the 1950s, which stands on the other side. The church is surrounded by a well-kept churchyard with grass and a couple of trees.

A broad path leads up to the church door. It is a simple building which dates from 1885, with a large door in the middle and above the door a large window.<sup>26</sup> On both sides are small round arched windows. The front of the church is crowned with a small bell tower. Teenagers in the congregation think the building has its charm, but does not stand out for its architecture: "This church is not great in terms of its structure, not beautiful, it is charming, but not very beautiful or extraordinary."<sup>27</sup> A sign refers the visitor to another entrance in a new building, which is behind to the church. Walking around in the little Protestant churches of Asten and Someren gives an entirely different experience than wandering around in the large and high Catholic churches. Especially in Someren it is hardly possible to speak of wandering: with ten steps you can cross the entire floor. Most of the interior furnishings come from the medieval church, including the pulpit from 1740.<sup>28</sup> The proportions and the interior with rather dark wood are reminiscent of a sitting room from the 1980s, but when the sun shines, the room lightens up. The small churches also create a feeling of solidarity and intimacy (see image 5 and 7). During the church services the distance between the minister and the congregation is small.<sup>29</sup>

In 2009 a new community centre was built behind the church to replace the former *verenigingsgebouw* (society building). There is a large hall for meetings, a kitchen and a youth room (see image 9-10).<sup>30</sup> A large corridor with huge glass windows gives access to the youth room and meeting hall and forms a connection with the church building. This means that people enter the church room from the front. In a corner there is a table with a burning candle and a bowl where people can put prayer requests for the intercessions. The burning candles on a tray next to it give evidence of many silent prayers. The meeting hall can be divided into two smaller rooms. On the walls hang bright paintings and a large piece of art depicting people drinking and talking together (see image 9). The youth room has some similarities to a teenager's room. There are beanbags, a couch, a football table, and bright colours on the walls. The room is called *Plexat*, a contraction of '*plek zat*' which means: place enough (see image 10).

### *Conflicting Views on the Use of the Church Building*

To pay for the community centre, the congregation hoped to rent it out for receptions, meetings, and family parties. The church is also available for civil weddings.<sup>31</sup> Renting out the building was not only considered a chance to find new sources of income; the community also saw it as an opportunity to be a church for the village and to show hospitality.

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hebben er een klok voor gegeven."

<sup>26</sup> Protestantse Gemeente Asten-Someren, <http://www.pg-astensomeren.nl/file/kerk.html>, accessed 8 February 2017.

<sup>27</sup> *Plexat*, Someren, 26 October 2012: "Deze kerk is niet tof qua structuur, niet mooi, wel schattig, maar niet heel mooi of bijzonder."

<sup>28</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, p. 369.

<sup>29</sup> Church service, Someren, 25 November 2012.

<sup>30</sup> 'Gemeentecentrum Protestantse kerk officieel geopend', *Siris*, 15 February 2009.

<sup>31</sup> 'Het kerkje is voor hele gemeenschap', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 March 2010; 'Protestantse kerk medio 2012 dicht', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 13 December 2012.

However, the local restaurant and café owners complained to the municipality that this was unfair competition, because it was thought that alcohol was sold in the church. According to the church council, this is not the case, since people have to bring their own drinks. The hall of the church can be used for family parties that are too large for a sitting room. However, the municipality has forbidden the church from letting the building for non-religious activities and has threatened with a penalty of 2000 euro.<sup>32</sup> This has not only caused a financial problem, but according to the minister it also threatens the identity of the church community.

*We want to be meaningful for the village. We can say that it is a religious deed to offer space to families because we find it important that people celebrate life and that a good community can be developed.*<sup>33</sup>

In the eyes of the minister the church's function as a meeting place is part of its religious task. However, the people of the municipality, who primarily have a Catholic background, do not see this as religious. In Catholic eyes 'religious' is limited to the celebration of the mass.<sup>34</sup> This perspective makes it difficult to explain that activities other than church services can also be seen as religious.

### 6.2.2 | Asten

On the outskirts of the village centre, in the corner of a little square, stands the small white Protestant church. The church is surrounded by restaurants, cafés, and parking lots. In front of it is a shoulder-high gate. The form of the windows and the roof-turret indicate that the passer-by is approaching a church. Dating from 1825, it is one of the oldest buildings in the village and was built as a *Waterstaatskerk* with financial support from the government. To the right of the church is a small gate in an old wall, which connects the church to the old parsonage – all that remains of the conventicle where the Catholics gathered until 1798.<sup>35</sup> In 2012, a sign says that the building is for sale.<sup>36</sup>

Inside, the church is light and the floor is covered with tiles, which results in a hollow echoing sound that is often associated with a church (image 5). A number of people remark that the acoustics in Asten are better than in Someren. It is interesting to see the effect that a building's 'sound' can have on people. Ria (PB21), who showed me around the building, said that being in the church makes her want to sing. In Someren the church is furnished with benches, but here there are chairs making it possible to rearrange the interior and create space for a choir or musical ensemble. Leo (PB60) mentions that some years ago on

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<sup>32</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Geen feesten in Protestantse kerk', *Siris*, 14 October 2013; 'Boete dreigt voor Protestantse gemeente', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 16 October 2013.

<sup>33</sup> "We willen van betekenis zijn voor het dorp. Als wij zeggen: dat het een religieuze daad is om ruimte beschikbaar te stellen aan families, omdat we het belangrijk vinden dat mensen vieren wat er te vieren valt, dat er goede gemeenschap ontstaat." (Church council meeting, 2 September 2014); 'Gebruiksbeperkingen aan het Gemeentecentrum?', *De Brug* (49:9), October 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Interview pastor Sonnehove, 14 April 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Berkers, *Asten*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> 'Protestantse kerk medio 2012 dicht', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 13 December 2011.

a Maundy Thursday the Communion table was placed lengthwise in the church hall, with chairs in two semi-circles on both sides. People were facing each other, which created a very intimate atmosphere of solidarity throughout the whole service. In the hallway stands a table for intercessions. The pulpit dates from 1649 and was brought over from the medieval church. A door next to the pulpit gives access to a meeting room for drinking coffee after the services. The hall was rebuilt in 1987 when the congregation had grown and more space was needed for the children's service and for coffee time after the service.<sup>37</sup> The hall is bright with white and grey accents, and on the tables crochet flowers are placed (image 8). In section 6.6 I go into more detail with regard to the closing of the church, in particular how this was experienced by the community, what meanings they attribute to the church building, and how the closure affected congregational life.

### 6.3 | Church in Decline

In the context of a declining number of church members and declining human and financial resources, people refer regularly to Matthew 18:20.

For where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them.<sup>38</sup>

This verse has become almost proverbial for the context of small village churches. It describes a situation of being with a small number of people, offering recognition, and at the same time it gives people hope. Only a small number of people is necessary to be a church. This makes it a text that a small congregation can rely on.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Focus on Survival*

Like most village churches, the PCAS church council is worried about the continuity of the congregation. The children's service is sometimes on the brink of stopping and discussion evenings are regularly cancelled. Recurring issues on the agenda of the church council are finding new church council members and questions about how members can become more involved in church affairs. The organisation of the church community is becoming weaker and the focus is on survival.<sup>40</sup> There is a growing tendency to appoint people for part of a function. For instance, the council's secretary is replaced by Mark (PB62) who only makes the church council minutes. In the meantime there is a real risk of overburdening people. The minister notices that people are overstretched and that limits have been reached. In September 2015 the church council becomes understaffed, after four members leave. This requires a rearrangement of tasks. A former deacon will assist with funerals and a former diaconal worker will take over some visits now that the pastoral team has diminished. After the secretary and the president left, the minister wondered how the organisation would

<sup>37</sup> Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>38</sup> English Standard Version

<sup>39</sup> congregation evening, Someren, 10 October 2012; Jan van Reenen, 'Brabantse Protestant tegenwoordig meer in beeld dan vijftig jaar geleden', *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, 29 May 2012.

<sup>40</sup> 'Protestantse gemeente Weert-Budel viert dubbeljubiläum', 17 August 2012, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/actueel/nieuws/protestantse-gemeente-weert-budel-viert-dubbeljubiläum-3>, accessed 10 October 2012.

remain administratively and juridically reliable. She felt left on her own to keep an eye on long-term developments and prepare the agenda for the church council. She thought this was an undesirable situation, because too much power and knowledge became concentrated in her person. Another consequence was that the minister had less time for pastoral work. In her yearly report in 2012 the minister writes that she expects that the congregation will have to let go of a form of church that is dear to them.

*This will be again - after selling the church in Asten - a mourning process for the whole congregations. This requires - again - careful guidance and it will take time, and people should be given the time to express what affects us most, what we are about to lose and why that was good and valuable, and how it affects us and our faith in God. Only when we have mourned appropriately can openness grow for a new vision on new possibilities.<sup>41</sup>*

This statement makes clear that survival should not be aimed at maintaining the church community, but at keeping something of church going.<sup>42</sup>

### Regionalisation

The church council considered various scenarios for the future: the last person turns off the light, the light is clustered with other lights or the light joins a larger light. The decision was made to bundle the light and to explore possibilities for cooperation with other Protestant congregations in the region, starting with diaconal work.<sup>43</sup> The church began to search for regional support to maintain church life locally. This plan was presented during a congregational evening in October 2012.<sup>44</sup> The *diakenen* (deacons) started with exchanging experiences and possible ideas.<sup>45</sup> From 2012 PCAS also participates in a regional lecture programme, each lecture taking place in one of the participating congregations. The project 'As I left my father's house' (see sec. 7.5.1) is a successful example of how regional cooperation made local initiative possible. This regional focus might not be entirely surprising. In the times of pillarisation Protestant congregations maintained a regional network for social contacts within the denomination. Teenagers from various villages met at yearly youth group celebrations and at gatherings on Ascension day. At these events many people found their future marriage partners. Regionalisation, therefore, is not something new.

The majority of the survey respondents agree with the statement "that the Protestant church should strive to work together with neighbouring protestant churches" (Appendix C figure I4.a). Survey respondents see that church involvement is declining and that the congregation is ageing. Therefore, regional cooperation is inevitable for the continuity of the organisation. Interestingly respondents also mention other reasons for cooperation.

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<sup>41</sup> "Dat zal (opnieuw, na de verkoop van de kerk van Asten) een rouwproces zijn voor de hele gemeente. De kunst zal zijn dit (opnieuw) heel zorgvuldig te begeleiden, er de tijd voor te nemen en mensen er de tijd voor te geven, te benoemen waar het ons ten diepste raakt, wát we kwijtraken en waarom dat goed en waardevol was, en wat dat met ons en met ons geloof in God doet. Pas nadat er recht gedaan is aan de rouw kan er openheid groeien voor een nieuwe visie op nieuwe mogelijkheden." (Annual report minister, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Annual report minister, 2012-2013; Telephone interview minister, 2 February 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Frits Gerritsen, *Beleidsplan 2012 Protestantse Gemeente Asten-Someren*, Asten, Someren, 2012, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Annual report minister, 2011-2012; congregation meeting, 10 October 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Diaconal regional cooperation, Someren, 8 November 2012.

They see it as a chance to learn from others, to be inspired: "Exchanging ideas and opinions can be enriching."<sup>46</sup> These convictions might be rooted in a theology of openness and unity. A couple of respondents argue that it is important to transcend boundaries. Furthermore, cooperation can increase the possibilities of outreach work in the region. At the same time people find it important that worship remains locally rooted and that the culture and identity of the congregation is sustained. There exists a tension between the local and the regional, but there are also ways in which this tension may become fruitful.

### *Church in the Villages*

In 2011 the church council explicitly states in its policy document:

*We want to be a community of Christ. As a local church, we want to be open to and focussed on ecumenical and regional Protestant cooperation. We want to be a community that looks after each other, offers room for all generations, connects them and shares faith with them. As a congregation and individually, we want to mean something for the society and our neighbour, through shared diaconal work, among other things.*<sup>47</sup>

This seems to imply that the congregation wants to play a role in Asten and Someren village society. But the level of aspiration lies higher than the human resources allow. 'Minding the shop' requires most of the available time and energy, and forms a hindrance to building a network and strengthening connections with the social environment. The minister fears that talking and thinking about the decline and the future distracts the focus from village society: "Our own future causes more concern than the duty we have to the outside world."<sup>48</sup> This statement was confirmed in 2013, when I discussed this with the church council. Council members responded: "The church council is of the opinion that we neither can nor should expand our activities to our villages of Someren and Asten."<sup>49</sup>

The effect of the 'survival mode' is that cooperation is primarily sought with Protestant churches in the region and local contact with the Catholic churches. The possibilities for cooperation with local secular organisations are hardly explored. Survey respondents (app. C fig. 12.a) doubt whether villagers notice anything from the Protestant church. They wonder whether the Protestant church should show more of itself in the village because they think that it has something special to offer. The programme of religious education is more extensive in the Protestant church, than in the Catholic church. With regard to mourning and memorial the community has expertise and resources available. In an inter-church setting a diaconal or social project could be started.

However, the reality of declining resources makes it difficult to find ways of actualising

<sup>46</sup> "Uitwisseling van ideeën en opvattingen kunnen verrijkend zijn." (Survey Q. 11b - see Appendix B V).

<sup>47</sup> "Wij willen gemeente van Christus zijn. Als lokale gemeente willen we open zijn naar en op samenwerking gericht met de oecumene en de naburige Protestantse gemeentes. Wij willen een gemeenschap zijn die omziet naar elkaar, die ruimte biedt voor alle generaties, hen samenbindt en met hen geloof wil delen. Als gemeente en individueel willen wij van betekenis zijn voor de samenleving en onze naaste, onder meer door gezamenlijk gedragen diaconaat." (Gerritsen, *Beleidsplan 2012*).

<sup>48</sup> De eigen toekomst baart meer zorgen dan de taak die we hebben naar buiten toe." (Annual report minister, 2012-2013).

<sup>49</sup> De kerkenraad is ook van mening dat we onze huidige activiteiten richting onze dorpen Someren en Asten ook niet verder moeten/kunnen uitbreiden" (Church council minutes, May 2013).



these ideas, which can lead to a feeling of failure. Here a tension can be detected between an ecclesial ideal and a real church. In a prayer opening a congregational evening the minister sketches an ideal image of the church, which contributes to the quality of life in the personal living arena by providing love, hope, peace, and justice.

*Lord, where two or three are gathered in your Name, you are in the midst of us. [...] That the church may become what she hopes to be: a house of hope and shelter of peace, an oasis of humanity. A refuge for lost people, a storehouse of your unconditional love, where the ode to life is sung, where peace is prayed for, where people receive justice in your Name, where the memory is kept of your son, who served people with his love, with himself.<sup>50</sup>*

In the next section I describe how the church community tries to realise these ideals in church practices, such as worship, support and faith development.

### 6.4 | Ordinary ecclesiologies

The previous section revealed various images of church, often in tension between an ecclesial ideal and the reality of everyday church life. In this section I investigate the ideas that ordinary church members have of a church, their ordinary ecclesiologies, to paraphrase Jeff Astley.<sup>51</sup> The survey provides some insights (see appendices B V and C). What do church members see as the most important task of the church (app. C fig H1-2)? Respondents first mention community spirit, contact with each other, and belonging. This is often bracketed together with support and looking after each other. An attitude of openness and respect is mentioned as a quality of a good community. A good community should be a community of equals, inclusive, and non-judgemental. A couple of people say they feel excluded by the community, because of a conflict a couple of years ago. People experience community in gathering in church services, in singing together. Various activities offer people the possibility of meeting each other and allow for various ways of connecting. At the same time the congregation is challenged to organise church services for all ages, where everyone can belong irrespective of age or religious background. Some say that the feeling of community through faith and belonging to God stretches further than only their faith community.

Second, the community forms the basis from which people can live out their faith in daily life: "Together - in solidarity - experiencing faith together and carrying it out in daily life."<sup>52</sup> People try to do this by helping other people and approaching others with an open attitude. Support can be offered by looking after each other, listening to each other, and visiting people in need. The support is aimed at personal well-being: "Looking after each other for the

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<sup>50</sup> "Heer, waar 2 of 3 in uw naam bijeen zijn, bent u in ons midden. [...] dat de kerk mag worden wat zij hoopt te zijn: huis van hoop en onderdak van vrede, oase van menslievendheid. Een schuilplaats voor verdwaalde mensen, een bewaarplaats van uw onvoorwaardelijke liefde, waar gezongen wordt de lofzang om het leven, waar gebeden wordt om vrede, waar mensen recht gedaan wordt in uw Naam, waar de gedachtenis wordt hoog gehouden aan uw Zoon die mensen diende, met zijn liefde, met zichzelf." (Prayer minister congregation evening, 10 October 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Jeff Astley, 'The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology', in: Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology, Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 1-9.

<sup>52</sup> "Samen - in verbondenheid - het geloof mogen beleven en uit te dragen in het dagelijks leven." (Survey Q. 10).

benefit of immaterial well-being.”<sup>53</sup> Some respondents place support in a broader framework, underlining that support should also be offered outside the church community: “Working together towards a society with space for everyone, where people care for and look after each other.”<sup>54</sup> The intertwining of community and support as an act of faith is summed up nicely in the statement that the church should offer a sense of safety in the name of YHWH.<sup>55</sup>

A third task which can be distinguished is faith development, both for adult church members and children. This can be found in sermons, reflective conversations, and moments of contemplation. Worship services are moments when faith can be experienced and nourished. Some respondents say their faith, view on life, and knowledge of belonging underpins their daily life and the way they approach other people. Therefore, it is important that the Bible is related to the reality they experience. This means that the church as a community is perceived as a possible source of support and development of faith and worldview. Only a small number of respondents speak about the missional task of the church, when they talk about spreading the gospel, sharing God’s love and making people enthusiastic about the message of Jesus. Figures H. 1-2 (app. C) confirm that the open attitude of the congregation is rather passive: people are welcome to join, but contact with other people is not actively sought.

### 6.4.1 | Worship services

The regular worship services form the central point in church life. Participants in the focus groups say they feel inspired by the services and find them valuable and formative for their personal religious lives. Drinking coffee afterwards is at least as important for meeting each other and exchanging personal narratives.<sup>56</sup> “Drinking coffee after a church service is an essential part of being together, it prolongs the fellowship.”<sup>57</sup> The services are important for strengthening community bonds, not only through socialising afterwards, but also through the communal experience of prayer, singing, and reflection in words or silence. Among the 26 survey respondents who commented on the statement ‘PCAS inspires me in my faith’, (app. C fig. 15.b) the church services, in particular the sermons and drinking coffee afterwards, are mentioned first as source of inspiration. In a discussion group people talk about the special meaning of church. They conclude that the church distinguishes itself through the liturgy, singing in the name of the Lord, and caring for each other. The beginning of the service, by mentioning the Lord’s name and lighting a candle as a symbol of his presence, differs fundamentally from someone opening a meeting by saying good morning. However, this does not mean that caring for each other, rituals, singing, and symbols cannot be found outside the church, as will become clear in the next chapter.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “Omzien naar elkaar ten behoeve van immaterieel welbevinden.” (Survey Q.10).

<sup>54</sup> “Er samen voor zorgen dat er een samenleving ontstaat waar voor iedereen ruimte is en voor elkaar te zorgen en naar elkaar om te kijken.” (Survey Q.10).

<sup>55</sup> “Bieden van geborgenheid in de naam van JHWH.” (Survey Q.10).

<sup>56</sup> Game afternoon, Someren, 24 October 2012.

<sup>57</sup> “Dat was ook met mijn vieringen, na afloop koffie drinken, dat vind ik wezenlijk daartoe bij behoren dat het samenzijn zich nog eventjes voortzet.” (Interview pastor Janssen).

<sup>58</sup> Discussion group, Someren, 14 April 2015.

### Music and Singing

Special worship services are prepared with the liturgical committee, making them the product of community initiative. This leads to inspiration, creativity, and extends the possibility of developing various ways to express a theme in music, symbols, and rituals.<sup>59</sup> Performances by choirs and musicians lend an extra dimension.<sup>60</sup> A church council member remarks that a choir supports the singing and also offers the opportunity to ponder for a moment, without having to do something.<sup>61</sup> During a focus group people were very enthusiastic about a hymn that was sung the preceding Sunday, which had an uplifting effect. On the other hand, Lydia (PB41) remarks that community feeling depends on whether people can identify with the songs. This is also the reason why the liturgy committee has brought in a bundle with familiar songs, although it has had an estranging effect on some church members, to whom the songs are not familiar.<sup>62</sup>

### Prayer

The church services are also moments for prayer, which Maartje (PB 57) describes as a moment with God. Maartje is a young mother who is searching for a place where she can have conversations with more depth than the small talk she hears at the school gates or in the shop. She wants her daughter to develop some religious awareness.

*What I really appreciate is praying together in church. That you come there and for a moment open your heart together and pray for the world. For me that is something which enables me to really connect with God, together with the people in the church. And that you also know that it is shared over the whole world in every faith and every country. I see that as a kind of fire spreading over the earth. I sometimes think: it is night there now and tomorrow it will be their Sunday and they will be praying too. And I think that is something, yes, that is a very unique experience. It enables me to take this energy back home. And that I can do something with it in my life. That is what the church offers me.<sup>63</sup>*

The quote makes clear that prayer is multi-dimensional. In prayer Maartje can meet God and feel connected, not only to people around her in the church, but also with the worldwide community. She describes prayer as something that is passed on and travels as a fire over the earth. Prayer also has a lasting empowering effect, which she carries with her and that inspires her in her way of life. In this way prayer and reflection connect the personal with the material living arena, because they shape the way people like Maartje interact with the world around them. The other way around, the material is also connected to the

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<sup>59</sup> Annual report minister, 2011-2012.

<sup>60</sup> *De Brug*, February 2014, May 2014, December 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 4 April 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Interview PB 35.

<sup>63</sup> "En wat ik heel fijn vind is het samen bidden in de kerk. Dat je er komt en dat je even met z'n allen gezamenlijk je hart openmaakt en bidt voor de wereld. En dat is voor mij een stukje dat ik echt contact kan maken met God samen met de mensen ook in de kerk, en dat je ook weet dat dat over de hele wereld in welk geloof en welk land dan ook, dat dat gedeeld wordt. En ik zie dat als een soort van vuur over de aarde heengaan zeg maar. Als je denkt van, daar is het nou nacht, morgen dan bidden zij op de zondag. En ik vind dat stuk, ja dat is voor mij een hele unieke ervaring. En dat zorgt ook dat ik die energie ook mee naar huis kan nemen. En dan met mijn leven ermee aan de gang gaan. Dus dat is wat de kerk mij biedt." (PB 57, FG II).

personal living arena when during the church service people pray for those in situations of war, poverty, or illness.<sup>64</sup> People can also bring in their prayers for intercession by putting notes in a basket in the hall. In 2014 the church council took the initiative to enable people to light a candle in the church, when they do not have the words, but feel the need make their prayers and thoughts visible.

### *Blessing*

Through conversations and ritual practices people can feel inspired, encouraged, and empowered. In the blessing, this feeling is confirmed: "Go hopefully in peace, that we may be a blessing to each other and to others."<sup>65</sup> The blessing forms an encouragement to care for other people and live in harmony with them. This empowering meaning of blessing also becomes apparent in the discussion of the liturgy committee when they read Genesis 32:23-32 about Jacob's wrestling match. The group sees the fight mirroring people who are struggling with life difficulties, such as grief, loss, illness, and uncertainty. When you are in the middle of a struggle what you need is perspective and hope that it will end some day and the encouragement to carry on. This might be the reason why Jacob asks his opponent for a blessing: a confirmation of demonstrated power and the knowledge that you are being carried.<sup>66</sup> Faith as a source of strength is also mentioned by survey respondents when they are asked how faith plays a role in daily life (app. C fig. F1-2). It also forms a strong motivation to express social concern as discussed below.

### **6.4.2 | Support**

There are various ways in which the church community tries to offer support. First, I describe the forms of pastoral support and the role the church plays around death, mourning, and memorial. Next, I turn to diaconal practices, which overlap to some extent with pastoral care. It becomes clear that bonding social capital is important to the congregation, but it takes a considerable effort to maintain it. Within the congregation there seems to be some diaconal uneasiness about how the church can relate more to village life. Still, there are some examples of how the congregation becomes more visible through diaconal involvement.

#### *Pastoral Care*

About forty percent of the respondents in the survey agree with the statement that the congregation forms a community of people who look after each other (app. C fig. I1a). Judging from the task descriptions in the survey (app. C fig. H1-2), support can be seen as the core business of the church. The church council tries to offer support by organising pastoral work. The pastoral team, which is formed by the minister, pastoral worker and

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<sup>64</sup> Church service, Someren, 25 November 2012.

<sup>65</sup> "Ga hopelijk in vrede, zodat we elkaar en anderen tot zegen mogen zijn." (Blessing church service, 25 November 2012).

<sup>66</sup> Liturgical committee, Someren, 7 November 2012.

deacons, visit people going through hard times, but also on happy occasions. The minister remarks that the pastoral work enables her to keep close contact with people and to see what people carry with them. It is important for people to express their thoughts and feelings and it enhances their connection with the community. She notices that knowing what people have on their mind influences what she says in sermons and prayers.

*The glasses through which I read Bible stories are partly influenced by the stories of the people I carry with me. I find the interplay between services and pastoral care very fruitful.<sup>67</sup>*

### Memorial

An example of how pastoral contacts can resonate in church services is when after the illness and death of a young woman the minister prays for the bereaved. The illness encroached deeply on the life of the family and formed a divisive element in their relations. Therefore, the minister prays that people will find the space to acknowledge that there are different versions of the truth. With regard to illness, death, mourning, and memorial the church offers support in various ways. The flowers which are brought after the church service and the visits by church members are a part of it. As mentioned earlier, the church also has a cemetery where members of the Protestant church can be buried. According to Marten (PB5), a church council member, this is exactly the reason why some people remain church members, although they are not otherwise involved in church life.<sup>68</sup>

After the death of church members the church plays a special role. The church community offers support and the funeral service is a moment for memorial. The funerals are also moments when the Protestant congregation becomes more visible in village life. Various non-Protestant respondents tell how much they appreciate the funeral services of Protestant acquaintances. The services differ from what they are used to in the Catholic church. A volunteer (PB70) during the *Ziekentriduüm* said: "You noticed in everything that the minister had mentally placed herself in the family's situation."<sup>69</sup> Lydia (PB41) tells about the unexpected experience of warmth despite the grief over a young man who had a fatal accident.

*Of course, it was a horrible event, but afterwards I talked with people who never go to church and who said: "Oh wonderful, in that way I would go to church every week! There was so much warmth, despite the grief." Then I thought, you should be proud of that as a church, but you should also do something with it.<sup>70</sup>*

The memorial service at the end of the ecclesial year is a moment when the names are mentioned of church members who have passed away in the preceding year. In 2012 I joined

<sup>67</sup> "De bril waarmee ik bijbelverhalen lees wordt mede beïnvloed door de verhalen van mensen die ik bij me draag. De wisselwerking tussen vieringen en pastoraat ervaar ik als een vruchtbare." (Annual report minister 2014).

<sup>68</sup> PB5, Focus group III.

<sup>69</sup> "Je merkte gewoon aan alles dat de dominee zich had ingeleefd in de familie." (*Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 5 September 2014).

<sup>70</sup> PB 41 (FG I): "Het was natuurlijk een afschuwelijke gebeurtenis, maar als ik dan daarna mensen spreek, die gaan echt nooit naar de kerk: "nou, geweldig, en zo zou ik wel elke week naar de kerk willen. [...] Die warmte die er hing, en ja, ondanks al het verdriet". Dan denk ik van ja, daar moet je als kerk dan ook gewoon trots op zijn, maar daar moet je wel wat mee doen."

the liturgical committee's preparations for the memorial service. Together with the minister the committee discussed which readings were most appropriate. The reading about the fight of Jacob was compared with the struggle people experience when they have lost someone. Psalm 130 mirrors the unrest of feeling abandoned by God. The moment that the sun rises is interpreted as the moment when people have the feeling that their grief is seen and acknowledged, which enables them to carry on.<sup>71</sup> Ria (PB 21) made a flower arrangement, in which the rising sun is depicted by red and pink roses.<sup>72</sup> During the service people light a candle for their loved ones. First, relatives of deceased church members are invited, then people from the community who do not want to forget relatives and friends. It offers an opportunity for personal appropriation. People can mark their loss by lighting a candle, saying the name of the ones they miss, and placing the candle on a mirror on the table. The service has a community binding affect, the atmosphere is intense: people fight their tears, the names of people who are not mentioned are hanging in the air. The minister experienced an intense atmosphere during silent prayer. After the service people say that they recognised the sun in the flowers and saw their own life story mirrored in Jacob's experience.<sup>73</sup>

### *Organisation of Support*

The church services are moments when people can find support, in the liturgy, or in social contacts. The congregation also organises social events, such as games afternoons or meals for singles to relieve people's loneliness. Church members themselves offer various forms of informal support. A diaconal worker tells how she tries to keep in touch with people in her neighbourhood. She regularly brings flowers from the church services and visits people older than 75 on their birthday. When she sees people crossing the street, she regularly invites them in. Ria (PB21) tells about what she calls 'supermarket pastoral care'. She sometimes spends more than 3 hours in the supermarket, because she continually meets people who want to tell their story.<sup>74</sup> Mrs. de Boer (PB25) tells that the days in the nursing home can be lonely, so she passes the time by making cards for the Cliniclowns.<sup>75</sup> But at the same time she makes efforts to visit other residents in the nursing home. Respondents experience these visits as very gratifying work.

The church council tries to keep in touch with church members through a team of so-called 'contact persons'. Contact persons have 5 to 10 addresses, where they deliver the activity programme and the requests for financial support. Some limit their work to dropping an envelope in the letterbox or collecting something at the door. Others try to maintain personal contact, but find it discouraging when they seldom find people at home or are not invited inside, because people are not interested in the church.<sup>76</sup> This means that the church council finds it increasingly difficult to maintain the network of support and communication, while their policy aim is to strengthen the network within the congrega-

<sup>71</sup> Liturgical committee, Someren, 7 November 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Symbolic flower arrangement, Asten, 21 November 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Church service, Someren, 25 November 2012.

<sup>74</sup> PB 21, Focus group III.

<sup>75</sup> Meal for singles, Someren, 14 November 2012.

<sup>76</sup> PB5, Focus group III.

tion. Because fewer people are attending church activities, informal contacts are declining. Gradually the number of contact persons is decreasing. Also, the church council finds it increasingly difficult to keep in touch with church members: in September 2013 three members left the pastoral team and it has been difficult to fill the vacancies. The direct result is that the church council changed its policy. Instead of visiting all new church members at home, the community now organises monthly coffee mornings to which newcomers are also invited. If people show no interest after repeated letters, they are asked if they prefer to be deregistered.<sup>77</sup> To the relief of the minister two new deacons have been appointed, who are trying to build their network within the congregation.

### *Questions on Support and Care*

Some participants in the surveys and focus groups wonder whether the community lives up to the ideal of caring for each other (app. C fig. 11a); contacts can be somewhat superficial. Others have the impression that mutual support is mainly given within the group of elderly and people of local origin. Some say they have not heard from the church for some time. In the focus groups the question was raised multiple times: how you can really look after each other? Contacts can be somewhat superficial and people are sometimes hesitant to approach others.<sup>78</sup> Another problem is that you do not always know that someone is sick. The 'flowers' and the church newsletter are important sources of information. One of the conclusions in a focus group was that on the one hand too close a community can feel stifling, while an effort to give people space has the risk of becoming an unconcerned community. Respondents tell about moments when a flood of cards and signs of concern, helped them go through a difficult period. The other way around, people have also felt a lack of attention when they had quite painful problems.<sup>79</sup> Here a tension becomes clear between people's ordinary theological convictions and the reality of church life. A couple of survey respondents are also self-critical and say that they could show more concern.

The structure of diaconal and pastoral work is mainly aimed at elderly church members. People who are older than 75 receive flowers for their birthday. The diaconal workers organise a Christmas meal for elderly people from the congregation. Although everyone is welcome, the event mainly attracts people from the church community. During a regional evening for diaconal workers this repertoire of activities triggered the question of whether this caring for each other is a pastoral or a diaconal task.<sup>80</sup> De Waal confirms that pastoral care is mainly focussed on older church members within congregations, although diaconal work should be directed at the interaction between 'inside' and 'outside'.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, a critical question is whether the diaconal work of the congregation is not actually pastoral care, because the diaconal activities, such as visiting the sick and meals for elderly church members, do not really seem like outreach.

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<sup>77</sup> Church council minutes, September, October 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Focus group III.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>80</sup> Cooperation regional diaconal work, Someren, 8 November 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Hans de Waal, *Diaconaat en het ouder worden van kerk en samenleving*, Rotterdam, Stichting Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 35-36.

Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that support and care are not limited to the congregation. Individual church members are involved in various ways in the village communities as volunteers. On average, church members offer more than 4 hours of help per week to sick or disabled relatives, acquaintances or neighbours (app. C fig. A1, 3; B1, 3). When asked what role church and faith play in daily life, people respond that faith shapes their worldview and the way they approach other people (app. C fig. G1). Survey respondents say that they try to follow the ten commandments: they want to serve society, which means helping people who are in need, without being hindered by church boundaries. It is about honesty and openness, and this can lead to love and friendship. Faith forms an important motivation for social concern. In their volunteer work and their attitude in life these respondents show that social concern is part of their worldview.

### *Diaconal Uneasiness*

If diaconal work is about the interaction between 'inside and outside', the question remains as to how people outside the church community can be reached. Some church members try to make church activities more known in their personal social network. Carmen (PB 43), an elderly lady, is a frequent visitor to discussion groups and other activities. She very much values the moments for meditative painting and flower arrangement because of the conversations. She regularly invites non-church members who she knows can be lonely to join services or activities.<sup>82</sup> But it is not generally known that the church offers various kinds of social activities. The *Onis* welfare worker is not aware of the programme and suggested promoting social gatherings more at the welfare centre.<sup>83</sup> A diaconal worker remarked that many people no longer know what the diaconal work of the church entails.<sup>84</sup>

During a congregation evening a group focussed on the question: "What can the Protestant congregation mean for Asten and Someren? Think about a diaconal action or an inter-church project." The question met with a number of 'doubts'. People started thinking about financial support, because they equated 'diaconal' with giving money. Subsequently it became clear that it was easier to think of (inter)national good causes, than of local target groups in need of support. Participants suspected that there are villagers with problems, but how do you know what they need, what can the church do to help and how can they be reached? In the discussion that followed, it became clear that the congregation lacks the contacts with social organisations, like schools, the food bank or the welfare organisation *Onis*, from which signals could be received.<sup>85</sup> During an interview, an *Onis* coordinator says that they started in 2013 with debt assistance and expected to receive 10 customers. A year later there were 65 families, sometimes with significant debts.<sup>86</sup>

Another 'doubt' comes from the idea that there are all kinds of initiatives already taking place. The Salvation Army collects clothes and in Asten is a charity shop. Why should the church organise things that are already being done?<sup>87</sup> A similar line of argument was followed

<sup>82</sup> Symbolic flower arrangements, Asten, 21 November 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Interview coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Cooperation regional diaconal work, Someren, 8 November 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Congregational evening, Someren, 28 October 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Interview coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Congregational evening, Someren, 28 October 2014.



by one of the diaconal workers when I asked whether the church was involved in the *Wmo* (Social Support Act) in any way. One of the church council members had drawn her attention to this, but she did not see possibilities for engaging in the *Wmo* partly because she also thought that there were other local organisations that could offer practical support, such as the *KBO* (Catholic Union for the Elderly). She also wondered whether this is a task of the church.<sup>88</sup>

### *Diaconal Visibility in the Village*

Nevertheless, some ideas of how the church could mean something came up during the congregation evening. The participants realised that the food bank in Deurne is not very close by, so it might be a good idea to offer something closer to home. The Christmas meal is now organised for the elderly members of the congregation who are perfectly able to pay. Would it not be possible to organise a meal for people who cannot afford it? Focus group participants explained that in the past Easter breakfast in Asten was also aimed at non-church members, who could do with some company. Diaconal worker Tessa (PB10) thinks that small-scale help with which people are familiar is more attractive than anonymous and unknown help.<sup>89</sup> An example is the Red Cross Bungalow in the region, which is run by a church member, where people can go on a retreat for a week. The children's service also visits the bungalow occasionally.<sup>90</sup>

The collection for the foodbank and the project 'Night without a Roof' are two other ways through which the church shows its diaconal face. During the Advent period the church opens a collection point for the regional food bank in a neighbouring town, on which 70 families depend. Tessa remarks that it is good to do something more material than putting money in a collection bag.<sup>91</sup> The church community considers it "a diaconal task to bring the light of Christmas to these families living in hardship."<sup>92</sup> The congregation also advertised in the local newspaper that the church functioned as a collection point, but this received no response in the village.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, when the collection in 2013 was organised with the schools it was a great success.<sup>94</sup> Incidentally requests are received by the diaconal workers, like the need for a bike in Someren. When this became known in the congregation, a bicycle turned up at the community centre the next evening.<sup>95</sup> The theme of poverty was further discussed during a Plexat evening and the children's service visited the food bank.<sup>96</sup>

The congregation has organised 'Night without a Roof' several times in Someren, to bring poverty abroad close to home. One of the youth leaders says that they want young people to learn to look out for each other. Teenagers made small houses from cardboard in which they spend a night on the lawn in front of the church. In this way, they can experience how street children, who do not have a roof over their head, live in Africa and South Ameri-

<sup>88</sup> Visit Asten-Someren, 2 September 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Church council, Someren, 1 November 2012.

<sup>90</sup> Congregational evening, Someren, 28 October 2014; Focus group III.

<sup>91</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 4 October 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Onze diaconale taak oppakken en zorgen dat het licht van Kerst ook weer een beetje gaat stralen in gezinnen die het moeilijk hebben. ('Adventstijd: tijd voor de voedselbank', *De Brug*, 49:11, 2014, pp. 15-16).

<sup>93</sup> Telephone call minister, 2 February 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Church council minutes, December 2013, January 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Diaconal regional work, Someren, 8 November 2012.

<sup>96</sup> *De Brug*, January 2014; March 2014.

ca. The children also sought sponsors to collect money for Tear, a cause that supports street children in Bolivia. In 2010 a local councillor also camped in a box, he happily supported the initiative and was surprised to learn that it was organised by the Protestant Church. He also felt very welcome and not an outsider.<sup>97</sup> With this event the church community literally stepped outside the church and became visible on the village square. The visibility was increased by the local media, who announced the event, inviting teenagers to join in with the camping and adults to sponsor them. A week later a report with photos and video material appeared on the local news site.<sup>98</sup> These activities are about raising awareness, addressing a quality of life issue such as poverty and subsistence level and trying to do something about it. In the next chapter I explain how the Protestant community also supports the *Zieken-triduüm* (Three Day Festival for the Sick) both financially and organisationally.

### 6.4.3 | Reflection and Faith Development

The role of faith in daily life is predominantly described by survey respondents in terms of worldview or view of life (app. C fig. G1). This can be related to norms and values, the way people are brought up or how they try to raise their children. Others relate worldview to life attitude, an open attitude towards other people. Some respondents frame this more actively as a way of life, showing social concern and supporting people. "It is my view on life, the way I live my life and treat people: love for nature and for everything which grows and flourishes."<sup>99</sup> Sixteen respondents refer to concrete practices such as praying, listening to music, singing, reading, and talking with people about faith. These practices offer reflection, inspiration, and empowerment. This brings us to the third function of church, which can be described as offering reflection and supporting people in their religious life. Church is a place for reflective conversations, which can be rare in daily life. The focus groups remarked that they found the conversations very special. The participants concluded that somehow these kinds of intimate reflective conversations do not often arise spontaneously, but that the conditions have to be created to make them possible.

In 2014 a group started reading *The Doornse Catechism: Old Questions, New Answers*. I attended one meeting of this group. Approximately 9 people participated and they were able to share very personal experiences and convictions. There was a very open atmosphere, in which doubts could be discussed. For one of the participants the discussion group has meant a lot:

*I was always told that the Bible is true from a till z and was literally written down by the Lord himself. I long believed that. But when I became older I began to doubt: do I still believe it, do I still belong? I still go to church, out of habit, and I sing in a choir – it is nice to sing – and sometimes you hear something sensible, you know people there. But these conversations have given me the feeling that I can belong after all.<sup>100</sup>*

<sup>97</sup> Interview local councillor Someren, 18 December 2013.

<sup>98</sup> "Nacht zonder dak in Someren", *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 15 September 2010; Harrie van Horik, 'Nacht zonder dak in Someren een succes', *Siris*, 12 July 2015.

<sup>99</sup> "Mijn levensvisie. De manier waarop ik in het leven sta en met mensen omga. Liefde voor de natuur en alles wat groeit en bloeit." (Survey Q. 9)

<sup>100</sup> "Er is me altijd verteld dat de bijbel van a tot z waar is en door de Heer letterlijk is opgeschreven. Daar ben ik lang in

This narrative of a discussion group member reveals how the idea of a shared worldview is fundamental for the feeling of belonging to a community and for personal well-being. The construction of frames of meaning is thus a lifelong process. When society changes and life circumstances develop, people have to adapt their worldview regarding questions as to what is valuable, which norms are important, what is most important in life? Also according to focus group participants, the church fulfills an important function in this regard, because in ordinary life it is difficult to find places to discuss these kinds of questions in reflective conversations.

Church life is pervaded by moments of reflection: meetings and activities are opened with prayer, asking God for his presence and blessing. Church council meetings start with a moment for reflection, when the minister raises questions about how the church council sees its tasks, why people feel the need to have church services, and how the diaconal calling of the church also asks questions about social injustice.<sup>101</sup> During the week, various activities are offered for faith development. Adults can visit various discussion evenings and the ecumenical discussion group attracts people from both inside and outside the community (see sec. 7.2.1). To the disappointment of the minister and the church council, discussion evenings are regularly cancelled due to lack of interest.<sup>102</sup> No specific programme is offered for young adults, which is also the age group when people often leave the village for studies or work. Some of them become involved in the organisation of projects like 'Night without a Roof'.

### *Religious Upbringing*

The survey (Q. 9) reveals that people relate faith to their own upbringing or to parenting, in which faith shapes people's attitude to life and society. Parents indicate that the Protestant congregation fulfils a function through the programme of religious education. Children from Catholic and interfaith marriages who went to the Protestant school, became acquainted with the Protestant congregation through the family services on Thanksgiving day. The parents discovered that the programme entailed more than they found in the Catholic church. They find it important that their children learn something of the Christian tradition, the biblical stories, and that they talk about ethical and existential questions.<sup>103</sup> The children themselves say that they find the children's services in the Protestant Church more interesting and informative than in the Catholic church.<sup>104</sup> Father Maartens, from the convent in Asten, remarks that courses and formation groups organised by the deanery have largely disappeared within the Catholic church.<sup>105</sup> So, it would seem that the formation programme is more strongly developed within the Protestant churches. This might

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meegegaan. Maar op latere leeftijd begon ik te twijfelen: geloof ik dat nog wel, hoor ik daar nog wel bij? Ik ga wel naar de kerk – uit gewoonte – zing mee met een koor – fijn om te zingen en soms hoor je nog eens wat zinnigs, je kent er mensen. Maar door de gesprekken heb ik weer het gevoel dat ik er toch bij kan horen." (Discussion evening Old Questions, New Answers, 14 April 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Church council meeting, 4 October 2012, 4 April 2013, June 2013

<sup>102</sup> Church council meeting, 4 October 2013.

<sup>103</sup> Focus group II.

<sup>104</sup> Children catechism, Someren, 25 October 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Interview Father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

## Chapter 6

explain why Protestants are more content than Catholics with the spiritual programmes on offer within their church.<sup>106</sup>

Every Sunday a children's service is offered, although the parents find it increasingly difficult to organise it. The difference in age is large, but the number of children is too small to work in separate groups. In the periods of Advent and Lent, special projects are prepared, which attract more children.<sup>107</sup> Children around 10 years of age can participate in children's catechism. They use a method developed by the minister, which addresses the themes of the development of the Bible, the Christian feasts, the church service, and solidarity. The idea is that parents simultaneously follow a series of evenings where the same subjects are discussed.<sup>108</sup> In 2012, three children participated in catechism, but the parents' evenings were cancelled due to lack of interest.<sup>109</sup> When children go to secondary school they are invited for PEP evenings: Plexat Event Programme. The evenings start with eating together in the youth room, followed by games and short conversations about various themes. The image of a human being is used to explore what people do in church and the meaning of church. With your mouth you talk and sing, with your eyes you can imagine how others are doing, and you can take a closer look, with your ears you listen, with your heart you love, with your feet you can make the first step towards a new future, with your head you pray, with your hands you can hold on, you can touch people, and cuddle them, with your knees you can kneel down. Most important is to love, listen, and cooperate.<sup>110</sup>

### Empowerment

In this section, we have explored three aspects of church: church as a place for worship, support, and reflection. These are all ways through which people can become empowered. They find inspiration and encouragement in church services. Christian Walti describes how practices of singing and praying can lead to a group spirit. The group spirit is not a dogmatic statement, but bundles various religious beliefs and motivations together. Church practices bring about a concentration which enhances a community feeling.<sup>111</sup> Support has a mutual dimension, since people can give and receive support. Church provides both the means and motivation for social concern, although the community also is faced with boundaries. Conversations with like-minded people can give hope and a feeling of belonging. Through all of this, people can develop a relationship with each other and with God. Several survey respondents also indicate that their faith gives them the strength to deal with life difficulties (Q. 9).

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<sup>106</sup> A.P.J. Bernts, J.P. Berghuijs, *God in Nederland, 1966-2015*, Utrecht, Ten Have, 2016, pp. 23-26.

<sup>107</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 2 September 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Eline van Iperen, Hanny Moelands, *De bijbel, wat is dat voor een boek?: Van feest tot feest, Wat gebeurt er in de kerkdienst?: Samen helpen, samen dienen: Serie Ouder-kindercatechese*, Leeuwarden, GCO Fryslân, Katechetisch Centrum, 2000.

<sup>109</sup> Children catechism, Someren, 25 October 2012.

<sup>110</sup> *Plexat*, Someren, 26 October 2012.

<sup>111</sup> Christian Walti, 'Gottesdienst als Interaktionsritual: Eine videobasierte Studie zum agendenfreien Gottesdienst im Gespräch mit der Mikrosoziologie und der liturgischen Theologie', in: *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* (31), 2015, pp. 259-267; Jan Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie der Kirchenmitgliedschaft: Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung kirchlicher Beteiligung*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2000, pp. 356, 364.

## 6.5 | Protestant Church Community

*As a congregation we want to reflect Gods unconditional love, which creates space for the other.*<sup>112</sup>

The congregation presents itself as an open community, open to each other and open to outsiders. Words like 'space' and 'openness' are recurring terms in policy documents, church newsletters, the activity programme, and liturgy. During, the fieldwork I sensed a striving for accessibility. With a wide range of activities, the church community tries to appeal to different groups of people. Activities, such as meals, youth gatherings, and the ecumenical discussion group are open for everyone who is interested. Church members are also encouraged to bring guests.

*Missionally, I would describe our congregation as an inviting presence. We are there, we are open and people can come to us, but we do not actively come forward with something unique.*<sup>113</sup>

Although the ideal of an open, welcoming community is widely embraced, participants in the focus groups and survey wonder whether they, as a community, are living up to the ideal. In this part I analyse how people relate to the church community in various ways.

### 6.5.1 | From a Closed to an Open Community

The narratives of the survey and the focus group reveal how within the Protestant community processes of inclusion and exclusion take place. The participants in the focus group sketch a process of development from a closed to an open community. In this process, various groups needed to integrate: people from Asten and people from Someren, new residents and long-term inhabitants, *Hervormden* and *Gereformeerden*, young and old. For decades, the Protestant community consisted mainly of families who rented farms from the *Maatschappij van Welstand*.<sup>114</sup> From the 1970s people from elsewhere came to live in the villages. Eelco (PB22) experienced a more open climate in Asten than in Someren. Various respondents tell about being left alone, after the service, while groups of people used to stand outside the church or drink coffee together.<sup>115</sup> Henk (PB38), who has lived in Someren for many years, once heard while working in the community centre: "Good work, but you will never be one of us."<sup>116</sup> After the unification Asten and Someren needed to become one community. It has taken time for people from Asten to feel welcome in Someren and some still feel themselves guests in their own church in Someren.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>112</sup> "We willen als gemeente een weerspiegeling zijn van Gods onvoorwaardelijke liefde, die ruimte schept voor de ander." (Gerritsen, *Beleidsplan*, 2012, p. 3).

<sup>113</sup> "Missionair gezien zou ik onze gemeente omschrijven als 'uitnodigende presentie' (we zijn er, we staan open, de mensen mogen naar ons toekomen, maar wij treden niet actief naar buiten met iets eigens)". (Annual report minister, 2012-2013).

<sup>114</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, p. 370.

<sup>115</sup> Focus group II.

<sup>116</sup> "Goed werk, maar je zal nooit een van ons zijn." (Ibidem).

<sup>117</sup> Participant discussion evening, Someren, 14 April 2014 reacts to the statement 'The church knows about receiving and about hospitality.' "This should be the case, but I did not always experience it as such. [Coming] from Asten I have long had the feeling that I was not welcome. You are from the other side of the bridge." (Dat zou wel zo

Nevertheless, these respondents also acknowledge that much has changed. Ria (PB21) says: "I never see new people sitting alone at a table anymore."<sup>118</sup> It seems to have helped to start drinking coffee together after the services. Marten (PB5), who has lived in Someren all his life, recognizes the picture sketched and tells how he gradually learned to approach people:

*I think it also has to do with the times. In the past it was different, I think. We were not that open to each other, at least, not in my impression. If in the past someone, a stranger, came into church, I would not make contact right away. But now, when there are holidaymakers, I always join them, because it's a chance to hear something else, you hear stories about how things are going over there.<sup>119</sup>*

The minister seems to have played an important role in opening up the congregation. By regularly mentioning in church service the ideal of an open community, where everyone is accepted irrespective of religion, gender, race or place of residence, she has made it discussable. She warns against making assumptions and rushed judgements which can exclude people.<sup>120</sup> In the focus groups it becomes clear that there is a thin line between looking after each other and social control. A church community can have something oppressing and scary about it. People stress that they want to have the freedom to be themselves and to hold their own beliefs. The idea seems to be that it is necessary to have an open mind and attitude towards diversity in order to keep people together.

### 6.5.2 | Ways of Connecting and Belonging

When do people belong to church? The minister says that some people stand with one leg in the church, but even one toe is enough to belong. The message of Jesus crossed borders and is fundamental for the inclusivity of the church.<sup>121</sup> The narratives of the focus groups, surveys, but also mini-interviews during participant observation, reveal a whole range of ways in which people feel connected to (an aspect) of the church. These narratives provide insight into how belonging works and how various ways of connectedness can lead to tensions. A recurring tension comes up between church members who are strongly involved and those who are not. Active members regularly wonder why other people are not participating more in the community. A couple of focus group respondents tell how they drifted away from the church community. For some this was caused by disappointments and disagreements, for others the relevance of church for daily life became less clear. But

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moeten zijn, maar dat heb ik niet altijd ervaren. [Komend] Vanuit Asten toch lang het gevoel gehad niet welkom te zijn, je bent die van over de brug); PB7 in diary: "In the future we will visit the church in Someren less frequently. We still have the feeling of being a guest in our own congregation." ("We zullen in de toekomst wel minder vaak de kerk in Someren gaan bezoeken. We voelen ons nog steeds gast in eigen gemeente.").

<sup>118</sup> PB21 (FGIII): "Als er nieuwe mensen komen zitten ze eigenlijk nooit meer alleen aan een tafeltje."

<sup>119</sup> PB5 (FG III): "Ik denk dat het ook met de tijd te maken heeft, vroeger was dat gewoon anders. Denk ik. Toen waren we niet zo open naar mekaar toe, althans die indruk heb ik en dat is tegenwoordig wel. Ik was, vroeger, als er dan iemand, een vreemde in de kerk kwam, nou daar zocht ik ook in eerste instantie geen contact mee. Als ik er nu, als er nu een vakantieganger heb, dan ga ik altijd bij een vakantieganger zitten, want dan, ja dan hoor je eens wat anders, je hoort de verhalen hoe het daar gaat."

<sup>120</sup> Annual report minister, 2011-2012.

<sup>121</sup> Discussion evening, Someren, 14 April 2014.

although they are not very visible, people may still feel connected to the church. In this section I apply Walker's model (see chapter 5.1) to the narratives of respondents and we will see that although belonging is surrounded with ambivalent feelings, it is still an important concept.<sup>122</sup>

### Activities

The previous section revealed how distinctions are made between long-term residents and newcomers, between people from Asten and people from Someren. While I tried to grasp church life by visiting various activities I noticed that the events attracted various kinds of people. There is a group who regularly visits the church services, who also frequently go to other church activities during the week and are involved in the organisation. For them the worship services have a central place in community life. But this also forms a risk. There is a tendency to measure church involvement by church attendance. And, although this can be an indicator, appearances can be deceiving. It is hard to tell why people do not visit a worship service. Some people are too old or too sick to leave their house. Other people are not able to come as often as they would like, because they have to work regularly on Sundays.<sup>123</sup> This also leads to the question: to what extent does the Protestant congregation offer other possibilities for worship and celebration outside the Sunday morning services?

Gradually I also became acquainted with other people, who are seldom in church on Sunday morning, but are still connected through participating in activities. For example, the group of teenagers and their parents who meet in Plexat. The (two) monthly meetings on Friday evening are aimed at teenagers, but are also a meeting place for their parents who organise the events. Accessibility is an important issue for the organisers, who wonder about the best frequency for the gatherings. They want to avoid organising events too often, because that has the risk of becoming too demanding. On the other hand, the teenagers also need to see each other regularly to bond and feel familiar with each other. The organisers also notice some restraint among parents to push their children to visit the youth evenings.<sup>124</sup>

The variety of activities allows for diversity and gives room for people to believe in their own way, but also has the risk of dividing the community into age and interest groups. The worship services still function as moments where people from different groups can meet each other, but the community also looks for alternative ways to bring various groups together. A couple of times PCAS organised a running dinner. Some church members cook, while others come around to have one course, before going to another house for the next one. In the end, everyone gathers in the church for the desert, which is prepared by teenagers. Activities function as a social meeting place for various groups. Through participating in activities, they build up a feeling of belonging to a community.

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<sup>122</sup> David S. Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theological and Sociological perspectives', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins (ed.), *Rural Life and Rural Church, Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, Sheffield, 2012, pp. 105-119.

<sup>123</sup> Focus group I.

<sup>124</sup> Plexat, Someren, 26 October 2012.

### People

While the variety of activities can lead to a distinction between groups, there are also people who form a link between the various groups. Ria (PB 21) is a frequent church visitor, who is involved with *Plexat* and goes to discussion groups. She organises activities such as meditative painting and making symbolic flower arrangements. The flower arrangements she makes are often used in the worship services the following Sunday. Since Ria is also a member of the liturgical group, she is well informed about the themes of special Sundays. This brings us to the role of people in connecting to the church.

Respondents tell how the church community can offer a social network. In the survey people are mentioned as the primary source for feeling at home in the church community (app. C fig. 15.a). For people who have lived in the village all their life, the congregation is a group of family and friends. New residents can find contacts in the church community who help them to find a way in the village community. But in a village community, where you can meet fellow churchgoers in other capacities, conflicts outside the church can also affect the church community. Another example of how people can be a carrier for connecting is that having children can be a reason for becoming more involved with the church. Several respondents say they go to church because they want to pass something on to their children. When children grow up and no longer want to go to church, this can also affect the involvement of the parents.<sup>125</sup> Third, through interdenominational marriages Catholics have become guest members and come along with their Protestant spouses.<sup>126</sup> Other families try to divide their church attendance between the Protestant and Catholic church (app. C fig. D1).<sup>127</sup>

The social environment seems to have a strong influence on how people relate to the church. A volunteer of the *Ziekentriduüm* sums it up nicely when he says that a couple of decades ago it was socially unacceptable not to go to church. Now it is not socially acceptable to go to church. Young people who go to the (Catholic) church are not taken seriously.<sup>128</sup> The stories of people who are middle-aged and older form the mirror image of the narratives of teenagers. Several respondents, such as Bart (PB 15), who is in his fifties, and Lena (35), who is in her eighties, explain that their social life was primarily related to the church. They met their friends in church. Teenagers nowadays find hardly any people of the same age. Most of their friends do not go to church.<sup>129</sup>

### Events

Walker remarks that 'Some communities engender a significant amount of belonging through secular events.'<sup>130</sup> These can be occasional events, such as the concerts in the *Koepelkerk* in Lierop and the *Ziekentriduüm* (see chapter 7). In the focus groups this relation with church was not dominant, but various respondents mentioned that the church played

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<sup>125</sup> Focus group III.

<sup>126</sup> Game afternoon, Someren, 24 October 2012.

<sup>127</sup> Children catechism, Someren, 25 October 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Volunteer *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 4 September 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Focus group I; Interview PB35; Van Reenen, 'Brabantse Protestant', 29 May 2012.

<sup>130</sup> Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church', p. 115.



## A Protestant Church in Brabant

an important role around life events, such as the baptism of children, marriage jubilees and funerals. In the next chapter I show that the participation of the congregation in village events makes the Protestant church more visible in village life. After the minister was excluded by the diocese from participating in Holy Mass during the *Ziekentriduüm* her position in village society changed. She became 'our' minister in the whole village.

### *Place*

Finally, there is connection through place. In Asten a meditation group is loosely linked with the congregation through the church building. Once a month a group of women, all of them living in Asten, and most of them Catholic, gather in the small hall behind the church. One of them also sometimes participates in meditative painting and making flower arrangements, but she does not perceive herself as belonging to the Protestant church. Only Carla (PB 61) is Protestant and therefore the key holder. One of the participants remarks that there is no other place or opportunity in the village for these kinds of activities. Thus, by facilitating the meditation group the Protestant congregation offers a special service to a couple of non-Protestants and has some contacts outside the church community. The group uses the hall, because the church is too cold and there is more distracting noise coming in from the street. They sit around a table, covered with a cloth and burning candles. When the meditation begins the lights are turned off. One of the participants reads a text, and the silence for meditation is marked with a bang on a Tibetan scale. We sit silent for three quarters of an hour and then the meditation is closed with another text and some music. The women drink a cup of tea before going back home. Other church members have no idea what goes on during the meditations: one church member asked whether it was religious. I responded that during the meditation God was mentioned and that the group read a text about creation and listened to religious music.<sup>131</sup>

Place is also about distance, which can affect the feeling of connectedness. The closing of the church in Asten increases the distance to the church for people in Asten, who need to cross the bridge more often. For some this is no problem, but others feel this differently. A couple who feel closely connected with the church in Asten and participate fully in church life, still feel like guests when they come to their own church in Someren.<sup>132</sup> In section 6.6 I show how for some people their relation with the church changed after the building in Asten was closed. On the other hand, people can remain connected to a church community, even when the physical distance increases when they move away. The pastor in Lierop is sometimes asked to baptise children of adults who were raised in the village, but now live elsewhere. Also, Protestants, who moved to Groningen, still feel related to the church in Someren and visit occasionally. For people who are born in the villages, it is almost impossible to distinguish between being connected through place and through people.

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<sup>131</sup> Visit Asten-Someren, 13-14 November 2012; Meditation group, Asten, 13 November 2012.

<sup>132</sup> Diary closing of a church.

### 6.5.3 | Belonging through Believing

My research gives reason to distinguish a fifth way by which people feel connected with a church, namely belonging through faith – or maybe even through God. Walker also mentions the divine belonging from which the four ways of belonging arise.<sup>133</sup> Earlier I mentioned that survey respondents (app. C, fig. 15.a) indicate that they feel connected with other people, both inside and outside the church community, through the love of God. It has to do with feeling at home in the liturgy, in the theological beliefs and practices of the community. Even when people do not agree completely, they want to have the idea that there is space for their personal theology within the theology of the community.<sup>134</sup> The minister also finds it important to offer children the opportunity of telling in church about what they believe and what they do not.<sup>135</sup> They may not want to be associated with a faith in which they do not believe, but they are seriously thinking about different kinds of questions. When people feel that this space for their experience of faith is lacking, they stay away, as a couple of survey respondents indicate (app. C fig 15.c).

Nevertheless, is it necessary to go to church in order to believe? Some respondents say that faith needs to be practiced in the world, which is actually more important than going to church: you can go to church every Sunday, but if you do not practice it in the world around you, it loses its content. Several focus group participants state that it is perfectly possible to believe without belonging: You do not need the church (i.e. church service or church community) for your faith. However, this statement of believing without belonging is surrounded by two paradoxes. First, these respondents believe in belonging. Their stories reveal strong beliefs about belonging: such as the feeling or knowledge of belonging to God, being accepted in the eyes of God. Second, the same respondents indicate that their faith needs maintenance. Because their relations with the church community are disrupted they 'shop' in various churches in the region for their 'spiritual food'. At the same time people can also find sources for inspiration outside the church, in art, nature, and music.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, it seems that being connected with church services also stretches further than the group of people who are present in the church. Through prayer people who are absent are included in the community and there is also a connection to the worldwide community. This means that through faith a feeling of belonging together can transcend time and place.

### 6.5.4 | Dynamics of Belonging

Following from the divine origin of belonging, Walker says that belonging is not unidirectional but mutual; it has to come from both sides. For a real sense of belonging people need to feel some commitment and it has to be acknowledged. Walker points out that tensions within a congregations can be the result of a clash between various modes of belonging. 'People who are mainly activity led grumble that others do not join in as much as they

<sup>133</sup> Walker, 'Belonging to Rural Church', p. 11.

<sup>134</sup> Idem, p. 113.

<sup>135</sup> Annual report minister, 2012-2013.

<sup>136</sup> Focus groups; Discussion group, Someren, 14 April 2014.

should, or deprecate the genuineness of a belonging that is not activity based.<sup>137</sup> Because people have various ideas of what belonging means and entails misunderstandings can arise.

In the focus groups, it becomes clear that the perception of belonging or feeling connected differs from person to person. In the focus group Eelco (PB22) said that he no longer belongs to the congregation. The other participants reacted in surprise, because they see him regularly in the church services. They interpreted this as a sign of belonging, but to him it is not enough. He goes to church for his spiritual food, like you go to a café. But this clashes with his conception of church, because in his view church is more than a service like a supermarket, where you come to fulfil your needs and do not bring something. There is a feeling of loss, regret, and disappointment that the involvement is not what it used to be and that he no longer has the feeling of belonging to the congregation.

There are various dynamics at work here. It shows that the feeling of belonging as a feeling of being at home is not something which can be forced. It is something which lies in the eye of the beholder, in the experiences and the feelings that are raised by those experiences. At the same time belonging is something that you can work at. To become a part of the community you need to invest and participate. But even then, belonging is also something which other members of the community have to grant you. The example of Eelco shows that others may have the idea that he still belongs to the community, because he visits the church services regularly, while he no longer has this feeling. On the other hand, Henk (PB38) was closely involved in church life, and had the feeling that he belonged, but was told that he would never be one of them. These narratives not only show that belonging is mutual, but also that the mutuality is both subjective and relational. People have their personal subjective understanding of what they see as belonging, but belonging is also something which is established in a relationship. This has the interesting result that someone who thinks that he does not belong, still belongs in the eyes of other church members and that someone who thought he belonged, discovers that others do not always see it that way. This makes belonging a dynamic concept, because it is subject to negotiation.

### *Time*

Belonging is also dynamic in another way, in the sense that it is not constant, but subject to change over time. In response to the survey question (11.1) about why people feel at home in the community, the aspect of time occurs regularly. A group of locals feels at home, because they have visited the church all their lives. They grew up in the congregation and have lived in it. The group of new residents says that it has taken a long time to belong. It requires effort, patience and staying power to become part of the community. Participants in the focus groups describe belonging as a feeling, which can be strengthened by participating and by being actively involved.

*Throughout the years I've always had a certain interest in it, but only recently have I really become engaged in it, by actually doing things for the church (Nienke).<sup>138</sup>*

<sup>137</sup> Walker, *Belonging*, p. 113.

<sup>138</sup> \*En ik heb er altijd een zekere interesse in gehad gedurende de jaren heen. En pas sinds een paar jaar ben ik er echt

## Chapter 6

*For me, faith and church hadn't come much further than Sunday school. When I became a church council member, I had much to learn and the church really came alive (Tineke).<sup>139</sup>*

Several former church council members indicate that they learned much in the church council and that church and faith became more alive. However, being strongly engaged can also lead to disappointment, conflicts, and estrangement. Eelco (PB22), who for these reasons now feels a very weak tie with the congregation, is still loosely connected to the church in general by visiting church services and singing in a Catholic choir. These stories reveal that belonging to church is something which evolves over time. Periods of close involvement, as a member of the church council, can be followed by a time of stepping back.

*Afterwards, I stopped coming, also because of my demanding work. I pushed the church away for a long time: not now. Over the last six months, we have picked up where we left off. And yeah, going regularly you find out what you have missed for a while (Bart).*

*For me, it always happens in phases. Whenever I was asked to do a job or a task, I thought, oh yes, that's true, I'll do it, and I would start going to church again. But when the job was done, I would think, now I'll leave it for a bit (Magda)<sup>140</sup>*

This evolving of belonging coincides with Hermelink's remark that the way people's belonging develops depends to a significant extent on people's life circumstances and story.<sup>141</sup> The church can play different roles in various phases of life. When people are studying and starting to work the link with church can become very weak, partly because people move from one place to another. With small children, the involvement in the church can become stronger. But with changing needs and worldviews, and changing use of time people can also drift away. What is surprising to note is that even though half of the survey respondents visit the church services sporadically and three quarters hardly ever go to an activity, still 75 percent of the survey respondents indicate that they read the church newsletter (app. C fig C, fig. E1). This again illustrates how the circle of people who are related to the church might be broader than is often thought.

### *Belonging and Quality of Life*

Thus, ways of belonging or feeling connected can alternate. In one period the relation with other people may be dominant, while later on place or events might become more important. This also means that a disrupted relation with other people or a lack of suitable

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mee bezig als in dat ik ook echt dingen doe voor de kerk." (Nienke - PB 51, Focus group I).

<sup>139</sup> "Geloof en kerk waren voor mij nooit veel verder gekomen dan de zondagsschool. Toen ik ouderling werd, moest ik zo veel leren en begon de kerk echt te leven." (Tineke - PB 46, preparation Focus groups).

<sup>140</sup> "Na dat gebeuren ben ik gestopt ook vanwege mijn drukke werkzaamheden. Heb ik een hele tijd die kerk weer even aan de kant geduwd. Van nu even niet. En nou laatste half jaar of zo. Zijn we de boel weer aan het oppakken. En ja, regelmatig gaan en dan kom je er wel weer achter wat je een tijdje gemist hebt." (Bart - PB15 FG1); "Bij mij is dat altijd met periodes, en als ik dan weer gevraagd werd voor een klusje of een taakje, dat dacht ik o ja, da's waar, ik zal het maar weer eens doen en dan ging ik ook weer naar de kerk. Maar was dat taakje afgelopen, dan dacht ik nou maar even weer niet." (Magda - PB 50, Focus group III); Henk de Roest, *Ik geloof het wel... : Een empirisch theologisch onderzoek onder 150 kerkenraden en 56 oud-ambtsdragers naar verminderde participatie van oud-kerkenraadsleden aan de kerkdienst*, Utrecht, 2011.

<sup>141</sup> Jan Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie der Kirchenmitgliedschaft: Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung kirchlicher Beteiligung*, Göttingen, 2000, pp. 347, 354.

activities can result in a loss of feeling connected. What this overview makes clear is that a church can have both a positive and a negative effect on the quality of life of both the community and of individuals. People can become hurt in a church community, feel excluded and become overburdened. Church is also a factor in social segregation, between Protestants and Catholics, between church and non-churchgoers.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, church and faith are also powerful forces in bringing people together, questioning people about their behaviour, motivating people to help each other, and raising questions about social exclusion. The church is not unique in this ambivalence; it also occurs in other contexts. But as one of the local research committee members remarks about a conflict, which has caused the estrangement of a group from the congregation:<sup>143</sup>

*In the end, of course, you are a church community, and you should be sitting together in a church, but you have a group missing. It has hurt people from both sides and it does not feel good for a lot of people. They would like it to be different, especially the last bit [...] We should resolve this conflict and say it has been very unpleasant for both sides, but we should be able to forgive each other and just act normally towards each other. And that is why it's so painful, that despite being a community of faith, we are not able to achieve it. (Bart)<sup>144</sup>*

My research demonstrates that belonging is a dynamic concept, which develops over time. The narratives provide insight into how connecting and belonging work, are established, develop, can diminish and can be revived over time. But what happens to belonging when a place of worship disappears?

### 6.6 | The Closing of a Church

At the end of May 2013, a serious buyer came forward for the church building in Asten. In June the congregation was informed about it. This announcement came as a surprise for some members when they read it in the local newspaper or heard rumours in the village. The closing itself was carefully prepared. From a pastoral perspective, it was obvious that the closing could not be ignored. In the church newsletter, the minister compared the closing with a couple who live apart. When they decide to live together in the house of one the partners, they need to find a new balance in their relationship. This was also the case in Asten and Someren.<sup>145</sup> The church council decided to publish a memorial book about the history of the church, with ample opportunity for churchgoers to share their memories.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>142</sup> J. Verrips, *En boven de polder, de hemel: Een antropologische studie van een Nederlands dorp, 1850-1971*, Groningen, Wolters-Noordhoff 1981. Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>143</sup> Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, p. 29.

<sup>144</sup> "Nou, uiteindelijk heb je natuurlijk in een kerkgemeenschap waarbij je met z'n allen in een kerk zou moeten zitten dat je een groep mist. En dat het mensen beschadigd heeft van twee kanten en dat is natuurlijk, dat voelt niet goed bij een hoop mensen. Ze zouden het zo graag anders zien. Vooral dat laatste. [...] zo'n conflict zou je echt uit de wereld moeten hebben, dan moet je met z'n allen zeggen van ja, jongens het is, we hebben aan twee kanten is het zo geweest, het is heel vervelend gebeurd en we zouden elkaar moeten kunnen vergeven en weer gewoon met elkaar om kunnen gaan. En dat is de pijn dat we dat in een *geloofsgemeenschap* geen eens voor elkaar krijgen." (Bart - PB15, Church council meeting, Someren, 3 October 2013, Discussion about results focus groups).

<sup>145</sup> *De Brug*, January 2012.

<sup>146</sup> Gerritsen, *Gedenkboekje*, pp. 16-32; Harry Bisseling, Henk de Roest, Peet Valstar, *Meer dan hout en steen: Handboek voor sluiting en herbestemming van kerkgebouwen*, Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2011, pp. 268, 286.

These memories were also to have a prominent place in the farewell service. Plans were made to take various objects from the church building in Asten along with the congregation to Someren.<sup>147</sup> I asked a couple of churchgoers to keep a diary about how they experienced this period.

Tineke (PB46) writes that she will miss the flexibility of the space, which is lacking in Someren. She will also miss the room behind the church where many stories, emotion, tears, and laughter have been shared. For Doortje (PB63) the church building has been a place of refuge in hard times, where she could leave her problems and carry on. It has been a place where she liked to come, could celebrate faith and reflect. Eelco (PB22) experiences the closing of the church as the end of the community and a defeat for Protestant Church existence. But he also says that despite the closing, faith remains alive and God's presence can still be felt. The closure urges the church to find new ways of experiencing and sharing faith. He will not miss the building so much, but the experience of cycling to church together with a group of people. Mieke (PB7) fears that through the closure the church community of Asten will fall apart. They will miss a spacious church building, where memories lie of funerals and jubilees. Respondents write how their experience of sitting in church has changed: "You are already saying *goodbye*." Doortje (PB63) describes this period as talking to someone who will soon die. These narratives cohere with De Roest's description of church closure as a mourning process.<sup>148</sup>

### *The Leave-taking Worship Service in Asten*

On the last Sunday the church is full. The minister chooses her words carefully, paying attention to the meaning of a church building as a house of God, which evokes an attitude of worship. Religious buildings attract people who are searching for God, the essence of life and what transcends people. She says how this church has been a place where people could bring their sorrows, fears, joy, gratitude, and guilt. The sermon reveals a theology of space and openness. The church is described as a place where people can be themselves, without being judged, a place for praise, for singing, to find courage, empowerment, and keep hope alive. The notion of church as a house of God reminds people of making space for God: for the possibility that there are other options, for differences, learning to look through God's eyes, church as a space for God, for the mystery, but also space for God in life and in relationships, God who never excludes people. In the prayers, the minister gives thanks for this place where people have experienced so much and where they found traces of God's presence, of the mystery, where people were empowered and which is connected with people's life stories.<sup>149</sup>

The closing of the building is embodied in a couple of rituals and gestures: an older man closes the Bible and lovingly pats on it. The woman who leads children's catechism closes the font and a deacon pours the wine from the cup back into the jug. Then they hold each

<sup>147</sup> Church council minutes, September 2013; De Roest, *Meer dan hout en steen*, p 262.

<sup>148</sup> Henk de Roest, "Losing a Common Space to Connect": An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods', in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* (17:2), 2013, pp. 295-312, there pp. 307-308; Bisseling, *Meer dan hout en steen*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>149</sup> Sermon closing service church Asten, 18 August 2013.

other's hands, standing around the Easter candle. The candle is not blown out, but they nod towards it. After the hymn *U zij de glorie (Thine is the Glory)* the quintet plays Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus', the last sounds in the building. People leave the church through the front door and gather outside in a semi-circle (see image 10).<sup>150</sup> During the trumpet song, *The Last Post*, people wipe away a tear. After a moment of silence, everybody goes back into the church, for a personal moment of goodbye. People can light a candle and place it in a favourite spot in the church. Candles stand on chairs, the pulpit, and the windowsill as silent reminders of people's experiences.

The closing of and farewell to the building was surrounded and embodied in various transition rituals: the pouring back of the wine, the closing of the font and the Bible, which ended the use of the building as a place of worship. The community standing in front of the church building in a semi-circle offered the opportunity for the congregation as a whole to say goodbye. And, finally, the personal individual farewell by placing candles in places which were meaningful for people. According to De Roest, rituals like these give space and time for emotions.<sup>151</sup> To experience these emotions, it is important that people can participate themselves; vicarious acting by others is not sufficient. Finally, these kinds of rituals strengthen the bonds between the individual and the community.

The reactions afterwards indeed confirm how the leave-taking service offered space for people's feelings and strengthened community ties. Carla (PB61) was full of praise about the service and the well-chosen words of the minister. "Singing the round almost made you float," she enthused.<sup>152</sup> Although after the unification the closing of the building was inevitable, Bart (PB15) is grateful that it was not also necessary to make a choice between the church buildings at that time. That would have been too much for the congregation, especially in Asten. Now people from Someren also feel the pain of loss and for them the church service was instrumental in raising this awareness.<sup>153</sup> Doortje (PB63) was glad about the recognition from someone from Someren who said that they until then had not realised what the closing meant to the community in Asten. Tineke (PB46) found herself a couple of weeks later talking to people, with whom she had hardly had any contact before. She also appreciated that the church council asked her to continue her cleaning work in the church in Someren. So the closing also created new bonds.

### *Meditation Group Drifting Away*

Asten lives on in the name of the congregation (Protestant congregation Asten-Someren), but of course the closure also affected church life. After a church building is closed there is a considerable risk that the congregation will fall apart.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, some people in Asten did stop visiting the church for some time. When the meditation group learnt that the building was to be closed they asked themselves where they would continue: in the church in Someren or in Asten at members' homes? They reconsidered their relation with the congrega-

<sup>150</sup> John Graat, 'Bijbel na 188 jaar dicht in Protestantse kerk Asten', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 18 August 2013.

<sup>151</sup> De Roest, "Losing a Common Space to Connect", pp. 302, 310.

<sup>152</sup> "En bij het zingen van de canon ging je bijna zweven." (Diary Project).

<sup>153</sup> Closing church Asten, 18 October 2013.

<sup>154</sup> Bisseling, *Meer dan hout en steen*, pp. 258-262.

gation and decided to use the church in Someren, because they would regret it if the connection with the church were to become weaker.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, the interior of a church offers a different atmosphere than a living room. The group said goodbye with a walking meditation through the church. Carla (PB61) said that she would miss the atmosphere. The flower table was taken along to the church in Someren to place the candle on. However, the transfer to Someren was not a success. The simultaneous use of the building by other groups turned out to disturb the group in their meditation: the running of children through the corridor, people talking in the kitchen, or entering the community room where they sit in semi-darkness. After a few months Carla decided to stop and a year later the group left the church in Someren. Carla has lost contact with the group and does not know whether it still exists. She regrets that there is no longer a connection with the Protestant congregation anymore.<sup>156</sup> The development illustrates how the loss of a physical meeting place can lead to the loss of a social meeting place.

Although Carla (PB61) does not visit the church in Someren, there is still a connection with the congregation when the contact person brings flowers on her birthday and they have a chat. And in some way the service once provided by the Protestant congregation still has effect. Carla says that she still finds much inspiration in meditation. Although previously she had read about meditation, she actually learnt to do it in the meditation group. She still incorporates moments of silence in her daily life, alone or with others. She tells about a friend whom she accompanies regularly to hospital. Or she rereads texts that she used for the meditation session.

*Then we also have these moments of silence, sometimes we just sit quietly together, to find some rest, some reassurance. [...] There is one poem, or actually a prayer, which is so beautiful that I get a lump in my throat. (Carla)<sup>157</sup>*

### *After the Closing*

The church building is now used by a business that rents the church for different activities: receptions, weddings, concerts, talks and lectures, and exhibitions. In the spring of 2016 Carla spoke with her neighbour who runs the church and she told her that they are booked until November. Carla is very enthusiastic about the new use, although the contrast is sometimes sharp. It is strange to realize that in a place where you used sit or walk so quietly, people are now leaping about during carnival parties. The other respondents are also positive about the new use. The interior has remained much the same. In their perception the building remains a kind of church, because of its use for funerals, marriages, and other meetings. Especially interesting are the so-called Pecha Kucha evenings, when people talk about their dreams and ideas, illustrated by twenty images.<sup>158</sup> It raises the question of whether the congregation could not have broadened their function in village society.

<sup>155</sup> Idem, p. 258.

<sup>156</sup> Telephone call PB 61, March 2016.

<sup>157</sup> "Dan hebben we ook die momenten van silte, soms zitten we gewoon zwiwend bij elkaar om wat rust te vinden, wat geruststelling [...] Er is een gedicht, of eigenlijk een gebed, dat is zo mooi, daar krijg ik een brok van in mijn keel." (Telephone call PB 61, March 2016).

<sup>158</sup> Anita van der Geest-Buinen, 'Derde pechu kucha In de gloria', *Siris*, 26 February 2015.



The closing made people think that cooperation with the Catholic church is necessary to keep something of church alive in the villages. The minister still has regular contact with the fathers of the Holy Heart convent in Asten. Every year a couple of ecumenical discussion evenings take place in the convent. The church community still has some contacts with the village, but these are rather marginal. Representatives of the church council visit the New Year's reception of the municipality and are invited for Remembrance day.<sup>159</sup> Although it is questionable whether the Protestant congregation was very visible before the building was closed, after the closing the church has virtually disappeared. This is also because the parsonage stands in Someren and the minister does not do her shopping in Asten. Since the church council does not have enough human resources to pay attention to the question of how to remain visible in Asten as a Protestant church community, the focus on village life tends to be directed towards Someren and not so much towards Asten.<sup>160</sup> Without a physical meeting place it seems more difficult to develop and maintain contacts. As I show in the next chapter, most church-meets-village events take place in Someren.

### Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I explored the recent processes and developments in a Protestant congregation in rural Brabant. The Protestant church community has always had a minority position in village society, which is reflected in the small churches. Church decline was also felt in Asten and Someren and therefore the congregation was forced to close the church in Asten. The loss of place led to a loss of community. An important issue for the church council is the lack of volunteers to keep the organisation running. Another recurring subject is the question of whether there are possibilities for more cooperation with other Protestant churches in the region.

Underneath these practical considerations, there are also fundamental questions asked about the value of a church in terms of worship, support, and personal development of worldview and life attitude. Church members wonder how to form an inclusive and meaningful community, where people of different backgrounds are welcome and people feel included, regardless of age or where they come from. They sometimes struggle with a degree of ecclesial uneasiness. How can you look after each other? How do you find a balance between interference and social control on the one hand and apparent indifference on the other? And how can the congregation as a church reach out to the village community? The focus on survival reinforces an internal focus, which decreases attention for the role of the church in both villages. In the next chapter I examine where and when the Protestant congregation appears in village life.

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<sup>159</sup> Church minutes, May 2013; December 2013.

<sup>160</sup> Annual report minister 2014.



# Chapter 7

## The Public face of the Protestant congregation in the Village Context

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I gave an impression of church life in the Protestant congregation of Asten and Someren. It became clear that the church can contribute to people's personal quality of life by providing worship, support, empowerment, and reflection. People relate to the Protestant congregation in various ways, which can be enriching and offers room for diversity, but sometimes leads to tensions. When conflicts arise or people feel excluded this also affects their well-being. The exploration also revealed that the focus on survival and the running of the organisation leads to an internal orientation. In the 2014 survey, respondents doubt whether the congregation has a wider significance for the village apart from the charming church building, contact between individual church members within the village community, and the occasional funeral or marriage. Thus, the provisional conclusion of the previous chapter was that the Protestant congregation hardly plays a role in the village societies of Asten and Someren.

Nevertheless, there is still a longing among church members to do more outreach by showing social concern for the wider community. The minister thinks that village society notices nothing of the diaconal work of the congregation and wonders whether it could be made more visible:<sup>161</sup>

*Whatever the church of the future will look like, and on whatever scale that will be, she will (if she wants to deserve the name 'church') be a movement of people who want to carry on living in that tension, who come together to celebrate what can be celebrated, and who inspire and encourage each other to keep staying ahead of the times. And perhaps it's in this anticipation of what is to come that she will find allies moving in the same direction: other religions, but also human rights movements, peace movements, refugee work, Médecins Sans Frontiers, environmental organisations, the foodbank, etc.<sup>162</sup>*

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<sup>161</sup> Annual report minister, 2012-2013.

<sup>162</sup> "Hoe de kerk van de toekomst er ook uit zal zien, en op wat voor schaal dat ook zal zijn, ze zal (als ze de naam 'kerk' waard wil zijn) een beweging van mensen zijn die het willen volhouden te leven in die spanning, die bijeenkomen om te vieren wat er te vieren valt, en die elkaar inspireren en bemoedigen om vooruit te blijven lopen wat er nog

## Chapter 7

Could this be the beginning of a change of perspective, focussing less on the possible disappearance of church life, and more on what is happening in the village context where "allies might be moving in the same direction". So, what happens if I change perspective and take my point of departure in village life? I start with a bird's-eye view of what is going on in the surrounding villages, now that the Catholic church is gradually disappearing. By focussing on the context various cooperation partners of the Protestant congregation appear on the stage. There are ecumenical contacts with the Parish of Lierop, the Holy Heart Convent in Asten, the Catholic choir *Bonum Tenete* and around the *Ziekentriduüm*, which prove to be important for the visibility of the Protestant congregation in village life. Besides ecumenical contacts, the Protestant congregation has contact with a cultural committee in Lierop, a cooperation school, and a nursing home in Someren. Therefore, in this chapter I examine the context of the Protestant congregation and investigate how the congregation is engaged with the worlds of culture, education, and care. The explorations in chapter 4 indicated that as a result of the deinstitutionalisation of religion, religious practices are transferring to other domains in society. In this chapter I give several examples of practices which seem to point to the presence of sacred consciousness, such as the celebrations in a school, the *Koepelkerk* concerts, and the services in the context of care. This chapter reveals that the involvement of the church in these practices is subject to debate and sometimes difficult to grasp. An analysis of what people try to achieve in these deinstitutionalized religious practices, and what meaning is attributed to them, can help to answer the question of what church and the Christian tradition have to offer to the quality of life in a village society.

An ambivalence can be detected around religious practices in the public domain of village life. This could already be sensed in the discussion about renting the Protestant church for other activities mentioned in the previous chapter. In 7.1 I sketch the context of south eastern Brabant and how the position of the Catholic church has changed over the last few decades. This helps to understand some of the ambivalent feelings surrounding religious practices. On the one hand, alternative moments for ritual and reflection are embraced; on the other hand, these practices meet with questions about religiosity in the supposed neutrality of public space. In 7.2 I describe how ecumenical contacts between the Protestant and Catholic churches are developing. The following sections explore how church becomes intertwined with other fields of practice. Section 7.3 focusses on the field of care, by looking at the involvement of the Protestant church in the *Ziekentriduüm*, the nursing home and in welfare work. Section 7.4 explores the relation between the church and the school. Finally, section 7.5 sketches how the churches use cultural repertoires to address the theme of refugees and how, vice versa, a concert committee in Lierop adopts liturgical forms to offer meditative concerts.

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niet is. En wie weet vindt ze bij dat vooruitlopen op wat er nog niet is wel bondgenoten in andere bewegingen die dezelfde kant uit gaan: andere godsdiensten, maar ook mensenrechtenorganisaties, vredesbewegingen, vluchtelingenwerk, Artsen zonder Grenzen, milieubeschermingsorganisaties, de voedselbank enz." ('Uit de pastorie', *De Brug* (49:9), October 2014).

## 7.1 | A Catholic Province

North Brabant is a province where more than half of the population is Catholic.<sup>163</sup> In the last decades the position of the Catholic church in village society has changed significantly. From an institution which puts its mark on all aspects of daily life, the Catholic church is now rapidly becoming marginalised, church attendance is declining and church buildings have to close. A couple of decades ago Protestants and Catholics may have lived in the same village, but they also lived in separate worlds. Gradually contacts between the Protestant congregation and the Catholic church have increased. Since the Protestant congregation mainly becomes visible through ecumenical contacts with the Catholic church it is important to gain more in-depth knowledge of the role of the Catholic church in village society. Furthermore, this exploration serves as an example to show how the marginalisation of the Catholic church has shaped the way people relate to religious practices in the public domain.

### *The Church Central in Village Society*

The Protestant church forms a small minority in a predominantly Catholic area. In Someren 0.9 percent of the population is Protestant and in Asten it is 2.5 percent. In 2015 Catholics make up 69 percent of the population in Asten and 86.8 percent in Someren, the most Catholic municipality in Brabant.<sup>164</sup> The turn of the twentieth century saw the flourishing of the Catholic church. Between 1892 and 1919 seventy new parishes developed and by 1940 213 new chapels and churches had been consecrated.<sup>165</sup> Many young men went to seminary to become priests, and a large number of them were attracted to the adventurous existence of a missionary. Until 1965 dozens of men received their novitiate in the Holy Heart convent in Asten, before they were sent out to Africa or Asia. Fifty years later some of them returned to the convent, which has now become a nursing home. The Holy Heart congregation started in 1919 with the cultivation of district called *De Peel*. The village of Someren-Heide became an independent parish in 1935 and, when the village grew, a large new church was built in 1960.<sup>166</sup> The sexton relates how the whole village helped by raising money and carrying sand. On Sunday morning the broad square in front of the church was filled with people; this was the place where people met each other.<sup>167</sup> Respondents from the male choir *Bonum Tenete* tell me that every Sunday there were three masses, and people used to start every weekday with morning mass.<sup>168</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic church laid the foundation for the present welfare work in the area. Roman Catholic congregations and orders started nursing homes, sent out district nurses and founded nursery schools and schools for boys and girls. Pastors

<sup>163</sup> Hans Schmeets, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland, 2010-2015*, Den Haag, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016, p. 7.

<sup>164</sup> Stijn Fens, 'Zelf missiegebied geworden, God in het land, Somerse roomsen', *Trouw*, 8 September 2015.

<sup>165</sup> Harry Verdijseldonck, Jisca Adriaanse, *Heilige Maria Presentatie te Asten: Een cultuurhistorisch kerkbezoek*, Utrecht, Matrijs, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>166</sup> Jean Coenen, *Hertog Jan en de Zummerse mens: Een overzicht van de geschiedenis van Someren en Lierop*, Someren, Gemeente Someren, p. 458.

<sup>167</sup> Meeting KBO (Katholieke Ouderen bond) Someren-Heide, 25 October 2012.

<sup>168</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, Someren, 14 April 2015.

## Chapter 7

were involved in council housing projects in villages and started youth work. Many cultural societies, such as brass bands and theatre groups, which were started by clerics, held their meetings in parish houses. The sisters of Lierop started a domestic science school, which attracted students from all over the country.<sup>169</sup> Jaap, the conductor of a male choir in Someren (PB 71), describes how until the 1980s the Catholic church was involved with every aspect of daily life:

*Every society, whether it was the youth association, or the association of farmers or merchants, had their own spiritual advisor. [...] The pastor was also the president of the schoolboard. He was simply the boss, not just of spiritual life but also of secular life. And each week those chaplains came into every classroom for at least an hour of religious education to the children.*<sup>170</sup>

Jaap worked in Lierop at the school and rehearsed songs with the children for the church services. He is sometimes still accosted by former pupils who appreciated his efforts. This whole system meant that the Catholic church played a significant role in local welfare work and contributed to the quality of life.<sup>171</sup>

### *Marginalisation*

Nevertheless, times have changed and the number of churchgoers is declining rapidly. In one generation, the *Rijke Roomse leven* (Rich Roman life) has disappeared.<sup>172</sup> People in their seventies say that their children 'have nothing' with church and religion. This means that church choirs receive hardly any new members and have to stop. The average age of the male choir in Someren is 74. The involvement of the Catholic church in social affairs, such as housing, became less accepted.<sup>173</sup> Besides, the parishes lacked the staff to be represented in all areas of society, since the number of vocations dropped dramatically.

Jaap (PB71): *We used to have five clergymen in the village. But after they left, religious education was transferred to the teachers. But many of them no longer attended church. They could not staff the school with Catholic teachers, not anymore. [...]*

Heleen (PB 37): *There are schools that teach nothing about religion, nothing at all – but there are also schools, like the Mariaschool, that do.*

Jaap (PB 71): *Some school have a few communicants, but not so many.*<sup>174</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 350, 355, 361-361, 372, 455, 473-475; Interview Father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>170</sup> Jaap PB 71: "Elke vereniging, jongerenvereniging, of het nou uit de boerenstand was of middenstand, die hadden allemaal hun aalmoezenier, geestelijk adviseur. [...] De pastoor was voorzitter van het schoolbestuur hè, was gewoon de baas hè, in feite ook over het wereldlijk leven, zeg maar, niet alleen het geestelijke. En die kapelaans kwamen elke week in elke klas minstens een uur godsdienstles voor de kinderen." (Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015).

<sup>171</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, p. 346.

<sup>172</sup> Idem, p. 467.

<sup>173</sup> Toon Cortooms, *De Koepel* (8:2), October 1970, <http://www.slaponline.nl/archief%20histori.html>, accessed 28 January 2016. (Website for village affairs of Lierop in North Brabant. The website seems to be the successor of the *Koepel*. The website provides news items, personal announcements. People can post questions, requests and announcements.)

<sup>174</sup> Jaap PB 71: "We hadden vroeger 5 geestelijken hier in het dorp. Maar toen dat niet meer lukte, toen ze het aantal niet meer hadden, toen werd dat overgedragen aan de docenten, nou, d'r waren er toen al heel veel die niet kerks meer waren. Want anders dan konden ze school niet bemand krijgen met katholieke onderwijzers, niet meer." [...] Heleen PB 37: "Er zijn scholen die toen totaal niks meer aan godsdienst, helemaal niks, maar er zijn ook scholen, net als de Mariaschool, toch nog wel."

Pastor Janssen in the nursing home notices that more people decide not to visit the church for a funeral, but instead go straight to the crematorium. People search for a neutral space like a community centre or one of the new funeral auditoria. The funeral directors are taking over the role of priests by reading a poem and playing a piece of music.<sup>175</sup>

### *Unfamiliarity and Estrangement*

The growing unfamiliarity with church and religion leads to a struggle about the meaning of the Catholic identity.<sup>176</sup> Although the link with the Catholic church is weak and sometimes even non-existent, many clubs, and associations still have 'Catholic' in their name. This increasingly leads to discussions about whether the name still reflects the identity of the school or association.<sup>177</sup> Recently the Catholic Women's Guild changed its name to *Vrouwen centraal* (Women central). The board thought the name was too old fashioned and created an unwelcome association with church, which is not attractive for younger members who have no relation with the church.<sup>178</sup> The same discussion is going on in the *Unie Katholieke Bond voor Ouderen - Unie KBO* (Catholic Union for elderly). Since there are also members who are Protestant or have no religious affiliation it is stated that a more neutral name is required, so that everyone can have access.<sup>179</sup> These discussions reveal that the ecclesial identity raises questions about accessibility and inclusivity. People seem to feel that an explicit affiliation with the church might raise the threshold, especially for younger generations. To avoid people feeling excluded a more neutral or general name is preferred. This trend seems to indicate a tendency to remove all reminders of the pillarisation of society. These issues of social inclusion and accessibility arise more frequently.

Unfamiliarity with the church is growing, since the bishops and the new generation of priests are adhering more strictly to the rules of the Catholic Church.<sup>180</sup> Hymns by the poet and former priest Huub Oosterhuis are not allowed in the Catholic liturgy. People are hurt when priests refuse to use non-religious music, such as pop songs during funerals. In the experience of respondents, the liturgical clock seems to have gone back fifty years in time. Teenagers who happen to visit funeral services find it ridiculous when only Latin songs are sung.<sup>181</sup> The exclusion of people from communion because of sexual inclination or religious background meets with incomprehension.<sup>182</sup> This leads to estrangement from the church, which is further increased by the scandals surrounding the sexual abuse of children by clergy. The interview respondents from the male choir expect that in ten years' time the church will have disappeared.

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Jaap PB 71: "Die hebben nog wel een paar communicanten, maar ook niet zo veel meer." (Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015).

<sup>175</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015.

<sup>176</sup> In a conversation during the *Ziekentriduum* (2 September 2014), a Protestant church member tells me that people are struggling with their Catholic identity; they no longer dare to be themselves, they think they have to go to church.

<sup>177</sup> Interview father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>178</sup> Telephone call PB 14, 2 February 2016.

<sup>179</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>180</sup> 'Kerk die bescheiden wil zijn verliest functie', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 16 January 2013; Ferd Raaijmakers, 'Hoogwaardige excellentie, Monseigneur', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 22 September 2012.

<sup>181</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>182</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015; 'Uitsluiting dominee (2)', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 13 September 2012; Peter van Overbruggen, 'Leiders kerk mogen niemand uitsluiten', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 25 September 2012.

### Parish Redivision

In the meantime, the Catholic church is taking measures to deal with the lack of ordained priests. In various parishes, the number of masses has been scaled down.<sup>183</sup> The fathers from Asten lead masses for the whole region. While in the past priests from the Netherlands travelled to other continents, now priests from Africa and India are coming to the Netherlands.<sup>184</sup> In 2014 a new priest from India came to Someren. He makes an effort to do his work well, but the language barrier is a problem. His sermons are sent to him from elsewhere, because he cannot write in Dutch.<sup>185</sup> The bishops give priority to masses led by an ordained priest over masses in as many places as possible, which would be more easily accessible. Former missionaries such as father Maartens from Asten and pastor Groeneveld from Lierop, plead for involving lay people in leading local communities and keeping worship going.<sup>186</sup> They draw on their experience as missionaries, when a large area had to be served by a single priest.

*There's a mother church in one of the larger towns, with a church office for the administration and where meetings take place. Then there's an education centre where catechists are trained. And around these there are ten, twenty or sometimes thirty chapels in all kinds of neighbourhoods, hamlets, and villages where people gather. The missionary, who is often positioned 20 or 30 kilometres away, visits once every month. But with the support of the catechists they organise everything themselves: the sick are visited, the dead are buried, children receive religious education, and people gather on Sunday and celebrate events, have a prayer service.<sup>187</sup>*

Father Maartens thinks that house congregations will develop: small groups who want to celebrate and experience the gospel in their own community. This idea is at odds with the current policy of the diocese, which is executing a parochial redivision.<sup>188</sup> This means that since May 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, Asten, Someren and all the surrounding villages have been brought into one parish, where there used to be eight.<sup>189</sup> The diocese aims at limiting the number of locations where the mass is celebrated (*vieringplaatsen*) to unburden the small number of clerics.<sup>190</sup> This parish redivision has led to protests in the whole region.<sup>191</sup> It is expected that

<sup>183</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Parochiebestuur wil kerktoren behouden', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 14 July 2014.

<sup>184</sup> Interview father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>186</sup> Interviews father Maartens, pastor Groeneveld, pastor Janssen (pseudonyms).

<sup>187</sup> Interview father Maartens: "Een moederkerk, dus en dat is dan meestal wel in een grotere plaats, en daarbij heb je een secretariaat waar de administratie gebeurt, waar de vergaderingen worden gehouden, je hebt een vormingscentrum waar catechisten worden gevormd dan daaromheen heb je dan 10, 20, soms 30 kapellen in alle buurtschappen of dorpjes of wijken en daar komen de mensen van die wijk, van die buurt bij elkaar en die missionaris die daar ver weg zit, want die zit 20, 30 kilometer verder, die komt er één keer in de maand. Maar onder leiding van een catechist organiseren zij alles. De zieken worden bezocht en de doden worden begraven en de kinderen worden voorbereid op, hè, krijgen godsdienstonderwijs, zondags komen ze bij elkaar en vieren met elkaar de dingen, houden een gebedsdienst."

<sup>188</sup> 'Fusie van 4 parochies in Reusel-De Mierden', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 4 June 2012.

<sup>189</sup> 'Parochiefusies op handen in regio', *Siris*, 7 December 2012; *Parochie heilige Franciscus*, <https://www.rkfranciscus.nl/?p=info&ids=geschiedenis>, accessed 24 November 2017; 'De parochie van Lierop', [http://www.deroerom.nl/pagina/643/de\\_parochie\\_van\\_lierop](http://www.deroerom.nl/pagina/643/de_parochie_van_lierop), accessed 24 November 2017.

<sup>190</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Parochiebestuur wil kerktoren behouden', *Siris*, 14 July 2014.

<sup>191</sup> 'Sluiting dreigt voor Antoniuskerk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 8 March 2012; "'Kruistocht" tegen sluiting kerk Soerendonk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 31 August 2012; "'Oneigenlijk argument voor sluiting kerk'", *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 8 October 2012; 'Lierop vreest voor einde van parochie', *Siris*, 10 April 2012.



this will lead to the closing of churches in the smaller villages, which means that church life will take place on a regional level and people have to travel further to visit a church service. Various people are sceptical about the developments and think that it will further estrange people from the church.<sup>192</sup>

*When seven parishes disappear and become one large church in a city or principle town and people have to go there, of course, they don't. They don't feel like they are a part of the service, they don't celebrate together. They feel like objects that are handed some inspiration and sacraments and then sent on their way. In the small communities everybody is involved. One is sexton, the other cleans, another brings the flowers, and people are rehearsing songs and someone else is a lay leader who prepares the sermon.<sup>193</sup>*

In some places in the province of Brabant church members started their own faith community after it became clear that their parish church would be closed down. They believe that their congregation is vital enough to continue.<sup>194</sup>

### A Threat to Social Cohesion

An example of such a vital parish is Lierop. Although the pastor also sees that the number of churchgoers is declining, the church still plays a central role in the village. The village is built around a junction, where the village shop, café, school, and the late-Roman church, with Byzantine elements, can be found. The village is very proud of the building, which was designed by Carl Weber (see image 1). The year 2008, one hundred years after Weber's death, was marked by a festive programme of lectures, concerts, and special Weber services, like a U2 service.<sup>195</sup> In the summer months the church was opened twice a week.<sup>196</sup> The pastor lives next to the church in a large parsonage. He is described as a community man, who goes to the café, the fair, and other village events. This is also the reason why the municipality wonders what will happen if he were to leave.<sup>197</sup> Choirs, musical ensembles, children from the school, and associations often participate in church services like carnival, Remembrance day, and Advent.<sup>198</sup> Special activities are held regularly. In 2014 the foundation *Vrienden van de Koepelkerk* (Friends of the Dome Church) and the parish council organised

<sup>192</sup> 'Kerk Petrus Banden sluit de deuren', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 10 June 2012; 'Aankoop kerk Someren-Eind bijna rond', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 16 June 2012.

<sup>193</sup> Father Maartens: "Zeven parochies die vallen weg en dat wordt dan, in een hoofdplaats, in een stad of zo komt er dan een grote kerk te staan of die dan blijft en waar dan de hele zaak naar toe moet, maar dat doen ze natuurlijk niet. Want dan voelen ze zich geen...ze voelen zich geen subject van de viering, ze vieren niet samen, maar ze zijn een beetje object van van, nou ja, je zit daar en je krijgt wat toegespeeld aan inspiratie of aan sacramenten en dan, nou dan ga je weer. In zo'n kleine gemeenschap daar speelt iedereen zo'n beetje mee om er iets van te maken. De een is koster en de ander zorgt dat de boel schoon is en een ander zet de bloemen neer en anderen zijn aan het repeteren voor de zang en de ander is lekenvoorganger want die, die houden dan de preek."

<sup>194</sup> 'Antoniusparochie Best trekt eigen plan', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 21 November 2012; "Niet fuseren betekent breuk met kerk", *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 23 November 2012.

<sup>195</sup> 'Lierop viert Carl Weberjaar', *Siris*, 8 May 2008; 'Volle Koepelkerk bij U2 dienst CoeXisT', *Siris*, 10 November 2008.

<sup>196</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Lieropse Koepelkerk laat uniek interieur zien', *Siris*, 16 June 2014; Harrie van Horik, 'Openstelling Lieropse Koepelkerk', *Siris*, 11 May 2015.

<sup>197</sup> Interview local councillor Someren, 18 December 2013.

<sup>198</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Adventviering in Koepelkerk', *Siris*, 21 November 2012; 'Herdenking Tweede Wereldoorlog in Lierop', *Siris*, 13 September 2009; Harrie van Horik, 'Carnavalsmis in de Koepelkerk', *Siris*, 11 February 2013.

an auction of services to raise money for the restoration of the large crucifix.<sup>199</sup> In 2016 the village organised their own passion play, with the pastor as the narrator and well-known villagers in the major roles. In one day, the performances were sold out (see image 2).<sup>200</sup>

Therefore, the closing of churches is seen by several villagers as a threat to the social cohesion and the liveability.<sup>201</sup> Churches are often an important landmark. The tower or dome dominates the skyline of the village and symbolises its identity. 'A village which is built around a church loses its roots when the church is removed and an empty space remains.'<sup>202</sup> Frequently church buildings attract groups of visitors, like the large stained-glass window in Someren-Heide. The closing of church buildings means that choirs and brass bands lose opportunities to perform and are threatened with dissolution.<sup>203</sup> Father Maartens thinks it is a shame that churches like the one in Someren-Heide have to close.

*The small community has for instance an excellent mixed choir and a wonderful theatre group. [...] But if the church disappears, what will remain of them? I am afraid that a source of inspiration will fall away, especially considering the ways the entire community has grown from and been inspired by the church...*<sup>204</sup>

The family doctor of Lierop fears that

*if our magnificent church building loses its parochial function, a shared goal will but disappear and volunteers will lose the beautiful and meaningful 'hobby' that they share, and with it, an important source of social cohesion will disappear.*<sup>205</sup>

Therefore, the *Vereniging Kleine Kernen Noord-Brabant - VKKNB* (Society for Small Villages North Brabant) points to the meaning of churches as meeting places, which are crucial for the social structure of a village. The *VKKNB* fears that the closing of churches will mean that parishioners will have to go without the support and rituals that the church provides.<sup>206</sup>

After church closures, the disused churches are also seen as a threat to the quality of life by the authorities and people in the neighbourhood. Sometimes demolition is preferred, but often municipalities are interested in finding a new use for the buildings.<sup>207</sup> In various places churches find a cultural use, such as in Helmond where the *Onze Lieve Vrouw Tenhemelopneming* (Our Dear Lady of the Assumption) church became a theatre.<sup>208</sup> In various

<sup>199</sup> Bart Werts, 'Diensteneveilig Lierop zoekt naar uitbreiding diensten', *Siris*, 9 April 2014.

<sup>200</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Prachtige passie in volle Koepelkerk', *Siris*, 21 March 2016.

<sup>201</sup> Threes van Dijck, Jan Peijnenburg, 'Met kerk verdwijnt ziel uit gemeenschap', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 9 August 2012.

<sup>202</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>203</sup> *KBO Someren-Heide*, 25 October 2012.

<sup>204</sup> Father Maartens: "Zo'n kleine gemeenschap heeft bijvoorbeeld een uitstekend gemengd koor, we hebben een geweldige toneelvereniging. [...] Maar ja, als die kerk weggaat, wat zal er dan nog van over blijven? Als ik zie hoe het allemaal ontstaan is, dan ben ik bang dat er een inspiratiebron wegvalt. Dat, zeker als je dat zo ziet hoe vanuit de kerk dat die hele gemeenschap gegroeid en geïnspireerd is, nou dan denk ik als je dat weghaalt..."

<sup>205</sup> "Als ons magistraal mooie kerkgebouw zijn parochiële functie gaat verliezen, valt het doel waarvoor we samen werken voor een groot deel weg en zullen de vrijwilligers hun gezamenlijke mooie en zingevende 'hobby' verliezen en daarmee zal een belangrijke bron van sociale cohesie verdwijnen." (Raaijmakers, 'Hoogwaardige excellentie').

<sup>206</sup> 'Kleine kernen willen parochies behouden', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 22 June 2012.

<sup>207</sup> Tom Tacken, 'Een dorp moet klaar staan om de kerk van God over te nemen', *Brabants Dagblad*, 26 February 2014.

<sup>208</sup> 'Tijdelijk Helmonds theater in kerk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 May 2012; 'Schalm wil gesprek over Oerlese kerk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 8 August 2012.

villages churches are replaced by, or are given a new life as, a multifunctional building.<sup>209</sup> In general, people are positive about a multifunctional use, because it seems to resonate something of the religious use.<sup>210</sup> The pastor of Lage Mierde is glad that the church will be used as an exhibition space, because religious art will also be shown.<sup>211</sup> Interestingly, it seems that the buildings are gaining in social relevance.<sup>212</sup> After churches are closed in some villages, remnants of the old churches are preserved. The bell tower of the Saint Josef church in Asten found a new place on a roundabout and was consecrated.<sup>213</sup> The parish council of Someren-Heide hopes that the church tower will remain after the building is closed.<sup>214</sup>

#### *Deinstitutionalisation of Religious Practices and Sacred Consciousness*

In various towns *kerkplekken* ('church places') appear to replace closed churches.<sup>215</sup> In Someren Eind the church has given way to a multifunctional building, but in this building a corner has been created where masses can be held.<sup>216</sup> In Helmond and Veldhoven initiatives have been started to build chapels.<sup>217</sup> In September 2013 a new chapel was consecrated in Someren-Heide. The chapel is not meant for services, because the diocese wants to limit the places for celebration in order to unburden the pastors (see image 3-4).<sup>218</sup> People feel the need for a place to light a candle and be quiet for a moment. It stands next to the graveyard, so it is also a place to mourn and to organise a wake for the dead.<sup>219</sup> A villager tells that he is glad to know that there is a place where you can go and find some rest, away from the busyness of family or social life.<sup>220</sup> Pastor Janssen pleads for local religious meeting places:

*One cannot expect that the people of a generation for whom faith still meant something will travel from Someren Hei to Someren village... search for a place, if you want to demolish that church, do it, but search for a building, a house or a chapel in the village where you can bring your joys and sorrows, where you meet people who ask: "How are you?"*<sup>221</sup>

<sup>209</sup> 'Aankoop kerk Someren-Eind bijna rond', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 16 June 2012; 'Kerkbestuur in Hapert wil meedenken over toekomst kerk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 24 August 2012; 'Bestuur Oda parochie: alle opties kerk Son bespreken', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 22 November 2012.

<sup>210</sup> 'Kandidaat voor kerk Soerendonk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 21 December 2012.

<sup>211</sup> 'Kerk Lage Mierde wordt expositieruimte', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 2 December 2013.

<sup>212</sup> 'Aankoop kerk Someren-Eind', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 16 June 2012.

<sup>213</sup> Harrie van Horik, 'Klokkenstoel verhuist naar rotonde', *Siris*, 13 March 2013; 'Uitnodiging inzegening Angelusrotonde', [www.r.k.angelusparochie.nl](http://www.r.k.angelusparochie.nl), accessed 15 April 2013.

<sup>214</sup> Van Horik, 'Parochiebestuur'.

<sup>215</sup> Henk de Roest, *Een huis voor de ziel: Gedachten over de kerk voor binnen en buiten*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2010, pp. 182-183.

<sup>216</sup> 'Kerk 't Eind wellicht bij de Einder', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 November 2011.

<sup>217</sup> 'Kapelletje in toren OLV-kerk haalbaar' (Helmond), *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 4 July 2012; 'Kapelletje op plek van gesloten kerk' (Veldhoven), *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 17 July 2012.

<sup>218</sup> Van Horik, 'Parochiebestuur'.

<sup>219</sup> Interview Father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>220</sup> Interview PB70, *Ziekentriduüm*, 4 September 2014.

<sup>221</sup> Pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015; "Men moet toch niet verwachten dat mensen van een generatie, waar het geloof nog iets betekent dat die van Someren Hei, naar Someren dorp gaan, om daar...zoek daar een plekje als je die kerk wil afbreken, breek 'm maar af, maar zoek dan een gebouwtje of een plekje of een huis, een kapelletje, in het dorp waar jij met je lief en leed terecht kunt en waar jij mensen ontmoet die zeggen van 'Hoe gaat het met jou?'"

Thus, it would seem that what has been called 'sacred consciousness' is not disappearing entirely. Mary holds a special place in Catholic faith. The Mary processions every year in Ommel are reminiscent of a time gone by. The events attract many visitors from the whole region; people make pilgrimages to Ommel, on foot, or by bus.<sup>222</sup> This probably explains why people attribute much meaning to the Mary Homage at the end of the *Ziekentriduüm* (see sec. 7.3.1). In a village such as Lierop there are still carnival masses, when the prince of the carnival prepares the sermon together with the pastor.<sup>223</sup> The yearly meeting of guilds is opened with a mass in the church of Lierop.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, guilds also erect their own chapels.<sup>225</sup> People go more easily to a chapel to light a candle and sit down for a moment, than to visit the church on Sunday.<sup>226</sup> Father Maartens finds it very strange that while secularisation increases people's devotion grows.

*You will hardly ever pass a field chapel that doesn't have a burning candle. You wonder how it is possible that, when you pass chapels at nine o'clock in the morning, some already have 20-30 burning candles. Maybe that people who don't go to church anymore, still experience some kind of faith.*<sup>227</sup>

This remark seems to tie in with the deinstitutionalisation of religion. People (re)create their own private rituals and search for sacred places, which points to the need for religious repertoires.

## 7.2 | Church Meets Church

Social cohesion is seen as an important condition for the development of quality of life. Churches can play a bonding, but also a segregating role. In this section I show how bridging social capital gradually developed between denominations.

### 7.2.1 | Developing Relations between Protestants and Catholics

The previous section described how a couple of decades ago the Catholic church was an important social factor which determined people's personal relations and the way society was organised. The Protestant community formed a separate group in the villages, with its own school in Someren. The church was the central social meeting place for Protestants of all ages. Various respondents mention that interdenominational marriages were forbidden and that children were not allowed to play with each other.<sup>228</sup> Jaap (PB71) remembers that

<sup>222</sup> 'Handel en Ommel in teken bedevaart', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 6 May 2013.

<sup>223</sup> Van Horik, 'Carnavalsmis'.

<sup>224</sup> Anita van der Geest-Buinen, 'Jaarvergadering Peellandse gilden in Lierop', *Siris*, 10 March 2015.

<sup>225</sup> 'Gilde wil beeld Leonardus uit kerk', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 14 January 2013.

<sup>226</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015.

<sup>227</sup> Father Maartens: "Je zult zelden een veldkapelletje tegenkomen waar geen kaars brandt ofzo. Dan vraag je je af hoe is het in godsnaam mogelijk als je daar s morgens om 9 uur komt dan branden er al 20 of 30 kaarsen. misschien wel, dat mensen die niet meer naar een kerk gaan dat die toch nog op zo'n manier iets van geloof beleven ja." (Interview father Maartens, 3 October 2013).

<sup>228</sup> Interview pastor Janssen; Interview *Bonum Tenete*; Reactions to "'Oecumenische" pastoors gelaten na brief bisdom', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 September 2012.

## The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context

in the 1950s it was not allowed for Catholics to hold processions in the street. The official ban on processions was withdrawn in 1983<sup>229</sup> On the other hand, the Protestant church was forbidden territory for Catholics. Unfamiliarity with each other's beliefs and traditions is sometimes still apparent. Church council member Piet (PB3) mentions that during Heritage day when the church is open for visitors, people sometimes tarry on the threshold and ask whether they are allowed to come inside. Protestants sometimes encounter prejudices from Catholics who fear that Protestants want to impose their views on them.<sup>230</sup>

Gradually the boundaries between the two worlds were crossed. In the mid-sixties the Catholic male and women choirs organised a Christmas celebration together with the Protestant singing group. Together they sang Christmas songs, not in one of the churches, but on neutral ground in a room at café Wijlaars.<sup>231</sup> In the memory of respondents from the male choir *Bonum Tenete*, the rapprochement between Protestants and Catholics started in the 1970s when young Protestants and Catholics mixed with each other in club life and cafés. On the other hand, when the head of the Protestant school played the priest in a drama club performance, this raised eyebrows in the Protestant church.<sup>232</sup> Eelco (PB22), whose children attended the school in the 1980s, was indignant about the tendency of Protestant school council members to exclude Catholics from decision making. Others explain this tendency as a way of protecting the identity of the group, given the minority position of the Protestant community.<sup>233</sup> However, a retired teacher in Someren-Heide says that Protestants are totally part of the village; they participate in the *KBO* (Catholic Association for Elderly) and other associations. Protestant children, who visited the Catholic school in Someren-Heide, even participated in the preparations for the first communion.<sup>234</sup> In the 1990s, professional contacts developed between the Protestant minister and the pastor of the Paul church in Someren. Minister Buijk also became more visible in village life, by participating in the *Ziekentriduum*. The *Pauluskerk* (Paul church) could also be used by Protestants for funerals, when the Protestant church was too small.<sup>235</sup>

### Mutual Visits

Gradually Catholics discovered the Protestant church. Catholic parents became acquainted with the Protestant church through the church-school services. Some Catholic partners in mixed marriages also became members of the Protestant congregation.<sup>236</sup> A consequence of interdenominational marriages is that some families divide their church attendance between the Protestant and the Catholic church.<sup>237</sup> Other Catholics came to the Protestant church out of dissatisfaction with the Catholic church. They are attracted by the attention for the Word of God and the fact that women can preach.<sup>238</sup> They also find more attention

<sup>229</sup> P.J. Margry, *Teedere quaesties: Religieuze rituelen in conflict*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2000, pp. 17-21.

<sup>230</sup> Focus groups I + II.

<sup>231</sup> Interview PB 35, 3 September 2014; Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>232</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>233</sup> Focus group III.

<sup>234</sup> *KBO Someren-Heide*, 25 October 2012.

<sup>235</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, p. 460.

<sup>236</sup> Game afternoon, Someren, 24 October 2012.

<sup>237</sup> Children catechism, Someren, 25 October 2012.

<sup>238</sup> Frits Gerritsen, Eline van Iperen (eds.), *Gedenkboekje Protestantse Kerk Asten, 1825-2013*, Asten - Someren, Protestantse Gemeente Asten-Someren, 2013, p. 32; PB 57 after church service, 26 November 2012.

for faith development and religious education than in the Catholic church. The minister sees it as a task for the congregation to be hospitable towards people who no longer feel at home in the Catholic church.<sup>239</sup>

The other way around, Protestants are also attracted by the rituals and symbolism of the Catholic church. Half of the survey respondents visit Catholic churches for funerals, baptisms, first communion and marriages of friends and neighbours (Q. 5 / app. C fig D.1).<sup>240</sup> Several church members attend mass in the Catholic church of Lierop, because they are inspired by and learn from the liturgy and the style of the pastor. Moreover, since the Protestant congregation is too small to start a choir, some Protestants sing in the male choir of Lierop:

*In this era it is no longer possible to keep Protestants and Catholics apart, it is good to do this together.*<sup>241</sup>

The Protestant organist has accompanied the Catholic male choir *Bonum Tenete* since 2002 and is glad that she can now play in Catholic masses. When she had her jubilee in 2010, the choir sang for the first time in the Protestant church in Asten. For some members, this was the first time they had entered the Protestant church. They are enthusiastic about the way the minister preaches, which is more in the spirit of this time and they welcome the opportunity to learn new songs. The organist, on the other hand, learned about Gregorian chant.<sup>242</sup> So on both sides, people find the contact enriching and see possibilities to learn from each other.

### *Ecumenical Practices*

The minister values the professional contacts with various priests in the region. The cooperation with the fathers of the Holy Heart convent in Asten started when the minister met one of the fathers during a meeting of the southern farmers association. Since 2008 they have organised discussion evenings, which attract both Protestants and Catholics.<sup>243</sup> A result of these contacts is that the minister is also regularly asked to prepare the meditation during the *Koepelkerk* concerts in Lierop (See sec. 7.5.2). Following in the footsteps of minister Buijk in the 1990s the minister also participates in the services during the *Ziekentriduüm* (see sec. 7.2.2 and 7.3.1). In 2011 the minister also joined an afternoon for sick people in Ommel.<sup>244</sup> In that same year the first ecumenical service in Lierop took place, which was seen as quite remarkable in the local media.<sup>245</sup> Afterwards the church council discussed two fundamental nouns in church services: hearing and sharing, which are mutually dependant on each other. In the Protestant tradition, the emphasis lies more on the

<sup>239</sup> Annual report minister, 2011-2012.

<sup>240</sup> Meditation group, Asten, 13 November 2012.

<sup>241</sup> PB37: "In deze tijd kan dat niet meer hè, dat gescheiden protestant apart, katholiek apart, het is mooi dat je dat met elkaar doet." (Interview Koepelkerk concert committee, 4 September 2014).

<sup>242</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>243</sup> Interview father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>244</sup> 'Ziekenmiddag Ommel', [http://www.fanfaresanctamaria.nl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=65&Itemid=70](http://www.fanfaresanctamaria.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=65&Itemid=70), accessed 4 February 2013.

<sup>245</sup> 'Opmerkelijke viering in Koepelkerk', *Siris*, 18 October 2011.

## The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context

hearing (sermon) and the Catholic tradition focusses more on the sharing in the Eucharist. The ecumenical services are moments when both traditions are more interwoven.<sup>246</sup>

*The most recent joint Protestant and Catholic service was warm and gave me a feeling of inter-connectedness.*<sup>247</sup>

The ecumenical discussion evening and services are moments in which participants can discover where the Catholic and Protestant traditions can be distinguished from each other and where they are complementary. The aim of the discussion evenings is to enter into an open conversation and share personal experiences and feelings. In this way believers can deepen their faith, and non-churchgoers can learn more about Christianity.<sup>248</sup> Every season a theme is explored, such as the songs of Huub Oosterhuis. In 2013, after Pope Francis was anointed, the topic 'The spirituality of Saint Francis' drew 30 participants. The evenings are organised in the Protestant community centre in Someren and in the convent in Asten.<sup>249</sup> This means that it is one of the rare occasions that the Protestant congregation still does something in Asten now that the church building is closed. Every evening is concluded with a short prayer in the church, based on the divine office. One of the pastors lights candles, reads a psalm, a hymn is sung, and people can pray intercessions. The evenings especially attract Catholics who feel alienated from the Catholic church; some of them also have started to attend the worship services of the Protestant congregation.<sup>250</sup>

### *Ziekentriduüm*

For more than fifty years the beginning of September in the municipality Someren has been marked by the *Ziekentriduüm*, a three-day festival with reflection, recreation and sociability for approximately 120 long-term sick, disabled and lonely people.<sup>251</sup> The initiative for this retreat came from the Catholic church. The idea is to offer sick and elderly people who can no longer go to church the possibility of holding a retreat for three days. It is an event in which various associations and churches are involved, which contribute financially and provide volunteers. In total 250 volunteers and nurses participate, local choirs sing during the services, and artists provide amusement.<sup>252</sup>

Every year the festival takes place in one of the villages in the municipality. During the festival there is a spirit of reunion among guests, volunteers and ex-volunteers who drop by or who have become guests themselves. People who are not able to attend receive a small present to involve them in the festival. The programme consists of services, drinking coffee, eating together, singing old country songs, and being entertained by artists.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Church council minutes, November 2013.

<sup>247</sup> "De vorige gezamenlijke viering van Protestanten en Katholieken was warm en gaf me een gevoel van verbondenheid," (Raaijmakers, 'Hoogwaardige excellentie').

<sup>248</sup> 'Gezamenlijke cursus door kerken in Asten en Someren', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 19 June 2008.

<sup>249</sup> Interview father Maartens, 3 October 2013.

<sup>250</sup> Local history club, Someren, 24 October 2012; Ecumenical Discussion group, Someren, 22 November 2012.

<sup>251</sup> *Ziekentriduüm*, <http://www.ziekentriduum.nl/>, accessed 2-4 september 2014.

<sup>252</sup> Cees Verhagen, Louis van den Bosch, *Het leven zoals het rolt, de driedaagse van Someren*, Someren, Ziekentriduüm Someren, 2012.

<sup>253</sup> "We zingen, buurten en lachen samen", *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 12 September 2007.

On the third day the *Ziekentriduüm* is closed with a Mary Homage. The aim of the festival is “to sing, to chat, to think about life, to laugh together and what is most important: to momentarily forget our troubles and feel that we belong.”<sup>254</sup> In this way, the festival has a strong empowering effect.

In the 1990s, the *Ziekentriduüm* gained a more ecumenical character, with the inclusion of non-Catholics and the participation of the Protestant minister. The 50th jubilee book mentions proudly that pastors from all the church communities are invited for the Mary Homage and blessing.<sup>255</sup> The organisation stresses that the *Ziekentriduüm* has an ecumenical character. The influence of the Catholic church has diminished, but contemplation and spirituality remain important.<sup>256</sup> In section 7.3.1 the relation to the church and the ritual function of the services is further discussed.

### 7.2.2 | Ecumenism in Discussion

In 2012 the bishop, who was born in Someren, was invited for the second day of the fiftieth *Ziekentriduüm*. The pastor and the minister were to lead the Eucharist together. But the bishop did not allow that a protestant minister would partake in the communion service, which raised a storm of protest. The president of the *Ziekentriduüm* was disappointed:

*We are not a Catholic Ziekentriduüm. We are for all sick and lonely people in Someren.*<sup>257</sup>

A few weeks later the Parish of Lierop saw itself forced to cancel the ecumenical service in Lierop, because the diocese marked it as an ecclesial offence. In a letter, the parish council wrote:<sup>258</sup>

*We do this with shame towards the Protestant congregation and our parishioners. We do this with anger towards our diocese, which is merciless in enforcing rules on people of good will.*<sup>259</sup>

To make the protest visible, the church in Lierop stayed closed that Sunday and outside waved a peace flag at half-mast.<sup>260</sup> The anger in Lierop was extensive and many Catholics attended the worship service of the Protestant congregation in Someren that Sunday. The Protestant churchgoers had to search for a seat in the community centre to follow the service on a screen. The minister tried to give voice to the emotions and simultaneously wanted to strengthen the bonds in a time when cooperation is hindered.<sup>261</sup> The cancelling

<sup>254</sup> “We zingen, buurten, denken na over het leven, lachen samen en wat het belangrijkste is, we vergeten even onze trubbels en krijgen het gevoel dat we erbij horen.” (Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 16).

<sup>255</sup> Idem, pp. 16, 19.

<sup>256</sup> *Historie*, <http://www.ziekentriduum.nl/wiezijnwe/historie/>, accessed 18 January 2016.

<sup>257</sup> “Wij zijn toch geen katholiek Ziekentriduüm”, wij zijn er voor alle zieken en eenzame mensen in Someren” (‘Dominee geweigerd bij kerkdienst tijdens 50e Ziekentriduüm’, *Siris*, 5 September 2012).

<sup>258</sup> Paul Verhees, ‘Geen mis met dominee in Lierop’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 17 september 2012.

<sup>259</sup> “Dit doen wij met schaamte naar de Protestantse gemeente en onze parochianen. Dit doen wij met boosheid naar ons bisdom, dat genadeloos het volgen van regels oplegt aan mensen van goede wil.” (Robin de Wever, ‘Bisdom tikt kerk op de vingers: geen viering met Protestanten’, *Trouw*, 17 September 2012).

<sup>260</sup> ‘Vlag halfstok uit protest’, *Het goede leven*, 18 September 2012.

<sup>261</sup> “Ik heb me er sterk voor gemaakt om op die zondag in onze kerk een gebedsdienst voor de oecumene te houden. Om lucht te geven aan de emoties die er overal waren, die emoties enigszins te kanaliseren en toch verbindend te



of the service was also a disappointment for an interdenominational couple who were to marry a week later. They had hoped to share communion together during the ecumenical service, since this would not be possible during the wedding service. When the minister walked together with the priest down the aisle in the *Koepelkerk* for the marriage, she found encouragement from the nods of support she received from various sides.<sup>262</sup>

This local discussion has affected the whole region. For several weeks the newspapers were filled with articles, interviews with the pastors, the minister, and the diocese. Letters and reactions on news sites show indignation, incomprehension, anger, disappointment, and sadness.<sup>263</sup> The exclusion of the minister and Protestants from the celebration of the Mass does not fit with the perception of church that many people have.<sup>264</sup> The pastor of Someren summarises the feeling of many people when he says:

*The world is larger than Someren and Lierop and I always keep the gospel and that man from Nazareth in the back of my mind ... That man was rather open-minded.*<sup>265</sup>

In the reactions love for one's neighbour and tolerance are recurring words, which some people find incompatible with the exclusion of Protestants, gays, people who live together, or are remarried.<sup>266</sup> The bishop and others are compared by some to Pharisees. People expect that such an attitude will lead to even more estrangement from the church.<sup>267</sup> For many people this is the next incident in a string of events: the sexual abuse scandal, married priests who are excluded, and negative experiences around memorial services. A letter by a local GP on the front page of the Saturday morning *Eindhovens Dagblad* summarizes the feelings and gains much support. Others agree with his critique, but think that the church has become irrelevant and should disappear altogether. On the other hand, there are also people who see ecumenism as a threat to the purity of the church. Secularisation, they state, is not

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werken in een tijd dat samenwerken van buitenaf bemoeilijkt werd." (Annual report minister, 2012-2013).

<sup>262</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 4 October 2012; Visit Asten-Someren, 10 October 2012.

<sup>263</sup> Reactions to "'Oecumenische" pastoors gelaten na brief bisdom', *Eindhovens dagblad*, 29 September 2012.

<sup>264</sup> 'Uitsluiting dominee (2)'; Van Overbruggen, 'Leiders kerk'.

<sup>265</sup> "De wereld is groter dan Someren en Lierop en op de achtergrond heb ik altijd het evangelie en die man uit Nazareth voor ogen. Die man was redelijk ruimdenkend hoor." ("Oecumenische" pastoors).

<sup>266</sup> "Waarom is het bisdom zo onverdraagzaam? [...] Gelukkig kan het ook anders. Protestanten en Katholieken kunnen ook samenwerken. In het verleden heb ik de dominee samen met een katholieke priester zien voorgaan tijdens een ziekenviering in Ommel. Door beide voorgangers werd tijdens de mis de communie uitgedeeld. Iedereen, katholiek, protestant of homo, ontving de communie, Niemand werd uitgesloten. Waarom zet het bisdom mensen buitenspel? Waar zijn de verdraagzaamheid en naastenliefde?" ('Uitsluiting dominee (2)'). Why is the diocese so intolerant? Thankfully it can be different: Protestants and Catholics can also cooperate. In the past, I have seen the minister and priest lead a service for the sick in Ommel. Both pastors handed out the communion during the mass. Everyone, Catholic, Protestant or gay, received communion. No one was excluded. Why does the diocese sideline people? Where are tolerance and love for ones neighbour?; Raaijmakers, 'Hoogwaardige excellentie'.

<sup>267</sup> "Het is Godgeklaagd wat de katholieke kerk hier presteert. De kerken zijn al bijna leeg en dit soort achterhoedegevechten doet ze nog veel sneller leegstromen. Het bisdom staat met zijn rug naar de gelovigen." / "'Waar er twee of meer in mijn naam bijeen zijn, daar ben ik in hun midden (Mattheus 18:20). Ik zou liever luisteren naar dit Woord van Christus, dan naar de kleingeestige woorden van de bisschop. Wee u schriftgeleerden en farizeën (Mattheus 13:1-39) - lees die tekst nog maar eens'. (Reactions to Verhees, 'Geen mis'). What the Catholic church is doing here is outrageous. The churches are almost empty and this kind of rearguard fighting will make them decline much faster. The diocese stands with its back to the believers. / For where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them.' (Matthew 18:20 English Standard Version). I would prefer to listen to this Word of Christ, than to the small-minded words of the bishop. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-39) - why don't you reread that text.').

caused by a church that lost connection with the spirit of time, but by the renewals of the Second Vatican Council. This has robbed people of old traditions and habits.<sup>268</sup>

In an open letter the diocese reacts to the discussion. The diocese has to guard that the parishes remain in unity with the world church. Communal celebration of the Eucharist and Communion threatens this unity, because it would lead to confusion. Protestants do not believe in transubstantiation and have a more symbolic understanding of the sacrament. This means that non-Catholics are not allowed to have communion, nor may Catholics partake in the Lord's Supper. This does not mean that the diocese is opposed to ecumenical contacts. Protestants and Catholics can develop social activities together and have word and prayer services.<sup>269</sup> In the experience of pastor Janssen diaconal projects like a repair café or debt assistance, can lead to celebrating together.<sup>270</sup> The upheaval has led to discussion in the whole region with a lecture in Deurne and discussions during the meeting of the classis, a regional gathering of Protestant congregations.<sup>271</sup>

### *The Aftermath of the Ecumenical Discussion*

The Protestant congregation was disappointed by the situation, but at the same time the reactions of indignation were heart-warming and encouraging.<sup>272</sup> The church council concluded that "religion had not been so talked of" as in the weeks following the discussion.<sup>273</sup> The minister noticed that people outside the congregation now also spoke of her as 'our minister'.<sup>274</sup>

*My initial fear was that the village would turn their back on me, but the opposite happened. As a minister, I now feel myself not only supported and carried by the Protestant congregation, but by the entire village community. Since the Ziekentriduüm, the term 'our minister' is also being used outside the boundaries of the Protestants congregation. I consider this a great compliment and I will attempt to live up to that title.*

One of the effects of the heated discussion was that *Bonum Tenete*, the Catholic male choir, offered to sing during a worship service in the Protestant church in Someren. Their aim was to show support and they gave the ministers a huge bunch of flowers. Now they sing once or twice every year and value the singing qualities of the Protestant congregation. It also offers them the opportunity to expand their singing repertoire.<sup>275</sup>

The problems caused the church council to stop with the ecumenical services for the time being.<sup>276</sup> However, the minister was pleasantly surprised when she was invited by the organ-

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<sup>268</sup> Raaijmakers, 'Hoogwaardige excellentie'.

<sup>269</sup> 'Open brief over de wijze waarop de oecumene wordt vormgegeven', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 29 September 2012.

<sup>270</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015.

<sup>271</sup> Church service, Someren, 25 November 2012; Meeting classis, Eindhoven, 27 November 2012.

<sup>272</sup> 'Dominee put kracht uit incidenten', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 20 September 2012.

<sup>273</sup> Church council meeting, Someren, 4 October 2012.

<sup>274</sup> "Mijn aanvankelijke angst dat ik hierdoor in het dorp met de nek zou worden aangekeken, keerde om in het tegendeel: ik weet mij nu, als dominee, niet alleen gesteund en gedragen door de protestantse gemeente, maar ook door de dorpsgemeenschap. De term "onze dominee" wordt sinds het Ziekentriduüm ook buiten de grenzen van de protestantse gemeente gebruikt. Ik ervaar dat als een groot goed, en zal in voorkomende gevallen proberen die titel niet te beschamen" (Annual report, minister 2012-2013).

<sup>275</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2012.

<sup>276</sup> Church council minutes, November 2012.

isation of the *Ziekentriduüm* to lead one of the services in September 2013.<sup>277</sup> Therefore, the church council decided to reserve a collection for the *Ziekentriduüm*.<sup>278</sup> After the commotion of the year before, the board of the *Ziekentriduüm* had decided to no longer use the Catholic church building in 2013. The whole programme now takes place in the community centre. This has the advantage that people no longer have to go to the church building. It makes the work of the volunteers easier, but it also deprives the guests of an opportunity to visit the church building once more.<sup>279</sup> It is also a strategic choice as the organisation wants to remain in charge. The role of the minister increased, because until then she had only participated as one of the celebrants during the Mary Homage. This means that the *Ziekentriduüm* has gained a more ecumenical character.<sup>280</sup> Participants are glad that something can be done together, which had been impossible before: "Cooperation becomes tangible."<sup>281</sup> Ultimately, a practice of segregation in fact strengthened bonds within the village community.

In October 2013, the parish of Lierop and the Protestant congregation held a word and prayer service together on a Saturday evening. An ecumenical Mass was unthinkable and a service on the Sunday was still too emotionally charged. The tension and abstinence were reflected in the sharing of water and bread, but afterwards abundance was celebrated in a richly laid table with coffee and plenty of cakes. Afterwards the church council found the interweaving of the Protestant tradition of hearing with the Catholic tradition of sharing very satisfying.<sup>282</sup> The minister writes in her annual report about ecumenism:

*Joint church services decrease some of the strangeness each side feels about the other and perhaps even demolish prejudices. Sharing something good that touches on one's inner motives improves the cordiality within the villages. In that way, they serve to enhance unity and peace.*<sup>283</sup>

The conversations in the ecumenical discussion evenings also show that people share something. They share an interest in how Christian faith can take shape in daily life, in the way you look after the environment, the threat of poverty to world peace, and dialogue with Muslims. They showed that ecumenism is much more than having a church service together in one church building. It is about building bridging social capital, not only between Protestants and Catholics, but also with people who are non-churchgoers or who have no ecclesial background. In the words of the minister:

*It has everything to do with dreaming of a better world together, comparing that dream to the current reality and sharing the inspiration to cling on to that dream and attempt to realise it.*<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Annual report minister, 2012-2013.

<sup>278</sup> Church council minutes, 6 June 2013.

<sup>279</sup> Telephone interview minister, 2 February 2016

<sup>280</sup> Mail minister, 12 mei 2015.

<sup>281</sup> "Dat woordje 'samen' wordt zo zichtbaar gemaakt." (Annual report minister, 2013-2014).

<sup>282</sup> Church council minutes, July, October, November 2013.

<sup>283</sup> "Door dit soort gezamenlijke vieringen gaat aan beide kanten van de kerkelijke scheidslijn het vreemde van elkaar eraf, wellicht worden er vooroordelen geslecht. En het doet de hartelijkheid binnen de dorpen goed: er is iets gezamenlijk beleefd wat goed was, en wat raakt aan wat mensen van binnen drijft. In die zin maakt het deel uit van werken aan eenheid, aan vrede." (Annual report minister, 2014).

<sup>284</sup> "Het heeft ook alles te maken met het gezamenlijk dromen over een betere wereld, het leggen van die droom naast de werkelijkheid van nu en het delen van inspiratie om vast te houden aan die droom cq te werken aan de realisatie daarvan." (Annual report minister, 2014).

## 7.3 | Church Meets Care and Welfare

In section 7.1 I described how the fields of church and welfare were inextricably linked, with priests working in nursing homes, starting youth work, and religious orders founding welfare organisations. Now these ties have weakened, and the relation between church and care is not always self-evident, a new understanding has to be found. I will argue that this raises questions about accessibility, the intertwining of sacred and profane, church and secular space, and the role of religion in neutral public places.

### 7.3.1 | Ziekentriduüm

The roots of the *Ziekentriduüm* lie in the Catholic Church. *Triduüms* form a period of three days of meditation and devotion preceding a feast. In 1963 the first festival was held in Someren, organised by the Inter-parish Social Charity Centre. Each day there was Holy Mass and religious conferences. Over the years the role of the church has declined. There is now only one service every day.<sup>285</sup> But the churches still support the festival financially, supply volunteers, and suggest people who are eligible to attend. Another important difference is that people of other religious backgrounds are also welcome. The pastors of the churches are invited to participate. If the contribution of the church within the *Ziekentriduüm* is to be understood, we need to focus on the meaning and function of the worship services. On the first and second days there are word and prayer services, and the third day is closed with a Mary Homage.<sup>286</sup>

#### *The Church service with the Protestant Minister*

In the mornings people are welcomed into the community centre with a cup of coffee and are seated around long tables. On the stage, the organ player and the speakers take their seats and the minister stands behind a lectern, waiting for the noise of people talking to quieten down. Now that people no longer go to the church, the minister sees herself confronted with the question of how to mark the transition from drinking coffee to the liturgical setting of a service. An audio technician says that he thought it brave of her just to stand there waiting for people to become quiet. Volunteers ask people to stop talking and the minister welcomes the 'people of the *Ziekentriduüm*' to the service where everybody can belong. The service is opened with a song. Then the minister announces that the Easter candle will be lit as a

*visible sign of God's presence in our midst. A reminder that his light and love are stronger than everything which bothers us.*<sup>287</sup>

The minister prepared the service together with board members of the *Ziekentriduüm*. In 2014, they chose the theme 'belonging'. The board also invited a choir or singer to sing

<sup>285</sup> Verhagen, *Het leven*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>286</sup> *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 2-4 September 2014.

<sup>287</sup> " Zichtbaar teken van Gods aanwezigheid in ons midden. Als teken van zijn licht en liefde die sterker is dan alles wat ons dwars en hoog zit. " (Service, *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 3 September 2014).

popular songs. By performing popular songs, such as the trip down memory lane in 'Het Dorp' of Wim Sonneveld, efforts are made to make the service accessible. People sing along with the song and afterwards they applaud, which also gives the service the character of a concert. It is an example of how religious and secular music are combined. But the minister finds it a challenge to find a form which makes it possible to still call the programme a liturgy. She is asked to come up with a suitable lecture. In 2014, she chose for the Beatitudes. The committee suggested that she read a text which sketches the position of an elderly person whose legs will not carry him anymore, whose ears and eyes have deteriorated and who asks for compassion and to belong despite her old age.<sup>288</sup> In the liturgy booklet the text is titled 'opening prayer', although it does not address God. The minister tries to place it in a prayer context by introducing it as follows:

*Among other things, prayer is showing yourself to God just the way you are and knowing that God says to you: you can come, the way you are; I love you, just the way you are. The following text arose from that kind of prayer.<sup>289</sup>*

The minister places the meetings during the *Ziekentriduüm* in a religious perspective: have we not come to discover something of God in our contact with the other? The sermon and prayers address themes such as supporting each other, appreciating and respecting other people and being aware of the damage that judgements and lack of interest can make. Afterwards some people indicate that they found the sermon difficult to understand, but the audio technician on the gallery was very positive. He thought that the minister had a good and inspiring story. In the closing text people are called upon to start with being open to each other. This can be difficult, as I notice directly after the service. I see a woman sitting alone in a wheelchair, while people around her talk with each other. When I try to have a chat with her, it becomes clear that she is hard of hearing and can hardly respond to my remarks. She seems to feel uneasy and somewhat abandoned and I wonder whether this kind of large scale event is really suitable for a person in her position.

### *Mary Homage*

During the Mary Homage on the last day, the guests are involved in a ritual of lighting candles at the feet of Mary. The Homage also attracts other villagers. The organisers have tried to create a church-like setting. On the stage a large table, covered with a white cloth, represents an altar. On the table are flowers, candles, and a lectern. On the left stand two chandeliers with white candles and on the right a big statue of Mary behind a stand for votive candles. The four pastors and a choir sit behind the table. A picture of Mary in the cave of Lourdes is projected on the rear wall (see image 5). Previously during the programme people had been facing each other sitting around long tables, but now they face the stage. By the suggestion of an altar, the arrangement of the chairs and the decoration with flow-

<sup>288</sup> "Ik ben oud, mijn benen willen niet goed meer mee en mijn handen beven. Heb geduld met mij, jullie wereld is zo snel." (Liturgy, *Ziekentriduüm*, 3 September 2014).

<sup>289</sup> "Bidden is onder andere: jezelf aan God laten zien zoals je bent. En weten dat God tegen je zegt: jij mag er zijn, zoals je bent. Ik houd van jou, zoals je bent. De volgende tekst komt voort uit zo'n soort gebed." (Sermon, *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 3 September 2014).

ers, candles and the statue, there is a different atmosphere than during the programme for amusement.

During the service songs and texts about Mary are sung and read. Father Maartens reminds the volunteers that being involved with sick people confronts us with our own vulnerability, which is a healthy experience. He presents Mary as an ordinary girl, who asked herself when she had to bear her child in a squat and was an asylum seeker in Egypt: why is this happening to me? When the moment of honouring starts, the volunteers take a bunch of flowers from the stage and give it to one of the guests, while collecting their candle. Then they walk to the stage where the candles are lit and put on the standard which has the shape of a large 'M'. "With the candles Mary is honoured, and we feel the warmth of Mary."<sup>290</sup> In the meantime the choir sings songs.

Subsequently Mary is honoured with the draping of shawls around the statue, symbolising the mantle of safety: blue is the colour of safety, green of listening, purple of reflection and sadness, red of love and solidarity, and white for the star in the night. Mary is prayed to as the mother of everlasting assistance, before the pastors pass by all the guests to bless them with the laying on of hands. The blessing is a sign of protection and safety. The prayers ask for strength and support to enable people to carry on. In the practice of praying and preaching, the pastors give voice to the worries, vulnerability and uncertainty with which people are living. The blessing is closed with a creed, which sketches the image of a good life: the belief in a God who brings peace in the world and who asks us to establish peace so that happiness is possible for everyone. In the closing prayer, the differences between generations are mentioned, including people's experiences that their children have another lifestyle, and speak another language. Mary is asked for support and strength for the coming year. After the service is concluded, the president of the *Ziekentriduüm* asks the pastors to stand at the exit, because people like to greet them.

### *Ziekentriduüm and Quality of Life*

How does the *Ziekentriduüm* affect the quality of life? According to the jubilee book the festival improves the quality of life of the guests, but also of the volunteers.<sup>291</sup> When I visited the *Ziekentriduüm* I heard from guests that they find distraction and amusement; they meet old friends and make new acquaintances. During the three days, they can forget their loneliness, sickness, or pain, and it helps them to cope with and maybe even accept their illness.<sup>292</sup> The volunteers tell they feel satisfied, because they are able to do something for other people and can listen to their stories and emotions.<sup>293</sup> So the *Ziekentriduüm* has an empowering effect. These practices are contrasted with the approach of the government, which primarily looks at figures and costs.<sup>294</sup> A comparison between the worship service on the second day of the *Ziekentriduüm* and the Mary Homage leads to some interesting insights.

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<sup>290</sup> "De kaarsen waarmee we Maria eren, waarmee we de warmte van Maria willen voelen." (Father Maartens, *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 4 September 2014).

<sup>291</sup> Verhagen, *Het leven*, pp. 57-64.

<sup>292</sup> Idem, p. 58.

<sup>293</sup> *Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 2-4 September 2014.

<sup>294</sup> Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 20.

## The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context

In the church service an image of the good life is sketched, in which struggles, loneliness and pain are not denied or expected to disappear. The dominant theme of the Mary Homage seems to be offering recognition and empowerment. In prayers the pastors ask for encouragement and support in difficult days. Mary is presented as a recognizable person with whom people can identify. The church service has a slightly different focus and is more about inclusion and belonging, and asking people to support and value each other. This means that both guests and volunteers were addressed. The Mary Homage had a more public character, since it also attracted people from the village. But at the same time the honouring and the blessing focussed entirely on the guests. Although people could not light the candles themselves, it seemed that they were more involved in the blessing than they were in the church service. "People really experienced the lighting of the candles very intensely and were so grateful as if I have done something very special," says a volunteer afterwards.<sup>295</sup> For many people is the Mary Homage the highlight of the festival.<sup>296</sup> It functions as the closing and farewell of the festival and it is characterised as a very intimate and spiritual event.<sup>297</sup> One of the participants writes in a poem that she also hopes to experience the unity and solidarity the other 362 days of the year.<sup>298</sup>

### *The Intertwining of Religious and Secular Space*

The *Ziekentriduüm* also provides insight into the changed position of the church. The festival song says: "People no longer pray the rosary; there is music, song and dance."<sup>299</sup> In 2016 the board member for the church services stops and it proves difficult to find a successor. This may be a result of the unfamiliarity with the Christian tradition among people below the age of fifty and suspicion towards the Catholic church.<sup>300</sup> The authors of the jubilee book write that

*The influence of the church has declined, but the need for spiritual reflection hasn't. Secularisation and the growing desire to personalise one's faith mean that it has been necessary to introduce some changes and respond to social developments.*<sup>301</sup>

These changes become visible in the intertwining of religious and secular space. First, the Mary Homage was a full-blown church service, but on the second day of the *Ziekentriduüm* the liturgy included some secular elements: Dutch popular songs that do not contain religious language and a prayer which is actually a poem. Poems play an important role in the services as comfort for the soul and are listened to attentively.<sup>302</sup> Second, it is interesting

<sup>295</sup> "Het ontsteken van de kaarsjes werd heel intens beleefd, mensen zijn zo dankbaar. Als of ik iets heel bijzonders heb gedaan..." (*Ziekentriduüm*, Someren, 4 September 2014)

<sup>296</sup> "Zeer tevreden over verloop 52e ziekentriduüm", *Peelbelang*, 9 September 2014.

<sup>297</sup> Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 19.

<sup>298</sup> "Marga van Dinther schreef een prachtig gedicht over het ziekentriduüm", <http://www.ziekentriduum.nl/2014/marga-van-dinther-schreef-een-prachtig-gedicht-over-het-ziekentriduum/>, accessed 3 September 2014.

<sup>299</sup> "Men bidt niet meer de rozenkrans. Er is muziek, zang en dans..!" (Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 81).

<sup>300</sup> Telephone interview minister, 2 February 2016.

<sup>301</sup> "De invloed van de kerk is minder geworden, maar de behoefte aan spirituele bezinning niet. Door de ontkerkelijking en dat mensen hun geloof steeds meer individueel willen inrichten, is het verstandig geweest om enkele veranderingen door te voeren en in te spelen op de maatschappelijke wijzigingen." (Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 15).

<sup>302</sup> Verhagen, *Het leven*, p. 19.

to see how sacred space is created in a non-ecclesial room such as the theatre in the community centre. A consequence of remaining in the community centre rather than going to the church is that sacred space has to be created in marking time, by words, music, and in the layout of the room or stage.

### 7.3.2 | Church in the Nursing Home

A couple of decades ago every nursing home had its own priest who visited the people and celebrated mass. In Someren the nursing home also had a chapel, until the building was replaced.<sup>303</sup> Ten years ago a new nursing home was opened as part of an umbrella organisation of homes for the elderly in Asten and Someren. There is one chaplain for all locations who serves people with dementia, because the nursing home only receives a subsidy for spiritual care for psychogeriatric patients. Otherwise there are no funds made available for spiritual care or religious activities, which seems to reflect the marginalisation of the church.<sup>304</sup> The chapel has been replaced by a silence corner in a meeting hall. A curtain hides the round conference table from view. Entering the space, there are ten chairs on the left and a couple of stoles hang on the wall behind them. The chairs face an altar with a niche for a statue of Mary with the Christ child. Large grey vases stand on both sides and in the middle is a rectangular bowl in which lighted candles can be placed. A small statue of Mary, a crucifix, and small vases with flowers form the decoration. To the right lies a book for intentions. The candles can be purchased in the shop of the nursing home. A collection box is attached to the wall 'for our own missionaries from Someren'.

Pastor Janssen, a retired married pastor who was born in Someren, offered his services as a volunteer. He started with services for people with dementia. Soon afterwards he also began to lead prayer services with communion on Wednesday afternoons for all residents. Also in attendance are people who come to the nursing home during the day for care, but are no longer able to visit ordinary church services. The get-together is continued afterwards with a cup of coffee, which the pastor finds an essential part of the service. About thirty people attend the services and they enjoy them. Furthermore, the pastor organises Christmas and Easter services in the community hall. For a couple of years now the parish priests have also been celebrating masses on Thursday night, which attracts a slightly different group of people, who see the Eucharist as the real thing. On Sunday morning celebrants come directly from the church to administer Holy Communion to residents.<sup>305</sup>

The pastor also notices how the church is becoming marginalised among the older generation. The decline in church funerals was already mentioned. He is also asked less often for extreme unction, when people who are sick receive a blessing and find solace and strength in the laying on of hands. Although he visited all of the residents when he started with his services, people hardly come to him for counselling. During Christmas, Easter and the Mary Homage the community hall of the nursing home is full. With good weather the Mary Homage takes place outside, where a statue of Mary stands in the garden (image

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<sup>303</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>304</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015.

<sup>305</sup> Ibidem.



6). Visitors see the church services in the nursing home as a welcome alternative to the services in the church, because they enjoy sitting cosily together as a community in the nursing home.<sup>306</sup>

#### *Ecumenical Services*

In 2012, one of the few Protestant residents started a discussion about the attitude towards religion in the home. Mrs. de Boer (PB25) tells that Sonnehove, as the nursing home is called, presents itself as a neutral home and all religious references such as crucifixes have been removed from public spaces, with exception of the silence room.<sup>307</sup> Therefore Mrs. de Boer was surprised to find that the Christmas celebration was a very Catholic mass. She asked the board why the Protestant minister was not involved in the service, which she would have expected in a neutral home. Although the board was willing to consider the proposal, Mrs. de Boer also met with some dismissive reactions from other residents.<sup>308</sup> In October 2013, the minister was approached by Sonnehove to explore what she could mean for the Protestant and Catholic residents. A service exclusively for Protestants was thought undesirable, not only because Protestants can go to the Protestant congregation, but also because it would strengthen social differences. The minister responded positively. By participating in the services, the minister wanted to show that Protestants are also Christians and hoped that it will improve the atmosphere in the home and decrease the isolation of the Protestant residents.<sup>309</sup>

Pastor Janssen was also positive about involving the minister. In 2015, the minister participated for the first time in an Easter celebration in the nursing home. This meant changes in the liturgy, which involved the adjustment of some texts. For example, 'blessed' (*zalig*) was removed to make it more neutral. For many residents, it was a first introduction to Protestant liturgy. During the communion, the minister wanted to share not only bread, but also wine. The communion plate and cup from the Protestant congregation were used. Pastor Janssen was somewhat worried how people would react and feared that the cup in shaking hands would lead to accidents, but people thought it was wonderful:

*We had an Easter service and, wow, I was allowed a taste of that wine for once.*<sup>310</sup>

The staff were slightly worried about the reception of the initiative: what would people think of the ecumenical service with a Protestant minister? Some raised their eyebrows over a married priest and a minister at the altar. Through the *Ziekentriduüm*, however, the minister had already become a familiar face. The client council responded that people found the Easter service very good and enjoyed it, despite the minister's 'long sermon', which they were not used to.

After the Easter service the minister thought she detected a change in approach.

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<sup>306</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>307</sup> Game afternoon, Someren, 24 October 2012; Visit Sonnehove, Someren, 14 April 2015.

<sup>308</sup> Interview PB 25; Game afternoon, Someren, 24 October 2012.

<sup>309</sup> Annual report minister, 2014; Telephone call minister, March 2014.

<sup>310</sup> "We hebben de paasviering gehad, goh, nou heb ik een keer van die wijn mogen proeven." (Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015).

*Bringing the Protestant church into it doesn't mean bringing in an organisation that is bent on exerting power or making converts, but one that is keen to contribute to a feeling of inclusivity within the institution.*<sup>311</sup>

The minister is glad to see this shifting attitude towards church, which seems to indicate an existing suspicion towards church. Ultimately, the contact with the pastor led to a new initiative: the possibilities for a mourning group in the community centre were being explored.<sup>312</sup>

### 7.3.3 | Church and Welfare

*Onis Welzijn* (*Onis Wellbeing*) is a regional welfare organisation in Asten and Someren that organises support. They mobilise volunteers to help people who are vulnerable, lonely, need debt assistance, or have other questions. They want to help people to live independently, participate in society and develop their talents. *Onis* organises workshops for personal development and courses for instance on philosophy and dealing with dementia. Some courses are comparable with the Protestant congregation discussion groups.<sup>313</sup> An interview with a coordinator confirms that the roots of welfare work, such as nursing homes and youth work lie in the Catholic church. Through developments of professionalisation and generalisation, welfare work has become distanced from the Catholic church and identity. Although there is overlap between the work of *Onis* and the churches, there is little contact between the organisations. Some exchange has taken place with regard to the mourning group.

In an interview that I had with a coordinator, possibilities for cooperation were explored.<sup>314</sup> *Onis* tries to respond to people's questions in their own programme or by referring people to other organisations. Problems related to loneliness and poverty are often larger than expected. Activities of the Protestant congregation, such as youth work, meals for singles, and discussion evenings, might be relevant for people in search of contacts. But the activities are not known within *Onis* and the coordinator suspects that people will not easily go to the church by themselves.

*People don't think of going to church for new contacts, they think you go to church because of your faith and not for something else. I don't think the thought even crosses their mind.*<sup>315</sup>

The coordinator also signals that people are increasingly occupied with *zingevingsvragen* (existential questions). People struggle with questions about mourning, freedom and autonomy. This is often not explicitly mentioned, but the respondent notices that people come with a simple question and within ten minutes they have told their whole life story.

<sup>311</sup> "De (Protestantse) kerk in huis halen betekent niet een organisatie binnenhalen die het om haar eigen macht of om zeltjeswinnerij te doen is, maar die een bijdrage wil leveren aan de (niet buitensluitende) sfeer in de zorginstelling." (Annual report minister, 2014).

<sup>312</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2014.

<sup>313</sup> Interview PB 6, visit 2-4 September 2014.

<sup>314</sup> Interview coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2014.

<sup>315</sup> "Je bedenkt niet dat je daar naar toe gaat voor je contacten, je denkt natuurlijk, als je daar naar toe gaat dan is dat omdat je gelovig bent en niet voor iets anders. Ik denk niet dat mensen op dat idee komen." (Interview Coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2014).

## The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context

*I am curious what would happen if we deliberately raised those issues in our conversations. Imagine posing a question like that in a conversation about family care. The answers might be surprising.*<sup>316</sup>

Maybe the church can offer some advice to both professionals and volunteers at *Onis* about how to recognise existential questions and how to talk about them.

### 7.4 | Church Meets School

In the previous section I showed how the church has to tread carefully when entering the public sphere with Christian practices, with which people are not always familiar anymore. This leads to combining ecclesial traditions and secular repertoires. In this section I describe how in the field of education the church has virtually disappeared, but Christian-religious practices still occur.

The Education Act of 1920 meant that the parishes took over responsibility for education. Catholic schools were founded by the parishes and public schools disappeared.<sup>317</sup> Today a reverse process is taking place and the church has a marginal position in schools. The diocese has had to cut down on staff to support teachers in religious education.<sup>318</sup> There are schools that are considering removing 'Catholic' from the name of the school.<sup>319</sup> According to various respondents, religious education has almost completely disappeared.

*The Catholic identity [of schools] is much looser than the Protestant [identity of schools]. In most Catholic schools, I think that religious elements would be hard to find.*<sup>320</sup>

Parents prepare a small number of pupils for their first communion.<sup>321</sup> In Lierop the priest still holds a service together with the school.<sup>322</sup>

#### *A Protestant School*

In 1947 the Protestants started their own school in Someren, first in the parsonage and from 1949 in a new building.<sup>323</sup> The Protestant congregation and school used to have a close relationship.<sup>324</sup> Church members were active in school life, for instance the woman who organised the children's service, also gave catechism to years five and six (groups 7/8). During a focus group, she said that she became acquainted with the Protestant commu-

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<sup>316</sup> "Ik ben benieuwd wat er zou gebeuren als je dat in de gesprekken bewust zou gaan benoemen. Stel je dat zegt, ga eens bij gesprekken over mantelzorg die vraag erin fietsen, daar zouden wel eens hele verrassende antwoorden uit kunnen komen." (Interview coordinator *Onis*, 14 April 2014).

<sup>317</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 370-378.

<sup>318</sup> Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2014.

<sup>319</sup> Gerrit-Jan Kleinjan, "'Katholiek is al van de gevel verdwenen'", *Trouw*, 28 August 2012.

<sup>320</sup> "Ik denk dat de katholieke identiteit vager was, dan de Protestantse. En ik denk dat op de meeste katholieke scholen het stuk godsdienst heel ver weg is." (Interview school teachers, Someren, 13 April 2014).

<sup>321</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.

<sup>322</sup> Interview pastor Lierop, 2 September 2014.

<sup>323</sup> Coenen, *Hertog Jan*, pp. 379, 462.

<sup>324</sup> John Exalto, Gert van Klinken (ed.), *De Protestantse onderwijzer: Geschiedenis van een dienstbaar beroep, 1800-1920*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2015.

nity through the church-school services.<sup>325</sup> But these services ceased after the Protestant school merged with a Catholic school. The *Viersprong* was a small school, which also attracted non-Protestant children. Because several parents also had functions in the church, the communication lines were short. Some people chose the school because of the attention for religious education and biblical stories, while others gradually came to see it as enriching. The staff had an church affiliation, although most of them did not attend the Protestant congregation because they lived elsewhere or were involved in another church.<sup>326</sup>

The team tried to find contemporary forms for the Christian tradition, which centred on the idea of celebration. The school organised an opening every week and a closing every month with all children. Every fortnight parents were involved in the opening. These celebrations focused attention on special events, such as the children of year one (group 3) who had learned to read. Children who had done their first communion were invited in the week opening to tell about their experiences.<sup>327</sup> The school participated once in a church-school service at Thanksgiving day. In the experience of the minister the cooperation lent new meaning to the festival. When several mothers were seriously ill, the minister helped to talk about it in the classroom. In this way, the children could express their experiences and worries. During the funeral of one the mothers the school was also involved through the participation of the class in a choir.<sup>328</sup>

### *A Cooperation School*

Gradually the number of pupils dropped and around 2011 the *Viersprong* was forced to seek a merger with one of the Catholic schools. The minister was involved in discussions about the identity of the new school. The Catholic school had the opinion that everything related to church had to go. But the Protestant school wanted to maintain something of their celebratory tradition.<sup>329</sup> For the parents it was important that the celebrations of Christmas and Easter and the opening of the week should continue. The end of the *Viersprong* was commemorated with a service in the Protestant church building. The head of the Protestant school handed the candle that had always been used in the week celebrations to the new director. This symbolized the tradition of the *Viersprong* and a request to take good care for it. Afterwards the head of the new school said that she now felt the value and meaning of the celebration tradition in the *Viersprong*.<sup>330</sup>

The new school *LeerRijk* (Rich-in-Learning) presents itself as

*...a community that values respect for the living environment, for each other and for humanity. By propagating these values, children learn to be responsible for their own choices, for the people around them and for their environment. This also means that the school welcomes all children and parents, irrespective of background, worldview and religion. The school wants to join with parents to form a community that is grounded on Christian values.*<sup>331</sup>

<sup>325</sup> Focus group II.

<sup>326</sup> Interview school teachers, 13 April 2014.

<sup>327</sup> Interview school teachers, 13 April 2014; Minister during visit, Asten-Somerén, 4 April 2013.

<sup>328</sup> Annual report minister, 2011-2012.

<sup>329</sup> Minister during visit, Asten-Somerén, 4 April 2013.

<sup>330</sup> Interview school teachers, 13 April 2014.

<sup>331</sup> "Een gemeenschap waar respect voor de leefomgeving, voor elkaar en medemenselijkheid belangrijke waarden

The teachers mention responsibility, challenge and trust as central values together. The Protestant congregation offers financial support for the purchase of the method *Trefwoord* (*Catchword*), which offers Bible stories, alternative stories, and songs. It is not only used as a method to talk about social values, but mostly as a religious method for Bible education. The two teachers I interviewed, who used to work at the *Viersprong*, see religious education not as just a course, but as something which should be interwoven through school life. Every three weeks a new theme is introduced at a week opening for the whole school. Parents are welcomed two times per year. The aim is to involve them more in the preparation of the services. Every day the children work on the theme in their own class and read a Bible story, a practice which has been adopted from the *Viersprong*. The teachers tell how they try to relate the stories to the life world of the children, although some staff members find it difficult to really enter into conversation with the children about biblical stories with which they are unfamiliar. Therefore, the respondents do not want to impose the celebrations on them.<sup>332</sup>

### *An Uneasy Relation between Church and School*

The school has no contact with the Catholic church and the church has not shown any interest in the merging process. It seems that the Catholic church feels no responsibility towards the school. The Protestant congregation church council visits the school on a yearly basis and is open to cooperation. The respondents experience that this connection with the congregation as something to hold on to and which has the potential to bear fruit.<sup>333</sup> But the school is still searching for the best way to relate to the churches. The Protestant church building is too small to hold services for all the parents and children of *LeerRijk*. It is no longer self-evident that the minister, who used to be a familiar face in the *Viersprong* community, now has a visible role in school life. The minister is very welcome to visit the school, which she did during the Christmas celebration of 2014.<sup>334</sup> According to the teachers, for some parents it may be awkward to receive a representative of the institutional church. The active involvement of a minister or priest in school life would mean that there is a direct connection with the institutional church. This is something that some want to avoid, because they have unpleasant experiences with the church.<sup>335</sup> Parents would probably be surprised about the involvement of a pastor, because the Protestant/Catholic identity is not visible in the logo of the school. The respondents suspect that there is a fear that parents might be put off by an outspoken Christian identity. Christian education is now somewhat hidden in the school plan, which makes it difficult to be clear about it. The respondents think that there are people who believe, and who want to live by it, but that they find it difficult to speak openly about it, because it is not done. Here the influence of the social environment becomes apparent.

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zijn. Door dat uit te dragen, leren de kinderen dat je verantwoordelijk bent voor je eigen keuzes, voor de ander en de omgeving waarin je leeft. De school staat dan ook open voor alle kinderen en ouders, ongeacht achtergrond, levensbeschouwing of geloofsovertuiging. De school wil samen met ouders de gemeenschap vormen, waarbij de christelijke waarden de basis vormen." (A. Biesmans, *Schoolgids*, Basisschool LeerRijk Someren, Schooljaar 2016-2017, p. 4); Interview school teachers, 13 April 2014.

<sup>332</sup> Interview school teachers, 13 April 2014.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>334</sup> Church council, January 2014.

<sup>335</sup> Interview teachers, 13 April 2014.

## Chapter 7

According to the teachers some parents have their doubts about exposing their children to Bible education and moments of prayer.<sup>336</sup> The teachers I spoke to stress that the aim of opening the day with prayer is to pay attention to the things of that day. They want to raise children with the Bible as an enrichment for their life, without obliging them to adhere to a specific church.

*The point is for people to experience the greater value of involving God in things. Once they have experienced that, they can pass it on. However they do it... form is not really that important, it's about retaining that greater value.*<sup>337</sup>

Another problem is the connotations that the word service/celebration has for Catholics. The teachers say that several colleagues associate the term with church and weighty matters. The meaning of service in the Protestant school was broader: celebrating what people in the school community experience with each other, paying attention to both the nice things and the hard things in life, such as the passing away of parents or sickness. At the same time, the teachers notice that the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, which are also visited by parents, are important for families. For some people it has replaced the Christmas service in church. The celebration of Easter is more complicated, because the passion story is quite confronting and requires some explanation. This takes time when people have no frame of reference from church.<sup>338</sup>

### *The Value of Religious Education*

In other interviews and focus groups with church members the issue of religious education was also mentioned. The teachers notice that their younger colleagues lack the ability to talk about faith.<sup>339</sup> The withdrawal of priests from schools and clubs seems to have led to a gap in religious consciousness among younger generations. Nienke (PB51), who went to a Catholic school about twenty years ago, was somewhat amused when she noticed at the same time that she knew more about biblical stories and Catholic customs than her Catholic class mates.<sup>340</sup> For one of the teachers it was also telling when a Protestant twelve-year-old girl taught her classmates the Lord's Prayer. Several respondents regret the fact that children nowadays receive hardly any religious education. They learn little about the Bible, the Christian tradition and develop no religious awareness.<sup>341</sup> Schools should convey some kind of sacred consciousness, just thinking about time, space, and the way the world functions.

An intriguing paradox becomes apparent: there is a mixture of religious illiteracy, suspicion about church and a dilemma about how to deal with religious diversity. At the same time the services in themselves point to a transfer of religious practices outside the ecclesi-

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<sup>336</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>337</sup> "Het gaat erom dat mensen ervaren wat de meerwaarde is om God erbij te betrekken. En als ze dat ervaren hebben, dan wordt het doorgegeven. En in welke vorm ze dat doen...de vorm is ook niet zo belangrijk. Maar dat ze die waarde, dat ze die wel vasthouden." (Interview teachers, 13 April 2014.)

<sup>338</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>339</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>340</sup> Focus group I.

<sup>341</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2014.

al domain. The practices in the school are an interesting example of what happens after the deinstitutionalisation of religion. There is unfamiliarity and maybe even resistance against church in general, and the institutional church in particular. Church has become very liquid here and the connection with the church is hardly visible. It remains limited to financial support from the Protestant congregation and yearly visits from church council members and the minister. Although the church is not part of school life or the school community, people still seem to feel the need for religiosity, reflection, and rituality. This is not without difficulties, because the teachers are not always sufficiently trained in this area.

The school seems to be struggling with how religion can be expressed in identity and practices, such as prayer, Bible reading, and celebration, in the context of a secularising village society. Here questions about inclusivity and accessibility reappear. On the one hand there is the accessibility of religious language and the experience that the ritual space in the school is more accessible than in the church. On the other hand, however, the discussions about the name and identity of the school reveal a fear of excluding people.

## 7.5 | Church Meets Culture

In this section I explore the relation between the fields of church and culture. First, we will see that the church employs culture as a way of communicating a message of social protest. Second, religious and cultural expressions become intertwined in an effort to give a church building and Good Friday new meaning.

### 7.5.1 | Church as a Theatre

In 2014 the Protestant Church in the Netherlands brought legal action against the Dutch state because of the treatment of asylum seekers who have exhausted all legal procedures.<sup>342</sup> Involvement with refugees was not a theme I came across regularly in my fieldwork, except from an occasional collection, like a foundation in Helmond that offers basic needs, care, and support to refugees. They are sent back to their home country, but are not able to go because of the Ebola epidemic or other problems.<sup>343</sup> But after the refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 the theme became more of an issue.

#### *As I Left My Father's House*

The minister in Someren heard from a colleague about the play 'As I Left My Father's House'. It tells the story of refugees from various cultural and religious backgrounds, who have the same refugee status and who are searching for a better life, believing that there must be a place somewhere where they can be safe. In the regional team of ministers the idea came up to bring the play to the stage in five towns in the area. This offered the opportunity to do something together as Protestant congregations, but also to do outreach

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<sup>342</sup> Nico de Fijter, 'Bed, bad en brood voor alle asielzoekers', *Trouw*, 8 November 2014; 'Dossier Bed-Bad-Brood', INLIA, *Charter van Groningen*, <http://www.inlia.nl/dossier-bed-bad-brood.html>, accessed 4 August 2017.

<sup>343</sup> *De Brug* (49:11), December 2014, pp. 15-16.

work. The aim was to reach a wide audience, so the play was performed in a secondary school, a Protestant church, a Catholic church, and a mosque. Although the church councils in the region backed the idea financially, more public and financial support had to be raised.

The minister sought contact with the merged Catholic parish of Asten-Someren and together they went to the mayors of the municipalities. The municipalities were willing to grant a subsidy, probably because at that time there were rather concrete plans for a refugee centre in Someren. The play could help generate public support and keep a good atmosphere in the village. Subsequently the minister contacted the religious education teacher at the secondary school to ask whether the school would be interested in participating. The school had already contact with refugee work: refugees had visited the school to tell about their experiences. The minister was glad for this opportunity to approach the school with a concrete plan for cooperation, which was probably better than searching for some common theme.<sup>344</sup> Through cooperation with *Onis* refugee work a couple of refugees were found to make homemade treats.

Local newspapers covered the event, announcing the play as an event which creates a sense of community and has the power to strengthen social cohesion, bridging religious, cultural, and ethnic differences.<sup>345</sup> Not only was the message of the play about cooperation and bonding, its organisation also led to closer contacts between the churches, both local and regional, the school, the municipality, *Onis* refugee work, the choir *Bonum Tenete*, which also performed, and between old and new residents of the villages.<sup>346</sup> The event addressed questions about safety, fear, pain, hope, and exclusion, and sought to strengthen local social cohesion. It was a successful way of improving the quality of life through the building of both bridging social capital with other churches and organisations, and linking social capital with the municipality (see image 7).

The event is also an example of how churches can use a cultural form, in this case theatre and music, as a way to relate to the broader society. Addressing a theme such as refugees and raising questions about how people are received in our society through the performance of a play probably had more effect than if the issue were to have been raised in the Sunday sermon. It shows that the local church can use cultural means of expression to communicate a message and raise social awareness.

### 7.5.2 | Koepelkerk Concerts

The dome with the towers on both sides dominates the skyline of Lierop. For decades, the village newsletter was called *De Koepel*.<sup>347</sup> The group of people who gathered on Sunday became smaller and in 2015 the Catholic parish merged into the regional parish of Asten-Someren. The building however remains important for the identity of the village, according to members of the *Koepelkerk* concert committee. Concerts in the *Koepelkerk* started in 2000 as an initiative of the *Probus* department in Deurne, Asten and Someren, who regret-

<sup>344</sup> Telephone interview minister, 2 February 2016,

<sup>345</sup> "As I left my father's house" in de Pauluskerk', *Siris*, 3 February 2016.

<sup>346</sup> 'Toneelstuk over drie vluchtverhalen', *Peelbelang*, 25 February 2016.

<sup>347</sup> *Archief de Koepel*, <http://www.slaponline.nl/archief%20histori.html>, accessed 28 January 2016; *Stichting Vrienden van de Koepelkerk Lierop*, <http://www.vriendenvandekoepelkerk.nl/>, accessed 28 January 2016.



ted that the late-Roman church, dating from 1892, in Lierop was decreasingly being used for religious purposes.<sup>348</sup> At the same time the initiators signalled a need for contemplation and inspiration. They searched for ways to maintain not only the building, but also its religious function as spiritual centre and place for the village community.<sup>349</sup>

### *The Concerts*

Gradually the format of the *Koepelkerk* concerts developed to become concerts aimed at spiritual deepening (see image 9). Now every year two concerts are organised, one on Good Friday, the other around All Souls Day. Every concert has a theme which is connected with the season of the ecclesial year. The theme is incorporated into the musical programme and the part-song, through which people become more engaged. A local pastor is invited to prepare a meditation, for example about Mary or about the church building as a meeting place. A fourth important element of the concerts is the church building itself (see image 10). The architecture contributes to the atmosphere, the experience, and, not insignificantly, the acoustics. However, the space also has its limitations. People at the back do not have a good view of the stage, so the concerts are projected on to two large screens. Sometimes the theme is also visualised in film or photo images as part of the performance (see image 8).

In the *Koepelkerk* concerts the tension between local and regional also becomes visible. In the vision document of around 2003 the local connection is stressed. The concerts are primarily aimed at inhabitants from Lierop, although people from other parts of the region are welcome. The committee wants to involve as many people from the village as possible in the organisation and favours performances by local musicians over ensembles from the region.<sup>350</sup> The local character was also stressed during the jubilee concert of 2009 in the film 'Lierop celebrates', which formed the background to the music. The film portrayed various festivities in the village with many familiar faces.<sup>351</sup> Ten years later a shift can be noticed. I also found people from Asten and Someren in the organising committee, who are involved because of their theological background, their knowledge of the musical world, or their practical skills, for example in the use of sound equipment. Nevertheless, they shared a passion for the religious heritage which is tangible in the church building and the music. Interestingly the committee members talked less about the local rootedness and more about the function of the *Koepelkerk* concerts for the region: the concerts attract people from the whole region, and offer regional musicians a stage to perform and interest new publics for their performances.

It seems that the motivation for the *Koepelkerk* concerts has moved from aiming at the local to focussing on social inclusion and incorporating everyone. Although the interdenominational character of the concerts was not mentioned in the vision document, the website underlines that they are not connected to a particular denomination and are open to every-

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<sup>348</sup> *Probus* (Professional Business) is an association of people above 55, higher educated, with social concern, who meet regularly for discussion (<http://www.probus-nederland.org/>, accessed 25 March 2017).

<sup>349</sup> Vision document *De Koepelkerkconcerten*; Interview *Koepelkerk* concert committee, 4 September 2014.

<sup>350</sup> *De Koepelkerkconcerten* - mailed by pastor.

<sup>351</sup> '25e koepelkerkconcert met Lieropse koren', *Siris*, 7 November 2009.

one.<sup>352</sup> In the autumn concert of 2015 the committee chose for the songs of Huub Oosterhuis because this repertoire is shared by Protestants and Catholics.<sup>353</sup> The concerts can be seen as events through which people can be loosely connected to the church.

### *Liturgy or Concert?*

The question arises as to what extent the *Koepelkerk* concerts are part of the church and what function they fulfil. The *Stichting Koepelkerk Concerten* (Foundation for Dome Church Concerts) is separate from the church, but the concerts take place in an explicitly ecclesial framework. The concerts have the approval of the pastor and the parish council of Lierop. Both the Catholic and the Protestant church are represented in the committee, but the representatives do not seem to have been appointed because of their ecclesial background. During the concerts, the regional pastors play a prominent role and there seems little difference between a Sunday sermon and a meditation during a *Koepelkerk* concert. The concerts take place in and are inextricably linked to the church building. In an interview, the committee stressed that the concerts need to have a religious dimension, but this does not mean that all music has to be ecclesial or that the performers need to have a church background. Especially the spring concert has a liturgical connotation, because it replaces the Good Friday service.<sup>354</sup> Heleen (PB 37), who is involved in the organisation, says:

*I'll bump into people when I'm shopping who say: "I went to the Good Friday Concert, that's Easter to me." Wonderful, yes, that's genuine.*<sup>355</sup>

The concerts have clear liturgical elements in the part-song and meditation. Sometimes biblical texts or prayers are performed by the musicians. The organisers not only want to include a religious theme, but also express the religious value of singing.<sup>356</sup> Drawing on religious traditions and stories, questions are raised about how people cope with suffering, see their life, and treat each other. The president of the committee says:

*One of the concerts that I remember well was the Mass of Peace by Karl Jenkins. In and of itself that's not religious music, it simply expresses war and the horrors of war, but of course it's very suitable when it's placed in a church setting at the right moment. [...] On Good Friday that means the church is full, while attendance at a proper Good Friday service is, well... Apparently, people are in need of a moment of peace and reflection, and find it during our concerts. They may even take good thoughts home with them, which is a good thing, irrespective of their religious background.*<sup>357</sup>

<sup>352</sup> *Koepelkerkconcerten Lierop*, <http://koepelkerkconcertenlierop.nl/voorbeeld-pagina/>, accessed 1 November 2016.

<sup>353</sup> 'Huub Oosterhuis centraal in Lierops Koepelkerkconcert', *Siris*, 21 October 2015.

<sup>354</sup> Interview pastor Lierop, 2 September 2014.

<sup>355</sup> PB 37: "Tijdens het winkelen kom je ook mensen tegen en dan zeggen ik ben op 't Goede Vrijdag concert geweest, dat is voor mij Pasen. Geweldig. Ja, ja, dat is echt." (Interview *Koepelkerk* concerts committee, 4 September 2014).

<sup>356</sup> Interview *Koepelkerk* concerts committee, 4 September 2014.

<sup>357</sup> "Een van de concerten die me heel sterk bijgebleven is, is dat van de Mass of Peace van Karl Jenkins. Dat was op zich helemaal geen religieuze muziek, die bracht gewoon de oorlog en de verschrikkingen van de oorlog tot uiting, maar dat past natuurlijk heel goed als je dat op het goede moment in de kerk plaatst en dat soort zaken meer. [...] Met goede vrijdag we hier een volle bak hebben, terwijl je echt bij de Goede Vrijdag viering... eh ja... kennelijk hebben mensen toch behoefte aan een moment van rust en bezinning en vinden ze dat in onze orkesten, of in onze concerten bedoel ik, vinden ze dat wel. En ja, misschien dat ze dan met een goeie gedachte

It is interesting to see that in the *Koepelkerk* concerts a religious/secular binary is used to make a distinction between various kinds of music, but religiosity is also a value or a meaning which can be attributed to secular music, songs, words, texts, and places.

Nevertheless, although there are strong resemblances to liturgy, the concerts are not church services.<sup>358</sup> The pastors do not wear liturgical clothes. There is no prayer, God is not addressed, words are spoken and sung about God, but not to God. The pastor of Lierop characterizes the concerts as 'singing reflecting'.<sup>359</sup> In the autumn concert of 2010 the tension between liturgy and concert became clear when liturgical music from the Eastern Orthodox Church was performed. In the Eastern tradition, liturgical songs are onomatopoeic (sound words) prayers of divine origin, which have to be performed in a liturgical setting.<sup>360</sup> Because the songs were now performed in a concert and not in a liturgy no insider from the Eastern Church was willing to tell about the background of the Eastern liturgy during the *Koepelkerk* concerts. The minister explains how liturgy differs fundamentally from art:

*Liturgy must be done! It's not something to talk about, and you shouldn't see it as a form of art that you can choose to like or dislike! Liturgy must be done. After all, liturgy is about praising, worshipping, and coming into communion with the divine. In church and in liturgy, heaven and earth meet, touch, blend, and interact. Liturgy is where attention and compassion exist, hope and new courage are born, forgiveness, reconciliation and new beginnings are experienced, and where victory over death is celebrated.*<sup>361</sup>

In this vision liturgy asks for commitment and involvement, not keeping a distance.

### *A Physical Meeting Place for Social Cohesion*

By being involved in the organisation and performance of the *Koepelkerk* concerts, the Parish of Lierop, the fathers from Asten and the Protestant congregation contribute in various ways to the quality of life in the region. The physical meeting place of the *Koepelkerk* brings people together. The preservation of the building as a church and a meeting place for the village forms an important motivation for the committee to organise events such as the concerts. The concerts not only provide income to pay for the maintenance, but also give the church a *raison d'être*, by giving it a broader use. It also fulfils a function by offering musicians a stage to perform.

Over the years the concerts have also gained ecumenical significance and have helped to increase familiarity with the Protestant church and the Protestant tradition. In this sense, they could be seen as missional. An example is the meditation by the minister about the

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naar huis gaan, dan is dat toch prima, los van welke gezindte dat ze ook zijn." (Interview *Koepelkerk* Concerts committee, 4 September 2014).

<sup>358</sup> Discussion group, Someren, 14 April 2015.

<sup>359</sup> Interview pastor Groeneveld, 2 September 2014.

<sup>360</sup> 'Koepelkerkconcert in kerk Lierop', *Siris*, 6 november 2010.

<sup>361</sup> "Liturgie, dat moet je doen! Daar moet je niet over praten, dat moet je niet als kunstuiting zien waar je al dan niet van kunt genieten! Liturgie, dat moet je doen. Het gaat immers om aanbidding, om lofprijzing, om het in verbinding treden met het goddelijke. Daar moet je aan meedoen, niet naar kijken of luisteren alsof het een kunstuiting is". [...] In de kerk, in de liturgie komen hemel en aarde bij elkaar, raken ze elkaar aan, vloeien ze in elkaar over, is er interactie. Is er aandacht en ontferming, wordt er hoop en nieuwe moed geboren, wordt er vergeving, verzoening en nieuw begin ervaren. Wordt de overwinning op de dood gevierd." (Meditation minister, *Koepelkerk* concert 5 November 2010).

position of Mary in Protestantism. The difference between churchgoers and non-churchgoers is also bridged. By using secular music, the organisers try to attract a wider audience. At the same time people may discover that church has more to offer than they previously thought. Thus, the *Koepelkerk* concerts form a place where diversity is bridged and social cohesion is strengthened. The events are examples of a deinstitutionalised church, searching for ways to be relevant in a changing context.

### *Koepelkerk Concerts as a Place for Creating Sacred Consciousness*

The *Koepelkerk* concerts not only fulfil a social, artistic, and aesthetic function, but also a religious function. The members of the committee describe the especially intense atmosphere during the concerts as “dry soil waiting for a drop of water.”<sup>362</sup> *Koepelkerk* concerts may not be liturgy in the strict sense, but this does not mean that they are devoid of religious and ritual meaning. The concerts can help to shed light on the way that religious practices contribute to the quality of life by analysing the interplay between place, time, and practice. The place of the church building forms the reason for the concerts, but it also shapes the concerts, because it determines the choice of music and offers a frame of meaning. The church building shapes the practice of the concerts: they are not concerts which happen to be in a church.

*They have to fit with ... the building. [...] They have to fit with the time of Easter and with the religious, so... [...] We always have a theme and pick the theme seeking a connection between the music, the moment and the church.*<sup>363</sup>

The moments of Good Friday and All Souls Day are connected with reflection and memorial. The pastor detects an interest in an alternative form of meaningful gathering on these special days. The value of the *Koepelkerk* concerts lies in both the physical space provided by the church building and the space for reflection, which can be found in the music, the singing and the meditation. In this way, the place, time, and practices of singing, and meditation provide the framework within which the concerts gain religious meaning.

In the meditations, the pastors reflect on the value of the place of a church building and of religious practices, such as silence, reflection, praying, singing, and lighting candles. In the Eastern tradition, the church building is worship in wood and stone. Various respondents speak about the unique ambiance and rest which they encounter in the *Koepelkerk*.<sup>364</sup> The minister sees the church building as a space for God, where the praise of God is sung, but this space also has a metaphorical meaning. Making space for God in this world is making space for praise and gratitude. A temple or a church symbolise the space of God where people can truly come home, which is the longing for shalom, being absorbed by the love and peace of God. Church is then understood as both a place and a community where people can be

<sup>362</sup> Interview pastor Lierop, 2 September 2014; Interview *Koepelkerk* Concerts committee 4 September 2014.

<sup>363</sup> “Het moet passen hier bij het ... bij het gebouw [...] Wel altijd passend bij het thema rond Pasen en passend bij het thema rond eh, hè het moet een beetje aansluiten bij het religieuze, dus... [...] We hebben ook altijd een thema en dat thema dat zoeken we wel een verbinding tussen de muziek, het moment en de kerk.” (Interview *Koepelkerk* Concerts committee, 4 September 2014).

<sup>364</sup> PB 22 in Focus group III.

themselves with all their emotions and their past, where it is safe and where they are not judged.<sup>365</sup>

As mentioned above, the *Koepelkerk* concerts combine the practices of music making, singing, meditation, and reflection. The concerts are described as a “meditative concert around the cross” and a “combination of special musical experience with spiritual deepening”<sup>366</sup> The spiritual character is expressed in the meditation and meditative films.<sup>367</sup> The meditations offer explanation, which enables people to understand more of the music they hear and sing. Through the meditations the pastors try to provide new insights into the Christian tradition, such as reflections on the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>368</sup> The meditations also have elements of reflection and empowerment. In 2014 the minister raised the question “How do you approach the new day, the time you are given? Is it a gift of God or does it rule your life?”

Making music can give something which cannot be captured in words, a feeling of being one, of being absorbed into what transcends daily life.<sup>369</sup> Through participating in the part-song people experience it, they become involved.<sup>370</sup> The pastor says that “singing revives people,” and he relates it to the call of God to people, to revive here and now. Singing thus becomes an image and vehicle for resurrection. The minister also frames singing as encouraging yourself and others to carry on, and not to become a victim of powers that pull you down.<sup>371</sup>

*Throughout the ages, the task of believers has always been to continue the song of praise in the world, despite everything: to sing of God’s goodness, to point out the good things and to keep hope alive for oneself and for the world. Hopefully, one day, that world will join the choir of voices.*<sup>372</sup>

*Of course, in addition to praise there exists the Kyrie. Singing is about praising God, but singing is also Kyrie: asking for compassion, goodness helps people to carry on.*<sup>373</sup>

So, singing is understood by the pastors as bonding and empowering. Singing, and liturgy more generally, is used as an image of church, but also as an understanding of quality of life:

*Liturgy makes already palpable, tangible, and visible that, ultimately, through heaven, this earth and this life will be changed, delivered, renewed and eternally ruled by God. That is the prospect that exists, and in liturgy that faith becomes an experienced reality.*<sup>374</sup>

<sup>365</sup> Meditation minister, *Koepelkerk* Concert, November 2008.

<sup>366</sup> ‘Symfonieorkest in koepelkerk’, *Siris*, 4 April 2010; ‘25e koepelkerkconcert met Lieropse koren’, *Siris*, 7 November 2009.

<sup>367</sup> ‘Koepelkerkconcert op Goede Vrijdag’, *Siris*, 31 March 2013.

<sup>368</sup> ‘Pater Noster en Ave Maria centraal in Koepelkerkconcert’, *Siris*, 6 November 2011.

<sup>369</sup> ‘25e koepelkerkconcert met Lieropse koren’, *Siris*, 7 november 2009.

<sup>370</sup> Interview *Koepelkerk* Concerts committee, 4 September 2014.

<sup>371</sup> Pastor Lierop, *Koepelkerk* concert, November 2014.

<sup>372</sup> ‘Als je vraagt wat de taak is van gelovigen door de eeuwen heen, dan is dat om ondanks alles de lofzang in deze wereld gaande te houden. Om Gods goedheid te bezingen, het positieve te benoemen. En daardoor de hoop levend te houden. Voor jezelf en voor deze wereld. En hopelijk dat die wereld zich ooit voegt in dat koor van stemmen.’ (Meditation minister, *Koepelkerk* concert, November 2008).

<sup>373</sup> ‘En natuurlijk, naast de lofzang is er ook het Kyrië eleis. Het zuchten en smeken, het roepen naar de hemel om alles wat benauwt en hoog zit’ (Meditation minister, *Koepelkerk* Concert, November 2010).

<sup>374</sup> ‘In de liturgie wordt alvast tastbaar en voelbaar en zichtbaar dat het uiteindelijk zo zal zijn dat deze aarde, dit leven door de hemel veranderd, verlost, vernieuwd en voorgoed door God geregeerd wordt. Dat uitzicht is er,

The pastor closes the Good Friday concert with the hope that people are empowered by the image of the risen Christ to face the future with trust.<sup>375</sup> An overview of the practices and meaning of the *Koepelkerk* concerts, suggests that they can be identified as places where sacred consciousness is socially created and sustained.

### Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I shifted the focus from the practices, people, and place of the Protestant congregation to the village itself. Where are traces of religious and ritual practices visible in village life and how do they contribute to the quality of life? This last element is further discussed in chapter 10, but at this point a couple of observations can be made. It became clear that the church is exploring contacts with other fields of practice such as care, culture, and education, although some prejudices and unfamiliarity have to be overcome. The religious practices described in this chapter give insight into the place and meaning of church and religion in village society.

I have shown that the Protestant congregation primarily becomes visible through the minister's participation in village events such as the *Ziekentriduüm* and *Koepelkerk* concerts. The minister plays a crucial role in representing the church. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the events in which the Protestant church has a more public role are ecumenical ones. It has to be acknowledged that these are only incidental events, bringing people together in ad hoc communities, so it would seem that their impact remains rather limited. Nevertheless, these moments stand out for their exceptional character, creating and sustaining sacred consciousness. Moreover, these incidental events seem to form a chain, linked by the recurring presence of key figures such as pastors and musicians, and by narratives of previous events. This chapter has shown the relations between the worship services during the *Ziekentriduüm*, in Lierop and in the nursing home.

So it would seem that the Protestant congregation needs to leave the church building to initiate or participate in events such as 'As I left my Father's house' to become visible in village society. The Protestant congregation also becomes visible in the local media, where reports appear about these activities. What is less visible is that the churches also play a significant role organisationally by financially supporting the *Ziekentriduüm* and the school. Furthermore, various church members participate in the organisation by singing in choirs and volunteering during the *Ziekentriduüm*. However, since religious affiliation is placed in the private domain, their involvement may not generally be recognised as ecclesial involvement.

The role of the church in the field of care is related to both personal well-being and social relations. With regard to personal well-being, the pastors address questions like coping with anxiety and contingency in the services. They also try to offer frames of meaning and rituals which can empower people. The ritual practices evidently take place in the non-everyday realm, especially during the *Ziekentriduüm*, which also brings people into

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en dat geloof wordt beleefde werkelijkheid in de liturgie." (Meditation minister, *Koepelkerk* concert, November 2010).

<sup>375</sup> Pastor Lierop, Good Friday concert 2011.

## The Public face of the Protestant Congregation in the Village Context

another environment. Second, the involvement of the church is placed, by both pastors and outsiders like the coordinator from *Onis*, within the framework of community building. Community is built through socialising, but also by addressing questions such as loneliness and exclusion, and finally by efforts to overcome religious distinctions, such as in the nursing home.

Furthermore, the religious practices that arise in the fields of care, education, and culture give insight into what happens when religion goes through a process of deinstitutionalisation. Religious and secular spaces and repertoires become intermingled. These practices not only have a function in transcending cultural and religious differences, but also indicate the presence of and need for sacred consciousness. Practices of singing, ritual, and reflection can nourish and evoke this sacred consciousness.





# Chapter 8

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

In this chapter I leave rural Brabant behind and explore Protestant congregations in the Groninger context. Section 8.1 describes the *Hervormde* congregation in the villages Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild, and Noordbroek. In section 8.2 I zoom in further on church life and analyse the relation between church and village in the various villages, by looking at place, people, and practice. As will become clear, compared to the situation in Brabant, church life Groningen is more intertwined with village life. Although the church holds no central position, it still offers various services to the village community: through various events and the position of church buildings as historical sites and physical meeting places. Walker's model of connecting again helps to bring into view how various circles of people relate to the churches. In 8.3 I take a broader perspective and see how the congregation tries to survive in regional networks. Travelling from Schildwolde to Hellum, Noordbroek and Overschild, the church is increasingly disappearing, but new regional church networks are also emerging.

### 8.1 | Introducing the *Hervormde* congregation of Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild and Noordbroek

About thirty kilometres east of the city of Groningen lie four villages: Schildwolde, Overschild, Hellum, and Noordbroek (see map below). These 'Woldkerken' – a reference to the region *Duurswold* or Woldregion – together form the *Hervormde* congregation Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild, and Noordbroek, with a part-time minister (0.5fte). Hellum and Schildwolde have formed a combination since 1967, which enabled them to appoint a minister together, but also to keep their own church council and possessions.<sup>1</sup> From that time the minister lived in Schildwolde and the parsonage in Hellum was sold.<sup>2</sup> In 1980 a minister was appointed for Schildwolde, Hellum, and Overschild.<sup>3</sup> In 2011 Schildwolde and Hellum were

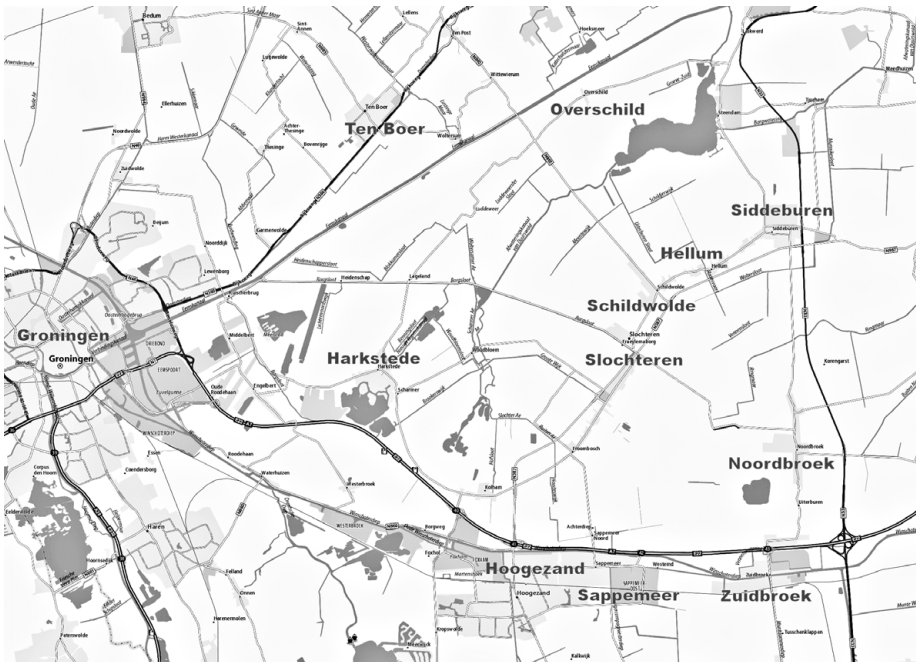
<sup>1</sup> Regnerus Steensma, *Het gebruik van hervormde kerken in Groningen: Een onderzoek inzake het huidige gebruik van de oude Groninger kerken, alsmede van de recent gebouwde hervormde kerken*, Groningen, Instituut voor Liturgiewetenschap Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1974, pp. 187, 195.

<sup>2</sup> Mara (PH 6), Maintenance churchyard, Hellum, 5 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen de Vries, *Jubileumuitgave 25 jaar Schildjer Proat*, Overschild, Vereniging voor Dorpsbelangen Overschild en omstreken, 2006, p. 14.

amalgamated. After the *Samen op Weg* process with the *Gereformeerde* church of Schildwolde broke off around 1990, the *Gereformeerde* church of Schildwolde merged with the *Hervormde* church of Slochteren, a neighbouring village, in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Around 2012 the church council of Noordbroek sought to join the three other villages. In 2017 the minister of the *Woldkerken* was also appointed in the Protestant congregation of Slochteren-Schildwolde.<sup>5</sup>

Thirty to sixty people attend the worship services, which are held alternatingly in Schildwolde, Noordbroek, and Hellum, and two or three times per year in Overschild. Most other church activities take place in Schildwolde. In 2014 the church council consisted of four people from Schildwolde, four from Hellum, and no one from Overschild. In 2012, the two church council members from Noordbroek joined the church council of Schildwolde-Overschild-Hellum (SOH). However, it was not possible to amalgamate as long as the congregation of Noordbroek was still responsible for the church building. The SOH-congregation lacked the financial and human resources to take on the maintenance of another monumental medieval building.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, in 2016, this building was transferred to the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* (Foundation for Old Groninger Churches) and the amalgamation was finalised.<sup>7</sup> Since all my data about Noordbroek relate to the situation when the church building was still owned by the congregation, I describe the situation from that perspective.



<sup>4</sup> Conversation church members, Harvest festival service, Schildwolde, 12 September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> 'Protestantse Gemeente Slochteren neemt afscheid van dominee Simon Bijl', *'t Bokkeblad*, 18 January 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 12 December 2013.

<sup>7</sup> 'Hervormde gemeente Noordbroek draagt kerk over aan stichting', *Menterwolde.info*, 26 November 2015.

In Schildwolde-Overschild 470 people are registered, with 103 living in Overschild.<sup>8</sup> The minister describes the church members of Schildwolde as confessional with a strong sense of community. The church community in Hellum has a more liberal tradition and is more orientated to the village.<sup>9</sup> There are 150 people registered and although only ten villagers visit the services regularly, a large number of the villagers pay for the maintenance of the building. Only one *Hervormde* family lives in Overschild, who are also key holders of the church for the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*, which has owned the church building since 2002.<sup>10</sup> The church community of Noordbroek is known as liberal and has 510 people registered, but Sunday services are visited by approximately a dozen people from the village. The church newsletter is distributed to 150 addresses in the village by people who want to be kept informed about the church. Among these are people who are not church members, but participate in a graveyard maintenance group and in guiding tours.<sup>11</sup> In total, the *Hervormde* congregation Schildwolde-Overschild-Hellum-Noordbroek (SOHN) has 1140 people registered, of whom 100 have been confirmed. Half of them are older than 70 and only 45 people are younger than 65.<sup>12</sup>

### 8.1.1 | Village walks

#### *Schildwolde*

Various roads lead to Schildwolde, a village of 1485 inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Coming from the city of Groningen, you can take the provincial road which runs through the village of Slochteren. After you leave a tunnel and an avenue of trees, the pastures open again and you see the *Juffertoren* (Lady Tower) of Schildwolde on the horizon. The tower dates from the thirteenth century and is built entirely of bricks, which is rather exceptional (see image 1).<sup>14</sup> The provincial road shows the 'rear side' of the linear village: the backyards of the houses and the barns of the farms that face the *Hoofdweg* (Main Road). For centuries, the *Hoofdweg* has connected a string of villages to the city of Groningen. The ministers describe the population as quiet and loyal. The houses and the traditions are old. There is a strong place attachment. Families have lived in the village for generations and are rooted in village history.<sup>15</sup> In this way I discovered a personal link with the village. When we became acquainted, a church member said that his family owns a piece of land they still call '*Gelderloosland*', which was owned by my great-great-great-grandfather.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In Schildwolde 49 people have been confirmed, 73 are baptised and 245 are birth members; in Overschild 9 people have been confirmed, 26 are baptised and 68 are birth members. In Hellum 20 people have been confirmed, 30 baptised and 100 are birth members. In Noordbroek 22 people have been confirmed, 35 are baptised and 453 are birth members.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hommes, *Contextanalyse Combinatie Hervormde Gemeente Schildwolde-Overschild en Hellum*, Glimmen, 9 March 2010.

<sup>10</sup> De Vries, *Jubileumuitgave*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Erik (PN5), Church service, Noordbroek, 2 March 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Situation August 2017.

<sup>13</sup> 'Schildwolde', *Statline, Kerncijferswijken en buurten 2009-2012*, CBS, 10 December 2014, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/70904ned/table?ts=1530542148792>, 2 July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Anneke M. Teule-Veldkamp, et al., *Een terugblik op tien eeuwen Schildwolde*, Bedum, Profiel, 1994, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> Interview minister *Vrijgemaakte* church, Schildwolde, 20 May 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Discussion evening, Schildwolde, 26 January 2014.

Travelling by bus you follow the string of villages and see the front of the village, houses from the 1960s alternating with nineteenth-century houses. Where Slochteren merges seamlessly with Schildwolde, you find (still in Slochteren) the nursing home, the town hall, the *Gereformeerde* church building, a bank, the doctor's surgery, and a garage, and just across the street the building of the *Gereformeerde Kerk Vrijgemaakt* (Reformed Church Liberated). Going further, you might think that you leave the village, as the space between the farms increases, but this is not the case (see map). Further down the *Hoofdweg* is a supermarket, a pet store, and a chemist. The supermarket has recently been rebuilt and houses a post office and a charging station for public transport cards. Posters are hung advertising activities and fundraising and there is a box for the collection of items for the food bank. Where the *Hoofdweg* crosses the *Meenteweg*, you find the older centre of the village. Here there are a paint shop, a *Buurtzorg* (Neighbourhood Care) office, a bakery and a hairdresser's. Almost on the crossing stands the tower, with the *Hervormde* church building dating from 1686 behind it.<sup>17</sup> In front of the church stands a World War Two monument and there is a lawn where in December a tent is erected for the New Year's Eve party and other activities. On the other side of the church is an old forge. Opposite the church is a small apartment complex for council housing where people from the whole municipality can be placed.<sup>18</sup>

The area around the *Vrijgemaakte* church building can in a way be seen as a third village between Slochteren and Schildwolde. The minister of the *Vrijgemaakte* church thinks that the feeling of village identity is weaker in this in-between region than among people who live around the respective towers of Slochteren and Schildwolde. The *Vrijgemaakte* congregation has 900 members, and people live primarily in Slochteren and Schildwolde. They make up about twenty percent of the population of Schildwolde. There is a strong social cohesion within the congregation, because entire families visit the church and the congregation is organised in neighbourhood circles.<sup>19</sup> According to the minister the church has close ties with village society, through the contacts of individual church members with the music, village, first aid, and cemetery societies. The *Vrijgemaakte* church and school have regular contact about the participation of children in services and the school using church facilities.<sup>20</sup>

Not long ago the *Hervormde* and *Vrijgemaakte* formed separate worlds. The mutual prejudices were rather strong. The minister tells that he encourages a policy of accessibility and hospitality in the *Vrijgemaakte* church. He tries to raise awareness within the congregation about not excluding people.<sup>21</sup> He would like the various work groups to actively invite people for church activities. For instance, children from the whole village are welcomed at the kids club. The minister of the *Vrijgemaakte* church says:

<sup>17</sup> Teule-Veldkamp, *Een terugblik*, p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Interview president village society, Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Interview minister *Vrijgemaakte* church, Schildwolde, 20 May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Minister *Vrijgemaakte* church Schildwolde: "Maar ook wel dat vanuit de kerk bewust beleid wordt gemaakt op toegankelijkheid, op gastvrijheid, op: let op dat je mensen niet buitensluit of afstoot, hoe gezellig we het ook hebben met elkaar." (But also that from the church policy is made for accessibility and hospitality. That you take care not to exclude or put off people, how socially we are with each other.).

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

*I find it important that we have good contacts, and to see what each can mean for the other. [...] I think that we are still learning to see and accept each other. But I get along perfectly with the Reformed minister and the moments of cooperation are good.*<sup>22</sup>

### Hellum

Driving on from Schildwolde you pass stately farms and suddenly come across another church and you discover that you have entered Hellum, a village of 515 inhabitants. Although again it is difficult to see where Schildwolde ends and Hellum begins, it turns out that they are entirely different villages. Hellum is smaller and only has one church. It is said that the presence of the *Vrijgemaakte* church makes it not done to wash your car on a Sunday in Schildwolde, which is not a problem in Hellum.<sup>23</sup> As becomes clear below, the fact that there is only one church affects the attitude and the perception of church within the village.

Contrary to Schildwolde, Slochteren and Noordbroek, the tower and church in Hellum are connected. The Walfridus church, named after St. Walfridus of Bedum, dates from the eleventh century. Tuff stone and Roman brick alternate with each other (see image 2).<sup>24</sup> A colourful sign shows that there is a school nearby, which lies somewhat hidden behind the church in a neighbourhood dating from the 1970s. In November 2016, it was announced that the Helmster school would close.<sup>25</sup> The village hall lies on the other side of the *Hoofdweg*. The relations between village hall and village church are further discussed below. Going further you pass the dentist's, an installation company, and a house which looks like it used to be a mill. It seems that the farms between Hellum and Schildwolde are statelier than on the other sides of the villages. The village association organises various activities during the year, such as a games week for children in the summer, parties in the village hall, and Remembrance Day. The village association also initiated the development of a Helmster round. Because the village is linear, villagers lacked the possibility of taking a circular walk around the village. Therefore some paths across the fields were laid in 2015.<sup>26</sup>

### Noordbroek

Instead of traveling by bus or car, you can also cycle to Schildwolde through the pastures, following the *Slochterdiep*. Close to the city of Groningen the farms are small, but gradually they become bigger. When you continue this way to the south-east, to Noordbroek, the grass is replaced by potatoes and corn and the farms become mansions. You pass a small hamlet, called Stootshorn, where a number of churchgoers live. Here a small evangelisation chapel used to stand, where Sunday school was held. Noordbroek with 1166 inhab-

<sup>22</sup> "Ik vind het belangrijk dat er goede contacten zijn met elkaar als, je kijkt wat je voor elkaar kan betekenen daarin. [...] Ik denk dat we nog erg bezig zijn met het elkaar leren zien en elkaar accepteren, ik kan met [de hervormde predikant] prima overweg en de momenten van samenwerking die er zijn, wat je samen doet, die verlopen ook prima." (Idem).

<sup>23</sup> Village café, Hellum, 14 February 2014.

<sup>24</sup> E. Barel, *et al.*, *Hellum, een parel in de Woldstreek*, Scheemda, Actief Scheemda, 1985, pp. 17-26; Peter Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken: van Harlingen tot Wilhelmshaven*, Groningen, Noordboek, 2008, p. 405.

<sup>25</sup> 'Het is over, Obs De Ent sluit na de zomer de deuren', *RTV Noord*, 9 november 2016.

<sup>26</sup> 'Burgemeester heeft Helmster Ommetje geopend', *'t Bokkeblad*, 22 April 2015.

itants is also a linear village and you enter the village somewhere in the middle. Near the crossroads are a gas station, a hotel, and a development from the sixties and seventies. When you turn to the left you pass the nursing home, a chemist, and a small square where the fish cart stands. Further down the road a multifunctional centre opened in 2015, with several facilities, such as the school, the social team, and the library.

The village may seem quiet, but every year on Ascension day it turns out that behind those nineteenth century doors little galleries, workshops, and museums are hidden. What at first glance may seem to be a normal house is the former Mennonite church, dating from 1811.<sup>27</sup> Driving further you pass a mill and a care farm, and when you have almost left the village the tower and the church emerge (see image 3). The late Romano-Gothic church dates from the early fourteenth century and is almost as high as the tower.<sup>28</sup> The church is surrounded by a churchyard, which forms a small park with the English landscape garden of the parsonage that lies behind it. The present occupant had opened the garden for general use, but when people left too much litter, the opening times were more restricted.<sup>29</sup>

### Overschild

Overschild, with 565 inhabitants, lies more to the north, on the other side of the Schildmeer. Noordbroek, Hellum and Schildwolde date from the Middle Ages, but Overschild really developed in the nineteenth century, when mills were built to drain the land. Later fertile clay from *terpen* (artificial hills) was conveyed to improve the quality of the soil.<sup>30</sup> In 1866 the excavations started for the *Eemskanaal* (Eems canal), which runs from Groningen to Delfzijl. A long road which lies lower than the canal, but higher than the land on the other side, goes to Overschild. The houses are built around a crossing; here the stately farms are lacking. There are two church buildings, the *Gereformeerde* church, which is now the house and workshop of an artist, and the *Hervormde* church, which is a *Waterstaatskerk* (a church that was built with financial support from the government) that dates from 1880 and has Neoclassicist elements (see image 4).<sup>31</sup> Behind the latter is a consistory and in front is a small square. The building is in need of restoration, and has worsened because of the earthquakes. Opposite the church there used to be the café until 1986, which was used for village meetings and attracted day trippers and workmen who stayed there during the week.<sup>32</sup>

After labourers left the village, new people arrived. In 1988 a multifunctional building was built, housing a school for fifty pupils, a café, meeting hall cum sports hall, and a mortuary.<sup>33</sup> However, in 2012 the school had to close. As a result of a community initiative the

<sup>27</sup> Redmer Alma *et al.*, *Monumenten in Nederland: Groningen*, Zeist, Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, 1998, p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, pp. 463-464.

<sup>29</sup> Open Day church, Noordbroek, 5 April 2014.

<sup>30</sup> *Terpen or wierden* are artificial hills, which date from the middle ages, when the sea regularly washed over the land and people would seek refuge on the terps when the water from sea came in. (K. ter Laan, Martin Hillenga, *Geschiedenis van Slochteren*, Groningen, Oppenheim, 1962, Reprint: Groningen, Regio-Project, 2000, pp. 280-282).

<sup>31</sup> Alma, *Monumenten in Nederland: Groningen*, p. 185; 'In Overschild is de ambitie nul (en waarom dat toch heel goed nieuws is)', *Groninger Kerken* (33:1), 2016, pp. 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> De Vries, *Jubileumuitgave*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>33</sup> Max Paumen, "'Overschild heeft geen stervensbegeleiding nodig'", *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 March 1990.

people of Overschild are now running a village hall in the school building.<sup>34</sup> Apart from the village hall there are hardly any services available in the village.

### *Church Building and Village Hall*

Thus, in traditional quality of life terms, Schildwolde and Noordbroek have various services, while Hellum and Overschild have hardly any services, but the village hall has a central place. Primary education is in the village or a neighbouring village, but for secondary school children have to go to Groningen or Appingedam. Agriculture still is visible in village life, but most people have to leave the village for their work. In Schildwolde and Noordbroek there are various meeting places, in the school, village shops, care institutions and churches. Especially the relation between the shops and village society is interesting. The shop provides a place for announcements, a place where you can have a chat, a place for various other services, and the shops also try to invest in village life by sponsoring activities. The other way around, villagers feel a responsibility to sustain the local grocery, so in Noordbroek and Schildwolde the church council does the shopping for the church in the local shop. With regard to social capital the village associations play a crucial role, communicating village needs to the local authorities. Because they are the contact point with the municipalities the village associations can organise the finances and permission for community initiatives.<sup>35</sup>

Hellum and Overschild have lost their schools, but have lively village halls. In both Schildwolde and Noordbroek there is a restaurant, but a real village café is lacking. So, when you ask where villagers as a community gather, two places are relevant: the church and the village hall. The church building and the village hall can reinforce each other, but can also stand in competition. The philosophy of the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* offers an interesting perspective on this relation. In their view, the church building can be seen as the parlour, the room for the special occasions, while the village hall is the living room where people hang around.<sup>36</sup> In Noordbroek this seems to be the case. In the autumn of 2014 the multifunctional centre Noordsuythoeve was opened.<sup>37</sup> During the fieldwork I did not find any indication that the use of the church and the village centre interfered with each other. A possible explanation might lie in the fact the buildings are very different, thereby excluding comparable activities. A closer analysis of the relation between the church and village hall gives insight into the different village societies.

In Hellum the *Hervormde* church is one of the organisations represented in the board of the village hall.<sup>38</sup> The church and village hall organise the yearly jumble sale together, the profits of which are shared. For large receptions, the church can borrow cups from the

<sup>34</sup> Bram Noordhuis, 'Dag-Schaldmeda-dag: afscheidsmiddag basisschool Overschild', *Eemsbode*, 15 June 2012; 'Dorpshuis 'De Pompel' feestelijk heropend', *t Bokkeblad*, 3 December 2014.

<sup>35</sup> De Vries, *Jubileumuitgave*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Conversation Jur Bekooy, construction engineer *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*, March 2014; Kees de Graaf, *et al.*, *Levende monumenten in een leefbare regio*, Groningen, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, 2015, p. 15 ([https://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/downloads/nieuws/bijlage\\_levende\\_monumenten\\_in\\_een\\_leefbare\\_regio\\_22\\_06\\_2015\\_lage\\_resolutie.pdf](https://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/downloads/nieuws/bijlage_levende_monumenten_in_een_leefbare_regio_22_06_2015_lage_resolutie.pdf)), accessed 18 January 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Karin Weijts, 'MFC de Noordsuythoeve in Noordbroek geopend', *Veendammer*, 22 October 2014.

<sup>38</sup> H.H. Grimme *et al.* (eds.), *Hellum, een parel in de Woldstreek - 2, Old/Nij*, Bedum, Profiel, 2008, p. 54.

village hall. For instance, when a member of a choir from the neighbouring village of Siddeburen wanted to hold his birthday party in the church, this could only happen if the reception also entailed a musical performance. Mara (PH6), who is the sexton, says that they do not want to be in competition with the village hall. Sometimes the congregation uses the village hall for a children's service or for meetings during the renovation of the so-called 'learning room' in Schildwolde.<sup>39</sup>

The church and the village hall in Hellingum have different functions. The village hall is very suitable for plays and parties. The church is perfect for concerts, which I explore further in chapter 8.2.2. One of the regulars at the village café hardly ever comes in the church, but two days before his mother was buried he realised that the memorial service should not take place in the village hall, but in the church. Because the invitations had already been sent, people were received in the village hall with a cup of coffee and then sent through to the church. The sexton says that when you walk through the church to prepare such a memorial meeting, you see another side of people.<sup>40</sup> The village hall and church building seem to have a harmonious relationship, but both parties seem to be aware that it is a delicate balance.

In Overschild the church is hardly used for services or village activities. The overdue maintenance of the church and the defective gas heaters form a hindrance to using the building for various activities. During a funeral service, the visitors fell through the floor with the coffin.<sup>41</sup> *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* is prepared to restore the building when it has gained a broader function. In their perception, the church is no longer used, despite the fact that there are occasional services.<sup>42</sup> However, the local committee, consisting primarily of church members, is awaiting the repairs in the hope of revitalizing church life.<sup>43</sup> When two theatre-makers approached the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* with the idea of starting a theatre in the church, this seemed an answer to their prayers. The church could be used for concerts, workshops and high teas.<sup>44</sup> Participants in the focus group have mixed feelings about giving the church such a multifunctional purpose. It requires much time and energy to run a multifunctional building in a village and therefore Rita (P4FGO) regrets that the theatre-makers organise activities like workshops and dinners in the church and not in the village hall. She sees Hellingum as a good example, where the church is used for concerts. The acoustics of a church building make it more suitable for musical performances than the village hall. Respondents wonder whether there are enough activities and human resources to maintain two village meeting places.<sup>45</sup>

Schildwolde lacks a community centre for the whole village and respondents indicate that this is caused by the fact that there is a well-equipped *Vrijgemaakte* church, with various facilities, meeting rooms and a youth home. Since the village café opposite the *Hervormde* church was pulled down a couple of years ago, a number of groups and societies

<sup>39</sup> Cluster church service Hellingum, 9 March 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Mara (PH 6), Maintenance day, Hellingum, 5 April 2014.

<sup>41</sup> De Graaf, *Levende monumenten*, p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> Meeting *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*, 26 March 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

<sup>44</sup> De Graaf, *Levende monumenten*, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015; De Graaf, *Levende monumenten*, pp. 32-35.



use the youth home, but this is not ideal. For larger meetings the village society gathers in the Chinese restaurant.<sup>46</sup> Since the *Vrijgemaakte* congregation has gradually become more open towards the village society, the building is increasingly used by other organisations, which decreases the need for a village hall.<sup>47</sup> Thus, although meeting places are fundamental for a liveable village, the presence of multiple meeting places or multifunctional buildings can raise questions, pose a challenge for the available social capital, and in some cases also form a hindrance to the development of community initiative. The question of how various meeting places relate to each other and to the needs of the community is relevant for discussions about quality of life.

## 8.2 | A Tale of Four Churches

Each village church belonging to the *Hervormde* congregation SOHN seems to represent a stage in a process of retreat and marginalisation. In this section I sketch church life in each village and describe how the church relates to village society. I focus on the meaning of church activities and the church buildings for the village communities, of which the church communities form a part. The fourfold model of connecting is again helpful for grasping the role of the church in village society. In this section I argue that the church buildings and churchyards, as well as events like Christmas and memorial services, connect a significantly broader group to the church than the church community and activities such as worship, pastoral care, and discussion groups.

In a survey of church members and villagers (see appendices B V and C) I asked people what they see of the *Hervormde* congregation in their village. The graphics reveal the ways in which the church becomes visible in village life. Figure E.3 (see appendix C) shows how people in each village are in touch with the *Hervormde* congregation. It reveals that most activities attract more people from Schildwolde, which is not surprising, because discussion groups, meals and the harvest service take place in Schildwolde. The Christmas and New Year's Eve services attract most people. The number of people who are reached through visiting work is rather low. Still, church members appear to be more familiar to people in Hellum than in Schildwolde, which might be explained by the fact that Schildwolde is three times larger than Hellum. Another reason might be that there is only one church in Hellum, which makes it possible to distribute the request for financial support across the whole village. This means that church members come to the door once in a while. Furthermore, the flowers and Christmas presents are also given to non-church members in Hellum, while in Schildwolde this is limited to the church community.

When people are asked when they visit the church building for non-church activities the picture changes somewhat. Figure C.3 (app. C) reveals that, contrary to Schildwolde, a part of village life in Hellum takes place in the church, such as school activities, concerts, and Remembrance Day. It is striking that Remembrance Day is not mentioned in Schildwolde, although the minister speaks every year in the church after the laying of flowers at the

<sup>46</sup> Interview president village society Schildwolde, 5 February 2014; 'Verenigingsleven Schildwolde ligt plat door jeugdsoosbrand', *RTV Noord*, 2 July 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Interview minister *Vrijgemaakte* church Schildwolde, 20 May 2014; Hommes, *Contextanalyse*.

monument next to the churchyard. To understand the relation between church and village in each of the four villages, the church building seems a good place to start, because it tells various stories.

It tells the story of the Christian faith, depicted by various architectural means, including in some cases the cruciform shape of the building, the front, altar and other artefacts within the building and [...] different theological emphases that have prevailed upon the building during its history. It also tells the story of the community which uses the building, its character and history.<sup>48</sup>

Looking at the architecture and use of the church buildings brings into view differences between the church communities and the villages.

### 8.2.1 | Schildwolde

The church building of Schildwolde was built in 1686 and bears some traces of the original building from the thirteenth century, such as the priest entrance. The church is plastered yellow and a path with flowers on both sides leads to the door. The visitor enters the church via a portal, where to the right is the consistory and on the left stands a table with hymn books. In the church red-brown benches with black knobs stand on both sides of the aisle facing the choir. Halfway along the south wall is the pulpit enclosure with the pulpit from 1666, which was donated by the minister Copius Meyer, who also initiated the renewal of the church. On the other side of the path, facing the pulpit, stand three box pews, rising in height and decoration. The last pew has a canopy with the coats of arms of local patrician families. The middle bench, opposite the pulpit, is where the church council used to sit (see image 5). The spacious choir is slightly raised and the space is dominated by a large box pew, which stands in the apse like an altar. Above the pew is a rosette window and in front of it stands the communion table. During worship services the churchgoers tend to sit on the benches near the entrance. From that position, the table stands far away in the choir.<sup>49</sup>

#### *New Year's Eve*

On New Year's Eve the church in Schildwolde is full for once. I see many unfamiliar faces. It is one of the rare occasions when *Hervormde*, *Vrijgemaakte* and non-churchgoing villagers gather in the *Hervormde* church. All villagers who died during the past year and were buried at the public cemetery are commemorated. Relatives receive an invitation to join the service, through which the church performs a memorial function. The New Year's Eve service is one of the moments when the church takes a central place in the village community and people irrespective of denominational affiliation go to the church.<sup>50</sup>

Outside, people walk around the tower and the party tent which stands on the lawn next to the cemetery. Throughout the night the church bells ring and people gather around

<sup>48</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Exploration in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology*, Aldersgate, Ashgate, 2003, p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle Middeleeuwse*, p. 505.

<sup>50</sup> New Year's Eve service, Schildwolde, 31 December 2014.

the tower to wish each other a good year. Every year, as a result of a community initiative by village societies, the society of local entrepreneurs and churches, a meeting place is created in a large party tent in front of the church. For a fortnight, the tent is the stage for parties, concerts, and other activities.<sup>51</sup> In 2012 the three churches of Schildwolde decided to organise a low-key ecumenical Christmas service in the tent. They hoped that the Christmas service would attract non-churchgoers. The assumption was that the party tent, to which people were already used to coming for the New Year's Eve party, would provide a lower threshold. After six years it turns out that hardly any outsiders visit the church, but that it brings people from the different denominational communities together.<sup>52</sup> In chapter 9.1 I describe this form of public ritual in more detail and assess whether it meets expectations.

### *The Juffer Tower*

Until 2013, the tower was the property of the *Hervormde* congregation, but they lacked the human resources to maintain the building. In 2013 the congregation transferred the tower to a village foundation. In the board are representatives of both churches, the historical society and other village groups.<sup>53</sup> The tower was restored and there are plans to make a small history museum about the tower in the attic. The tower stands somewhat apart from the church and villagers identify more strongly with the former than with the latter. The village magazine is called the *Juffer* and during the village festival week lamp posts are decorated with the silhouette of the tower. The whole village contributed to the restoration of the tower: the baker sold biscuits in the form of the tower and the cake mould was designed by the local smith who lives next to the church.<sup>54</sup> On the one hand, the transfer of the tower meant that the church lost a function in village life by no longer maintaining a meeting place that is of fundamental importance to the average villager. Nevertheless, the cooperation with other organisations within the new foundation leads to new contacts and cooperation partners. In the perception of Tom (PG111), the president of the village association, the *Hervormde* congregation is not actively involved in other village organisations, so the transfer also creates new possibilities for the building of bridging social capital.<sup>55</sup>

### *On the Churchyard*

While the congregation no longer has responsibility for the tower, they still maintain the graveyard around the church and the cemetery which lies next to the church. In this way, the church community contributes to the maintenance of the physical environment. On Saturday morning men from the *Hervormde* congregation, the *Vrijgemaakte* church and one or two others gather at the cemetery to weed the paths and the space between the graves. Halfway through the morning they drink coffee in the learning room of the *Hervormde* church and they finish their work with a drink. It is one of the occasions when *Hervormden*

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<sup>51</sup> Interview president village society Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

<sup>53</sup> 'Juffertoren in handen van dorp Schildwolde', *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 30 June 2015; <http://www.juffermarkt.nl/>, accessed 28 November 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Wilma (PS 2), Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 12 December 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Interview PG111, president village association Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

and *Vrijgemaakten* work together and denominational differences are bridged.<sup>56</sup> In chapter 9.1 I further analyse the growing cooperation between the two churches.

The churchyard was also the place where the jumble sale took place. The proceeds were for the church and the minister used to play the role of auctioneer.<sup>57</sup> But sadly the jumble sale has stopped, because the human resources seemed to be lacking. This was much to the disappointment of several church members, some of whom said that if they had known in time they would have been prepared to continue the organisation.<sup>58</sup> The villagers also regretted that the jumble sale was stopped, because it was one of the moments when the church became more visible in village life.<sup>59</sup> This shows that a group of people still had a connection with the church through a yearly event like a jumble sale, which was broken when the event stopped.

### *Nursing Home*

Up to this point I have focussed on the broader circle of people who are connected with the church through places, such as the tower and the cemetery, and through events, such as the New Year's Eve services. Events and places seem important for building bridging social capital. Looking at moments where binding social capital is created, connections based on activities and people play a larger role. Part of church life takes place in the nursing home in Slochteren where several church members live. The ministers and church members visit residents regularly, and there is a Bible group and singing afternoons. Since the nursing home has a regional function, the Protestant congregation of Slochteren-Schildwolde, the Protestant congregation of Scharmer-Harkstede, the *Vrijgemaakte* Church of Schildwolde, the *Vrijgemaakte* Church of Harkstede, and the *Hervormde* congregation SOHN alternately organise worship services on Sunday evenings. Morning services from the respective churches are videotaped and broadcast in the home.<sup>60</sup>

The services are attended by residents of various denominational backgrounds. This leads to new ecumenical contacts, also when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. A former minister of the *Vrijgemaakte* Church opposed his members taking part in the Lord's Supper when the *Hervormde* minister led the service, but the *Vrijgemaakte* residents ignored this.<sup>61</sup> This means that the services are a place where not only denominational differences, but also physical distances are bridged, because through the services and the visiting work of church members, residents can sustain ties with their old village (see sec. 8.3.1). In December 2016 the nursing home was closed and joint services are now held in the nursing home in Siddeburen.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Maintenance church yard Schildwolde, 25 April 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Mara (PH6), Maintenance church yard Hellum, 5 April 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Meeting Sunday school Schildwolde, 5 March 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Interview PG111, president village association Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

<sup>60</sup> *De Bron & Rondom D'Olle Dodde, Kerkblad voor de Hervormde Gemeenten, Schildwolde-Overschild-Hellum en Noordbroek*, (3:6), June 2015, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Karel (PH7) Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 14 January 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Bram Hulzebos, 'Zonnehuis Olderloug sluit deuren', *HS Krant*, 7 October 2015.

### *Inside the Learning Room*

Figure E.2-3 (app. C) reveals that people outside the church community notice the *Hervormde* congregation mainly through the work on the cemetery, and the Christmas, New Year's Eve, and Harvest services. The church newsletter is also an important source of contact, through which the church relates to a larger group. But a large part of church life, which takes place in the *leerkamer* (learning room), remains hidden. Next to the church stands the parsonage with the learning room, built in 1871 as a venue for catechism.<sup>63</sup> Since the parsonage in Hellum was sold, Hellum lacks this kind of ancillary space and the congregation has to pay rent to the heritage foundation (*SOGK*) for the use of the church building in Overschild. Consequently, church life mainly takes place in the learning room in Schildwolde: church council meetings, discussion evenings, Bible group, Sunday school, meals, singing afternoons, gatherings of the maintenance group, and coffee once a month after the worship service. The minister sits in the learning room every Wednesday, holding an open house, a service which is seldom used.<sup>64</sup>

### *Bible and Discussion Groups*

The Bible group gathers every fortnight on Wednesday afternoons in the learning room. It is a group of approximately 20 elderly people from Schildwolde, Hellum and Overschild, but nobody from Noordbroek. This group forms the backbone of the church community. Participants can suggest which Bible texts they want to read. In the spring of 2014, Mrs. de Vries (PS27) suggested to the minister that they follow the readings of the worship services from Matthew.<sup>65</sup> This meant that the group could give input for the sermons or that afterwards discussions about the sermons could continue. Since the same readings of the Sermon on the Mount by Matthew were also read during church council meetings and in the services in the nursing home, the congregation more or less lived with the texts.<sup>66</sup>

For the younger age group of thirty to sixty-year-olds there are discussion evenings once a month. Contrary to the Bible group it is always a surprise how many people turn up. As a consequence, the composition of the group differs greatly. While in the Bible group it is easy to continue the conversation from the previous time, this is not possible in the discussion group. Here the group does not start with Bible texts, but discusses themes such as the meaning of Easter. But when events ask for another topic, the theme is easily changed. After the village was startled by a third suicide in two months, several group members felt the need to talk this through: how can we make sense of this? Wilma (PS2) expressed her astonishment that someone had said that it was God's will. Karin (PS82) told how she regularly visits a woman who has lost her daughter and how she feels her grief.<sup>67</sup> The discussion reveals how worldviews are discussed, how the group is personally affected by the suffering of others and how people try to develop strategies to cope with life difficulties.

<sup>63</sup> Teule-Veldkamp, *Een terugblik*, p. 96.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. *De Bron* (2:9), November 2014, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> PS 27, Church service Schildwolde, 5 January 2014.

<sup>66</sup> *De Bron* (2:1), January 2014, p. 12; Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 14 January 2014; Bible group, Schildwolde, 22 January 2014; Church service, Schildwolde, 2 February 2014; Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 4 February 2014; Church service nursing home, Slochteren, 16 February 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Discussion group, Schildwolde, 20 March 2014.

## Chapter 8

Here the social environment of the material life arena affects the quality of life in the personal life arena.

The minister uses both the Bible and the discussion group as a place to bring in questions about the function, place, and calling of the church. How can we become church in the village? In his sermon on the first Sunday of the new year the minister raises the following question:

*How can we as a congregation of Christ be there for the seeking Magi in our society, people who seek something to hold on to in an environment of much uncertainty and change? [...] How can we share that gospel story in a way that it reaches the people who need it, both within and outside the church? [...] Or are we overly concerned with keeping ourselves going, doing things as we've always done them, the organisation and the buildings?<sup>68</sup>*

The question is further discussed in the Bible group. The group reads Matthew 5:13-16 and talks about what it means not to place your light under the corn measure:

*We should not only spread the light in our own household, but we need to go outside. How do you put the light on the stand? By working as a volunteer. Can't people see you're from the church? I don't want to witness at the door like a Jehovah's Witness, but people will surely be able to see that you are a church person.<sup>69</sup>*

It becomes clear how a connection can develop between activities. When people meet regularly they can continue an ongoing discussion, both on a personal level, in relation to well-being, and on a congregational level, talking about the future of the church. The frequency and succession of activities is crucial for connecting through activities and the development of binding social capital which forms a community.

### *Sing, Eat, Walk*

After the new hymnbook of the Protestant Church was published in 2013, two church council members started singing afternoons to become more acquainted with the new songs. A church member who also plays the organ regularly accompanies the group. The afternoons are mainly visited by elderly people from Schildwolde, and Carolien (PN12) from Noordbroek.<sup>70</sup> Pictures on the walls of the learning room remind of former days when the congregation had its own choir. Hellum and Schildwolde used to have their own choirs, until they merged and in 2012 the choir stopped.<sup>71</sup>

Two times per year the minister and two church council members organise a meal in

<sup>68</sup> "Hoe wij als gemeente van Christus er kunnen zijn voor de magiërs in onze samenleving en dan bedoel ik voor de mensen op zoek, op zoek naar houvast in een omgeving waar alles steeds maar onzeker is, verandert; [...] Hoe kunnen wij dat evangelie op een zodanige manier vertellen dat het bij de mensen komt die het nodig hebben, mensen binnen en mensen buiten de kerk? [...] Of zijn we toch te veel bezig ons zelf overeind te houden, de dingen te doen zoals ze altijd gingen, de organisatie en de gebouwen?" (Church service Schildwolde, 5 January 2014).

<sup>69</sup> "Maar dat uitdragen van het licht moeten we niet alleen doen in ons eigen huishouden, maar we moeten naar buiten." "Hoe zet u het licht op de standaard?" "Door vrijwilligerswerk te doen. Kunnen mensen dat niet zien, dat je een kerkmens bent? Ik wil niet als Jehovagetuige deur aan deur getuigen. Maar mensen zullen dat vast wel kunnen zien." (Participants Bible group, Schildwolde, 22 January 2014).

<sup>70</sup> Singing group, Schildwolde, 11 February 2014, 11 March 2014, 20 May 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Barel, *Hellum, een parel*, p. 113; Mara (PH 6), Maintenance morning church yard, Hellum, 5 April 2014.

the learning room. The kitchen is not equipped for serious cooking, so they make the stews and rice in advance at home. Again, this is an activity organised by core members for the rest of community; it seems difficult to mobilise other people. The meals attract various age groups from families with babies to people in their eighties, one of the rare occasions outside the worship services that age groups mix and interact.<sup>72</sup> Another moment when a meal is shared is on the morning of Ascension day. After a traditional early walk at dawn, breakfast is held in the learning room.<sup>73</sup>

The president of the village society told me that it is not easy to go for a walk in the linear village, something which is regretted by the many walking and cycling enthusiasts who live there. He was surprised to learn that the church also organises a walk on Ascension day.<sup>74</sup> Although the community followed his advice to put an announcement in the local newspaper, no other walkers turned up. A small group of about ten people follow the route that Timo (PS110), who knows his way through the village, has marked out. Halfway the minister halts and takes a moment for meditation. He invites people to stand still, to be aware of the place where they are standing, feeling the earth beneath them and seeing the sky above.<sup>75</sup>

### 8.2.2 | Hellum

In Hellum there is only a *Hervormde* church. *Gereformeerden* in Hellum go to the *Gereformeerde* church in Siddeburen and *Vrijgemaakte* attend the church in Schildwolde. Catholics and Mennonites have to travel to Sappemeer. The village is not divided along denominational lines like in Schildwolde, but various respondents distinguish between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Although they say that the village is not churchgoing, they claim that the church building belongs to everybody and 75 percent of the village pays for its upkeep. In the survey, people from Hellum more often mention that the church should be open to others, giving space for religious diversity and being involved in village society.<sup>76</sup> The church is regularly open, not only for worship services and drinking coffee during maintenance work, but also for weddings, funerals and various village events, such as Remembrance Day, concerts organised by the *Helmster Klokkeluiders*, *Kloksmeer* on New Year's Eve, and the jumble sale. Every day at 11 o'clock a group of volunteers rings the bells of the church. This tradition comes from the time when farmers and workers on the land needed to know when they should go home for their midday supper.

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<sup>72</sup> Stewbuffet, Schildwolde, 7 March 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Morning walk Ascension day, Schildwolde, 29 May 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Interview PG111, President village society Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Morning walk Ascension day, Schildwolde, 29 May 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Selection of survey responses to question 8: "Betrokken zijn met het algemene dorpsleven en met niet-kerkelijke mededorpsbewoners" (Being involved with general village life and with non-churchgoing villagers); "Een kerkgemeenschap zijn. Mensen betrekken bij de activiteiten in de kerk, mensen de ruimte geven om te geloven en daarin keuzes te maken, je betrokken voelen bij elkaar en dit kenbaar maken in de praktijk" (Being a church community, involving people with activities of the church, giving people the space to believe and to choose, having an interest in each other and showing this in practice); "Plek om bijeen te komen en historie en markant dorpspunt" (Place to gather, historical and prominent place in the village); "Verdraagzaamheid en verbondenheid stimuleren" (Stimulating tolerance and solidarity); "Dat je samen een kerk bent en dat ook uitdraagt naar buiten" (That you are a church together and show this to the outside world).

*Between Churchyard and Cemetery*

The churchyard is seen as the midpoint of the linear village.<sup>77</sup> On a sunny Saturday in September 2014 a cavalcade of carriages passes the village. The theme is two hundred years of monarchy. On the churchyard stand tables and chairs, where people can drink a cup of tea. The village choir sings old Dutch songs. The activity committee, the sextons and the choir have organised the catering and the furnishing, while the churchyard looks impeccable due to work of the Cemetery Hellum group.<sup>78</sup>

Fifteen years ago, the churchyard and cemetery looked untidy and the wall around the churchyard needed repairs. On initiative of the village society, the church wardens, the municipality, and *Landschapsbeheer Groningen* (Landscape Management Groningen) started a project to restore the centre of Hellum. Other village organisations also joined the initiative, raising money for the restoration of the wall. People could buy a brick and engrave their name on it before it was baked. Gravestones were restored by volunteers, who repainted the lettering. This led to more knowledge about the history of the village. A bench surrounded by hedges was placed near the entrance of the graveyard, which functions as a hangout.<sup>79</sup> Through the maintenance work the church became visible in village life. The village society finds it important to support the congregation in the maintenance of the church, churchyard and cemetery. In this way, various groups contribute not only to the maintenance of the physical environment, but also sustain the village community. It is intriguing to see how place attachment brings people together for community initiative.

The group consisting of church members and people involved in the village hall still gathers every fortnight to maintain the churchyard, the grounds of the village hall and the cemetery. The aim of the group is not only to work, but also to socialise. Men with spades and hoes walk round the church, sometimes weeding, sometimes talking. Among them is also a church member from Schildwolde. During the morning, they work their way to the village hall, weeding and sweeping the leaves. The sexton (PH6) takes a bucket and a brush to clean the graves. The silence is broken by the noise of a lawnmower. Mara (PH6) tells stories about the people who lie buried here. She tells about a woman who wanted to be lowered into the grave with ropes and not mechanically. She points to four graves belonging to two boys and two men and tells about the tragedy of Hellum. The boys had in the winter gone ice skating on the Schildmeer. When they did not return two men went to rescue them, but all fell through the ice and drowned. She was still a little girl, but remembers that the village was plunged into mourning.<sup>80</sup> The churchyard is a place where narratives about village history are remembered.

After an hour, the group drinks a cup of coffee in the church. One of the men treats the others to cake for his birthday. It is a moment when people ask about each other's health, gossip about other villagers and announce upcoming activities. As in Schildwolde, the morning is closed with drinks in the church. Mara (PH6) says that it took some effort to persuade the group to drink coffee in the church as they are not used to entering the build-

<sup>77</sup> Grimme, *Hellum, een parel*, p. 23.

<sup>78</sup> Marc Jansen, 'Fraeylema Koetsentocht met koninklijk allure', *HS-krant*, 6 June 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Grimme, *Hellum*, p. 96.

<sup>80</sup> Idem, pp. 124-129.



ing. But in the church, they do not have to pay for every cup, as they do in the village hall.<sup>81</sup> Thus, both the church and the village hall have their limitations in terms of accessibility. Coffee in the church is free, but people experience a threshold, which might be explained by unfamiliarity with the building. They might feel more at ease in the village hall, but then their coffee is not free.

### *Inside the Helmster Church*

The Walfridus church in Hellum dating from circa 1000 was built as a Catholic church (see image 6). After the Reformation, all Catholic elements were removed from the church and a wall closed off the choir. The church has the oldest *rouwborden* (memorial plaques) in Groningen.<sup>82</sup> During the restoration (1963-1966), the small Romanesque windows were reconstructed, the choir was opened up again and the benches were replaced by chairs, which makes the interior very flexible. During worship services the chairs in the nave are placed in two rows; opposite the pulpit stand a dozen chairs for the church council. The pulpit dates from 1759 and bears the coat of arms of the families Rengers and Ripperda. At the far end of the room the communion table is placed with a lectern and behind it the chair for the minister. To the left of the table the lid of a sarcophagus has been erected, to which the font is attached.<sup>83</sup> In the choir is a niche low to the ground, that might very well have been used in the Middle Ages as sepulchre during Easter plays.<sup>84</sup> In the back, near the entrance, is a bar with a small sitting area where people can have a coffee. Nowadays the church is rather bare, although you can still see some traces from the past.

Because the interior of the church is flexible the church is very suitable for recitals and concerts. After some slight alterations, the church is transformed into a concert hall: by removing the chairs opposite the pulpit, placing a piano next to the pulpit and a microphone at the top of the aisle a podium can be created. For a choir with more than sixty singers the choir space is filled with platforms on several levels. On the psalm board 'welcome' is written instead of psalm numbers or the board is replaced all together by a floral wreath. Another difference between a worship service and a concert is the way the church lit. During the double spring concert of the regional choir a spotlight was created during the second half of the concert by turning on only the lights in the choir space, leaving the public in the dark. The bare walls and the lamps hanging down from the ceiling at different heights like a reverse chandelier, create an artistic atmosphere.<sup>85</sup> Maybe because of these slight differences in the interior the sexton detects a difference in atmosphere in the church when she comes there for a worship service or for a concert.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Mara (PH 6), Maintenance church yard Hellum, 6 April 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Elmar Hofman, 'Ronde rouwborden in Hellum, Het belang van de bijzondere gedenktekens van Frans en Egbert Rengers', *Groninger Kerken* (33:2), 2016, pp. 71-76.

<sup>83</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, p. 405.

<sup>84</sup> *Hellum*, <http://www.kerkeninbeeld.nl/>, accessed 31 August 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Spring concert, Hellum, 23 March 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 1 April 2014.

### *Helmster Klokkeluiders*

In 2001 the foundation *Helmster Klokkeluiders* (Helmster Bell-ringer) was set up by the church community and village association. A church member represents the church community. Four times a year they organised a concert or a performance of a cultural nature in the church.<sup>87</sup> An example is the performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* in the local dialect, which a sexton very proudly mentioned to me. In his welcoming speech, the secretary of the cultural foundation underlined how nice it was to be able to listen to professional artists in their very own church: "The winter has stayed away, there is no snow here, but we create a winter atmosphere with music in our own language."<sup>88</sup> The foundation can rent the church at a reduced price. Every concert is visited by around forty people, but this is not enough to cover all expenses, therefore the foundation also depends on gifts from donors. The concerts always take place on Sunday afternoons when the church is still warm from the morning worship service. People who attend the concerts come, as with the worship services, from the village and the surrounding area.

The main aim of the *Helmster Klokkeluiders* is to expand the social function of the church. The point is to have a shared experience. The foundation wants to demonstrate that you can do something in the church and hopes to inspire other people to do the same. In this way, they try to give an impulse to village life. A board member says:

*We would like the church to become a building where people who don't come for a worship service do want to enter. The first time people come for the music, which happens to be inside the church. We hope that gradually the church will come to belong to everyone, – that would be beautiful – so that when the church community disappears, the church can continue. If you want to maintain such a building for the community, you need more visitors and more people who say: 'I want to organise something in that church'.*<sup>89</sup>

This is an interesting remark which draws attention to two things: first, apparently the church does not currently belong to everyone and is not easily accessible in people's experience; there is a threshold. Second, there is the wish that something of the church will continue if the church community stops. Not only should the church building be preserved, but it should also be available to use for various purposes.

### *Children's Easter Vigil*

It is seven o'clock in the evening on Holy Saturday. The church of Hellum is half lit and on a screen *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is projected. On the stairs lies a carpet with cushions. The minister sits on the ground with a group of children around him (image 6). Parents and

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<sup>87</sup> Grimme, *Hellum*, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> "De winter is weggebleven, hier is geen sneeuw, [...] we brengen de winter in onze eigen taal door muziek." (*Winterraize*, Hellum, 16 February 2014).

<sup>89</sup> "We willen graag dat de kerk een gebouw wordt waar mensen die niet voor een kerkdienst komen, wel naar binnen willen. Eerste keer komen ze gewoon voor de muziek, dat is dan toevallig in de kerk. Langzamerhand wordt de kerk dan weer voor iedereen, dat zou heel mooi zijn. Zodat als de kerkelijke gemeente ophoudt te bestaan, om de kerk dan wel door te laten gaan. Wil je zo'n gebouw behouden voor de gemeenschap, wat meer bezoekers, en mensen die zeggen ik wil wat in die kerk organiseren." (Meeting church council and *Helmster Klokkeluiders*, Hellum, 15 May 2014).

grandparents sit on the chairs. A little girl walks around from the carpet to her mother. The minister reads stories, a tradition that has blown over from the New Church in Groningen. The story of The Very Hungry Caterpillar, which mirrors the story of the resurrection of Christ, is mixed with the vigil tradition of reading key biblical stories, such as Jonah, the Exodus. The children follow the characters Mirjam and Micha who meet several figures from the Bible.<sup>90</sup>

Every year it is difficult to tell whether it will happen again. Are there people to organise the vigil? Often new organisers have to be found, who have to work out what has to be done. Will there be enough people to play the roles?<sup>91</sup> In 2015 the human resources were lacking and the organisers had to make a PowerPoint presentation instead to visualise the story. The Easter Vigil is a moment where children from several villages come together. There are children from the Sunday school in Schildwolde, the children's service in Noordbroek and a couple of children who I have not seen before. Did the publicity in the local newspaper and the posters in the schools and the supermarket have effect? It is difficult to tell. People may not have swarmed to the church, but at least in passing by the school door the *Hervormde* congregation has become visible for a moment in village life.<sup>92</sup>

The children's Easter Vigil leads to a number of observations. The event creates bridging social capital since it connects various groups (see sec. 8.3.1). Because people come from a wide area, they do not meet each other on a daily basis. At the same time, it is exactly the regional network which has worked here. Because some church members visited the New Church in Groningen, they came across the idea of a children's Easter Vigil, which they introduced into the *Hervormde* congregation. On such occasions, the advantage of owning various church buildings becomes clear. To host such an event, you need a large flexible space, which the churches in the other villages lack.

### Church Life

When one looks at what institutional church life consists of one sees, apart from the monthly services, that a group of ten people tries to maintain church life: bringing flowers to villagers in times of joy or sorrow and visiting people who need some attention. Around Christmas everyone who has something to do with the church receives a Christmas gift. Relatives of all deceased villagers, irrespective of church membership, are invited for the memorial service on New Year's Eve. It is interesting to see how these gestures make the connection visible with the broader village community who relate through place and events. It also makes clear that the congregation has a broad understanding of who is connected to the church. This brings into view a paradox between words and practice. The respondents say that the maintenance work is not really church, but since the maintenance mornings are announced in the church newsletter, the church community distributes tokens of appreciation and provides the catering, the maintenance is an integral part of church life.

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<sup>90</sup> Children Easter Vigil, Hellum, 4 April 2015; *Mirjam en Micha*, <https://www.mirjamenmicha.nl/over-mirjam-en-micha/>, accessed 28 November 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Meeting church council - Sunday school, Schildwolde, 4 February 2013; Meeting Sunday school, Schildwolde, 5 March 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Children Easter vigil, Hellum, 4 April 2015.

When you ask villagers what they can tell you about the church, they seem to know very little about the liturgical and pastoral activities.<sup>93</sup> They mainly speak about the cultural activities: the church bells that ring every day, and the cultural committee which organises various events in the church. The *Neutraal Gemengd Koord Sydeberth* (Neutral mixed choir Sydeberth) from a neighbouring village, in which people from Hellum also sing, performs Christmas and spring concerts in a very crowded church.<sup>94</sup> The New Year is celebrated in the village hall, during which the church bells ring for several hours. Remembrance Day also takes place in the church.<sup>95</sup>

Walking around the church building and talking with people about the church, it becomes clear that the building is an iconic, important feature of village life. The churchyard and cemetery are places that contain village history and family stories, when there is someone who can tell about it. By maintaining the building, the church community contributes to the physical environment. At the same time the church council offers an important meeting place by opening the church for concerts, receptions, funerals, etc. By organising and participating in activities the church also contributes to the social cohesion. The driving forces behind this are Kees and Mara, who are almost always available to facilitate activities. They are closely involved in church life, as elders and in organising the pastors for the services. They embody the relation between church and village and are actively involved in everything that happens in the church. Thus, the church needs the village for the preservation of the medieval building and the village needs the church for concerts, the Christmas celebration, commemoration day, and funerals.

### 8.2.3 | Noordbroek

On Ascension day, the church of Noordbroek forms the midpoint of the village. After the church and a museum opened their doors for the first time on Ascension day in 1986 the cultural day has grown into a village event, when historic sights, artists, museums, galleries, and shops welcome visitors from the whole region. People have to park their car outside the village and are transported there by coach or bus. Traditionally the church receives the most visitors, who walk through the building and drink a cup coffee in the *leerkerkje* (learning church).<sup>96</sup>

Guides are present to explain the history of the building. The Romano-Gothic church, built in the first half of the fourteenth century, is famous for its organ and the medieval frescos, which were rediscovered during the restoration fifty years ago (see image 7). The guides start their tour under the organ, on the west side of the church, where people used to enter the building. The first thing you see is a double fresco of Adam and Eve on the one side and the baptism of Jesus on the other. The next vault displays the story of Saint

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<sup>93</sup> Village café Hellum, 14 February 2014; Meeting *Helmster Klokkeluiders*, Hellum, 26 August 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Spring concert, Neutral mixed choir *Sydeberth*, Hellum, 23 March 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Interviews during Participant Observation in Hellum, Village café, 14 February 2014; Village play *Disturbance in the Home of Rest*, Hellum, 8 February 2014; General meeting village society, Hellum, 19 February 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Evaluation meeting Cultural Day Noordbroek, 3 June 2014; *Kring Cultureel Noordbroek*, <http://www.noordbroek.com/kcn/Actueel.html>, accessed 20 July 2017; 'Kring Cultureel Noordbroek ter ziele: te weinig bestuursleden', *Menterwolde.info*, 24 January 2017.

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

Christopher, a giant who looked for a purpose in life. After serving first the king and later the devil, a hermit suggested that he could serve the most powerful person in the world by carrying people over the river. One night he heard the voice of a child calling him. The fresco depicts Christopher carrying a child through the river, where mermaids swim, in a rural landscape with a fisherman on the riverbank. The story goes that as Christopher walked through the river the child became heavier and heavier, and he almost fell into the river. When he reached the other side, he asked where the weight came from. The child replied that he was Christ and that he carried the sorrow of the world on his shoulders. This incident gave him the name Christ-carrier. The climax of the fresco series is the Last Judgement, showing Christ on the rainbow, with Mary and John by his side, heaven on his right and hell on his left. In the apse Christ is depicted as the man of sorrows, which would have been above the altar. In the choir are a sacrament niche and a piscina.<sup>97</sup>

### *A Worship Service in Noordbroek*

Noordbroek on a Sunday morning is quiet. A cyclist rides down the street. The ringing bells make clear that there is a service in the church, but I see nobody outside the building. On this March morning, the sun lights up the church's reddish stones. Crocuses are popping up between the graves. Inside the church three children hand out liturgy booklets. About twenty people sit on the benches opposite the pulpit. The rococo pulpit and the baptismal rail were made in 1757.<sup>98</sup> Although the minister of the *Hervormde* Congregation of SOH leads the service in Noordbroek, the services have a slightly different character. There is room for silence and musical intermezzos, which are announced in the booklets. The organ playing is not background music during the chatting before the service, but it is part of the service, which starts after the church council has entered the church. While in Schildwolde children just visit the Sunday school and do not enter the church, the children in Noordbroek leave the church after a children's story, which is related to the theme of the service. The stories tell about Mirjam and Micha, two children who play and talk with Jesus. The attention to detail is also noticed by Mr. in 't Veld (PN35): "a well-prepared service, for that I don't mind the cold."<sup>99</sup>

After the service churchgoers leave the chilly church building – outside it is warmer than inside – and walk to a small building next to the graveyard for a cup of coffee. This is the learning church, which looks somewhat like the Protestant churches in Brabant. A heavy green door is flanked by round arched windows. Via a corridor the visitor enters a room, where light pours in through the windows and people can warm up. Tables are placed in a 'U' form and I am told that the room was also used for worship services in the winter months, when the church was too cold. A box and some toys are available for babysitting. The tranquillity of the worship service is replaced by clattering cups and chattering people.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Piscina is a niche in a church near an altar, where the priest could wash his hands and the communion vessels during the Eucharist. (Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, pp. 463-464). Justin Kroesen, Regnerus Steensma (eds.), *De Groninger cultuurschat: Kerken van 1000 tot 1800*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2008, pp. 83

<sup>98</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, p. 464.

<sup>99</sup> "Een mooi verzorgde dienst, daar heb ik de kou wel voor over." (Church service Noordbroek, 2 March 2014).

<sup>100</sup> Church service Noordbroek, 2 March 2014.

### *Fragmented Church Life*

The church plays a marginal role in village life, and has done so for decades. In Noordbroek the farmers and labourers were hostile to each other. The church council was dominated by farmers, and the church did not have a good reputation. Mrs. Timmer (PG55) who came to live in Noordbroek after her marriage in the 1950s noticed that people thought it strange that she went to the church. Many baptized members in the village did not know they belonged to the church. She remembers that in that period there was a small group who visited the worship services. The church also offered Sunday school, but the children only occasionally visited the church. Mrs. Timmer presided over the women's society for many years until it ended in 2010. She always prepared a reading for the evening and chose familiar Christian songs. The evenings were visited almost exclusively by women who did not go the worship services. There were no thorough reflective, theological conversations. Nevertheless, the society had a pastoral and diaconal task: they sent flowers to each other in times of sickness or mourning and they started the initiative to bring fruit baskets to all people in the nursing home. It seems that the Sunday school, catechism, and women's society formed separate circles, which were not related to the worship services. However, during the restoration of the church in the 1970s the whole village contributed:

*During the restoration, the whole village, well, the whole village was involved. The church belongs in Noordbroek and the church shouldn't disappear. We don't go there, we don't do that, but we do collaborate to keep it here. Yes, that's how it is, I have to be honest, that's when the church becomes alive.<sup>101</sup>*

### *Church Relating to the Village*

Nowadays it seems that church life in Noordbroek consists only of monthly worship services and that the church community has little connection with village life. This is hardly surprising when one realises that the church council consists of only one deacon, Maaike (PN10). Erik (PN5) decided to stop as a church warden, because he could no longer combine the workload with his job. Maaike (PN10) acts out of a great sense of duty and continues to maintain contacts with the nursing home, where the community organises evensongs, takes time for pastoral visits, writes in the church newsletter, is contact person for the guides and other groups and participates in a municipal welfare network. She is assisted by two church wardens from Appingedam whose task is to find a new owner for the church building. In the perception of villagers, the church has already disappeared. Roel (PN 106) says:

*I find faith very important, but the way everything has been going for the last couple of years has made me move away. You never leave faith, that is something quite different. [...] Everything gradually crumbles away: churches close. There is no longer a minister that I know. In the past, you could say: I would like to have chat with the minister. That's a thing of the past now, because I don't know which minister to approach. Villagers don't know who the minister is anymore; even*

<sup>101</sup> "Bij de restauratie, het hele dorp was, kijk, dan werkt het hele dorp mee. De kerk hoort in Noordbroek en de kerk moet niet weg. Erheen gaan nog niet, dat doen we niet, maar meewerken eraan dat de kerk er blijft. Oh ja, zo is het wel hoor, dat moet ik heel eerlijk zeggen, dan leeft de kerk wel." (Interview Mrs Timmer (PG55)).

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

*I do not know who the minister of this church is. Occasionally a minister arrives, only to disappear again soon after. [...] There is no church council anymore. The building is empty, that is to say, a group visits the church every three to four weeks. That is a nice construction, but besides that there is absolutely nothing left. We cannot address people, because they no longer have that function. The church council doesn't function any more.*<sup>102</sup>

It seems that the presence of a church has to do with visibility, recognisability and most of all people. There might still be a church building, but here the church community has nearly become invisible.

Around 2000 the church council was aware that the church building was the most important point of contact with the village. But because the mistrust of the church is very great, they were also aware that they were not able to make the connection with the village on their own. Another factor is that the current group of churchgoers consists almost entirely of people from outside the village. They may have lived in the village for ten to twenty years, but apart from Lenie (PG65), none of them is an original inhabitant, which may make it more difficult to form a link with the village community. This was the reason why the church community approached Roel, who as a General Practitioner was a well-known person in the village with many contacts, to help open up the church. After his retirement in 2007 Roel (PN 106) found the time to gather a couple of interested people to form the guiding committee. Together the church community and the guides started some new initiatives, such as the Christmas walk and Remembrance Day, to make the church building more a church for the village: "We try to keep [the church building] alive in the village."<sup>103</sup>

The church council wants to keep using the church for worship services, but also offer the opportunity to develop new initiatives. This hospitality is theologically motivated: the congregation wants to be "an open, accessible and progressive faith community where everybody can experience faith in his or her own way."<sup>104</sup> They are convinced that the re-

<sup>102</sup> PN 106: "Ik vind geloof heel belangrijk, alleen zoals het de laatste jaren ging, ben je er zo van verwijderd, maar je verwijderd nooit van geloven, dat is heel iets anders." Interviewer: "Wat bedoelt u met zoals het de laatste jaren ging?" PN 106: "Dat alles langzamerhand afkalft, dat de kerken dicht gaan, dat er niet meer een dominee is die ik ken. Vroeger kon je zeggen, ik wil eens even met de dominee praten hè. Dat is niet meer, want welke dominee moet je hebben hè. [...] Iemand in het dorp die kent niet de dominee van nu. En nog weet ik nog niet eens wie de dominee is van deze kerk, hier. Af en toe komt er eens een dominee en die vliegt dan weer weg. [...] Er is geen kerkbestuur meer. Hè, het gebouw is leeg natuurlijk in de zin van een keer in de drie vier weken komt er een groep kerken, dat is een mooie constructie, maar verder is er dus absoluut niks meer. We kunnen geen mensen aanspreken, want ze hebben die functie niet meer. Het kerkbestuur, hij doet het niet meer." (Focus group guides Noordbroek, 17 July 2014).

<sup>103</sup> PN106: "Wij proberen het in het dorp levend te houden." Interviewer: "Het gebouw?" PN106 : "Het gebouw, ja." (Focus group guides Noordbroek, 17 July 2014.)

<sup>104</sup> "De Hervormde Gemeente Noordbroek probeert een open, laagdrempelige en progressieve geloofsgemeenschap te zijn, waar iedereen op zijn of haar eigen manier het geloof kan beleven. De Kerk Noordbroek wil de unieke cultuurhistorische kwaliteiten van het kerkgebouw en zijn omgeving verzilveren en voor toekomstige generaties veilig stellen door het gebouw een bredere functie te geven, het te verankeren in de lokale samenleving, door de samenhang met regionaal cultureel erfgoed te benadrukken en door de internationale uitstraling van het orgel te verstevigen. Dat gebeurt vanuit de visie dat de religieuze functie een wezenlijk onderdeel uitmaakt van de uitstraling en de beleving van de kerk en als zodanig een onmisbare schakel vormt in de samenhang van activiteiten die worden ontwikkeld." (The *Hervormde* congregation of Noordbroek tries to be an open, accessible and progressive faith community where everybody can experience faith in his or her own way. The Church of Noordbroek wants to make the most of the unique cultural-historical qualities of the church building and its environment, and secure them for future generations by giving the building a broader function and anchoring

ligious and cultural use of the church can strengthen each other. This was not a new idea. In the 1960s Adriaan Soeting started as a minister in Noordbroek. He wanted to turn the church into a cultural centre: after a restoration, the church could offer space for services with much attention for church music. He dreamt of a choir, concerts, and expanding the knowledge about the history of the church. At that point the frescoes had not yet been discovered. For Soeting it was all part of his pursuit to teach the congregation what it meant to be a church, and to be a community.<sup>105</sup>

### *Groups inside and outside the Church Building*

The present community around the church is still fragmented. Inside the church three groups are active: the church community, the guides and the cultural committee. The church community holds services once a month. The guides open the church for visitors every first Saturday in the summer season. It was very special when residents from the nursing home visited the church. Some of them had lived in Noordbroek for eighty years but had never entered the church. Helen (PN70) says: "You did not go to church, that was for rich people."<sup>106</sup> Several activities are organised to tell stories about the history of the church and the village.<sup>107</sup> The church functioned as a theatre when an actor read fragments from the diary of minister Rutgers van der Loeff who lived in the village in the nineteenth century.<sup>108</sup> Every year the guides organise an exhibition or a project, such as *Misfortune and Wealth*.<sup>109</sup> A couple of years ago artists from the village exhibited their work in the church. The third group is the cultural committee, which organises organ concerts several times per year. The organ, built in 1696 by Arp Schnitger, attracts people from all over the world.<sup>110</sup> According to the guides the organ concerts are mainly visited by people from outside the village. The organists, who live opposite the church, also uses the church for organ lessons.

Two other groups are active around the church: the grave project and the bell-ringers. The churchyard is the domain of the grave project, which started in 2005 with restoration work. The group has gained in-depth knowledge of the funeral heritage. Gradually their attention was drawn to the grave drums, tubs of steel or iron, with a lid of glass, in which flowers were made of iron or porcelain (image 8). Around 1900 it was the rage to place these tubs, with artificial flower wreaths, on the graves. In 2013 a foundation was established to protect these grave drums.<sup>111</sup> The foundation restores the grave drums, and has gained a collection which is displayed on the gallery in the church.

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it in local society, by emphasizing the connection with regional cultural heritage, and by strengthening the international fame of the organ. This is based on the idea that the religious function is a vitally important part of the appearance and experience of the church, and as such forms an indispensable link in the coherence of the activities that are developed. (Website church Noordbroek, removed after transfer of the church.)

<sup>105</sup> 'Culturele manifestaties in de monumentale kerk in Noordbroek, Ds. Soeting: graag cantorij voor de eredienst', *NN*, 12 December 1964.

<sup>106</sup> "In de kerk kwam je niet; dat was iets voor de rijken." (Open Day church Noordbroek, 5 April 2014).

<sup>107</sup> Open Day church Noordbroek, 5 April 2014; Focus group guides Noordbroek, 17 July 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Evaluation meeting Cultural day Noordbroek, 2 June 2014.

<sup>109</sup> 'Rampspoed en Rijkdom in 't Oldambt', *Middengroninger.nl*, 1 April 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, p. 464.

<sup>111</sup> *Stichting tot behoud Groninger graftrommels*, <https://drimble.nl/bedrijf/noordbroek/k57403473/stichting-tot-behoud-groninger-graftrommels.html>, accessed 20 July 2017; 'Troostrijke tekens op het kerkhof van Noordbroek', *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 4 August 2014.



## Four Village Churches in Groningen

Contrary to the organ, the tower, as in Schildwolde, is very much a village thing and around it a group of bell-ringers has assembled. The tower also dates from the fourteenth century, and Noordbroek also knows the tradition of *Klokmeer*.<sup>112</sup> Fifteen years ago New Year's Eve was a night when people did not dare to walk in the street and groups of young people caused trouble, demolishing property and making fires at various places. The mayor had closed the tower, but the group climbed into the tower and opened the door from the inside. Eventually in 2006 they were allowed to ring the bells and now they have strict agreements that people only drink after they have finished ringing.<sup>113</sup> The tower has become the central place on New Year's Eve, attracting hundreds of villagers, who are also allowed to ring the bells themselves.<sup>114</sup> Every year they donate the day's collection to a group in the village.<sup>115</sup> Now they also ring the bells on the cultural day, during the Christmas walk, and funerals. They also organise activities in other places, such as an Easter brunch in the nursing home and a ghost trip through the village around Halloween. After the president of the bell-ringers nearly froze his fingers walking through the village with his daughter on Martinmas, he decided to distribute hot chocolate in the middle of the village.<sup>116</sup> This case illustrates how the presence of a meeting place can lead to a community initiative that reduces nuisance and increases the liveability. This also explains why the village was outraged when in 2015 a local councillor suggested removing the bells from the tower to economise on the council budget. When the village councillor woke up on New Year's Day he found a huge cement church bell in his garden.<sup>117</sup>

A close examination of the whole activity programme in Noordbroek leads to the conclusion that the church as a community is hardly involved. The only church member who is hostess for the guides sees no connection and Maaik (PN10) is involved in the Christmas walk, not as deacon, but as a member of the women's society.<sup>118</sup> The opening of the church and everything related to it has been outsourced to the guides, including the opening around Festival of the Spirit, which is an initiative of the church community. With regard to the tower and the bell-ringing, the church has no say in the matter because the tower is owned by the municipality, so strictly speaking this is not relevant for the research. Nevertheless, the development of the group has proved quite important for the quality of life in the village, pushing back nuisance, and leading to all kinds of community initiatives. It also shows the importance of the physical environment, in this case the significance of a building such as the tower for the identity of a village.

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<sup>112</sup> Karstkarel, *Alle middeleeuwse kerken*, p. 464.

<sup>113</sup> Cultural Day Noordbroek, 29 May 2014.

<sup>114</sup> 'Noordbroek luidt voor negende jaar de klokken met oud en nieuw', *Menterwolde.info*, 31 December 2014.

<sup>115</sup> 'Klokkenluiders schenken cheque aan organisatie wandelvierdaagse', *Menterwolde.info*, 31 December 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Meeting Bell ringers, Noordbroek, 28 November 2014.

<sup>117</sup> 'Menterwolde Gewoon wil geld besparen door klokken uit kerktorens te halen', *RTV Noord*, 29 October 2015; 'Ludieke oudejaarsstunt: kerkklok gedumt in tuin raadslid Menterwolde', *RTV Noord*, 30 December 2015.

<sup>118</sup> Focus group Noordbroek, 24 March 2015.

*The Challenge of Building Bridging Social Capital*

The grave project and the guides have regular contact. There are people who participate in both groups and there is an overlap in interest. The other groups operate largely independent of each other. The church community and the guides both want to give the church building back to Noordbroek, but there seems to be little substantive cooperation in pursuit of this shared goal. They keep each other informed about basic organisational issues, but there is limited communication about each other's plans and activities, and how they might be related. One of the guides' projects like Misfortune and Wealth would have been suitable for a themed service, but the link was not made.<sup>119</sup> Even with regard to the Festival of the Spirit, the groups do not really mix. During the Festival of the Spirit between Ascension day and Pentecost, artists can exhibit their work in churches all over the country (see sec. 9.3.1).<sup>120</sup> Although it is an initiative of the *Hervormde* congregation to participate in the festival, the practical preparations in Noordbroek are carried out by the guides, who prepare the exhibition with the artists and open the church. But they seem to be unaware of what the festival is actually about. Lucas (PN 104) tells enthusiastically about the exhibition of paintings and photographs during Festival of the Spirit, between Ascension day and Pentecost, but the role of the church community is not mentioned in his narrative.

The guides form the main bridge between the church community and village society. They were able to mobilise various clubs and groups to organise Remembrance Day and the Christmas walk. These are occasions when bridging social capital develops and a broader part of village society becomes involved in the church, albeit primarily as a building. The church community itself is hardly involved in the preparations. It seems that the fragmentation around the church is part of the DNA of the village of Noordbroek. Various respondents tell that the community of Noordbroek falls apart into various groups. Some are involved in sports, others in the history society; there is a group around the nursing home and a group who organises the children's games week. The village advice council (*DorpsAdviesRaad*) tries to create bridging social capital between the various groups.<sup>121</sup> A member of the history society remarks that community activities often fall apart in Noordbroek.

*Noordbroek is a village where people are just not able to keep the peace. In the past the farmers were hostile to the labourers and the tradespeople who depended on both sat somewhere in between. [...] Now the youth falls outside the community. The bell-ringers of today were the hooligans of 20 years ago. Back then they wanted to vandalise the tower, now they are protecting it. Togetherness around a project never lasts very long; currently there are arguments about the multifunctional centre, about the library and about the size of the tennis court.*<sup>122</sup>

<sup>119</sup> 'Rampspoed en Rijkdom in 't Oldambt', *Middengroninger.nl*, 1 April 2014.

<sup>120</sup> *Feest van de Geest*, <http://www.feestvandegeest.nl/>, accessed 20 July 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Meeting Village Advise Council Noordbroek, 4 March 2014.

<sup>122</sup> "Noordbroek is een dorp waar het mensen gewoon niet lukt om de boel bij elkaar te houden. Vroeger was het de tegenstelling tussen arbeiders en boeren en de middenstand, die van beiden afhankelijk was, hing daar wat tussenin. [...] Nu is het de jeugd die erbuiten valt. En de klokkenluiders van nu is het gajes van 20 jaar geleden, toen wilden ze de toren vernielen, nu beschermen ze 'm. Gezamenlijkheid rondom een project duurt nooit lang: nu is er weer geruzie over het multifunctioneel centrum: over de bibliotheek, en over de grootte van de tennishal." (Cultural day Noordbroek, 29 May 2014).

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

The church building in Noordbroek both unifies and segregates people. It is an important part of the physical environment, contributing to the character of the village and the living environment. The frescos and the organ make the church interesting for an international public, drawing tourists from the region and abroad to the village. It is a place that can become a physical meeting place, when people are welcomed on open days with a cup of coffee. It forms a stage for community initiatives by various groups: the guides with their tours and exhibitions, the grave project and grave drums foundation wanting to protect funeral heritage, the cultural group who organise concerts, and the tower which connects the bell-ringers, who have decreased nuisance and started new community initiatives. Last but not least there is the church community which welcomes people from the region and keeps in touch with residents in the nursing home.

### *Transfer of the Church*

Finally, in February 2016, the day came that the church building was transferred to the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*.<sup>123</sup> The *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* promises to protect the cultural-historic value of the building. Both the congregation, in the person of the minister, and the foundation speak about giving the church back to the village. Afterwards the reactions are varied. People are glad and relieved; others have a feeling of loss.<sup>124</sup> It is getting dark as I walk back to my car with ambivalent feelings. The building will be maintained, used and probably become more accessible than before, at least if the local committee are able to connect with the broader village community. They want to strengthen the social, cultural and musical function of the building. But where is the attention for preserving something of the religious function of the building, which is inherently part of its history? The members of the local committee with church affiliation also do not seem to ask that question. Do they think that it is safely outsourced to the *Hervormde* congregation? The news coverage reports that in the new situation there will be regular worship services, but why does it feel to me like God has lost his home in Noordbroek?

Since the transfer, the church community no longer has anything to do with the use of the church building. They no longer bear responsibility for the maintenance and use of the church. Although their role was marginal before the transfer, it was crucial for the broader use of the church building. For some years, it was uncertain what would happen to the building. It was clear that the church community was no longer able to maintain the building; the human and financial resources were becoming too small. Besides, as long as the

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<sup>123</sup> 'Hervormde gemeente Noordbroek draagt kerk over aan stichting', *Menterwolde.info*, 26 November 2015.

<sup>124</sup> Sven (PN 103): "Het dorp krijgt de kerk weer terug, eigenlijk verandert er niet zo veel. In elk geval niet voor de rondleiders. Nu kan gebeuren wat we steeds al wilden, maar wat maar niet van de grond kwam." (The village gets the church back again, although in fact it doesn't really change much, at least not for the guides. Now things that we've always wanted but that never really took shape can finally begin to occur). Helen (PN70): "Ik heb er wel wat moeite mee, mijn vader en zijn vader en al mijn opa's zijn er altijd bij betrokken geweest en ik maak me wel beetje zorgen wat er nu verder met alles gaat gebeuren, bijvoorbeeld het kerkzilver. Weet niet of ze daar wel goed voor gaan zorgen." (I do find it difficult; my father, his father and all of my grandfathers were always involved. I am a bit worried what will happen with everything, for instance, the church silver. I don't know if they will take proper care of it). A guide: "We raken toch een beetje de kerk kwijt." (We are sort of losing the church in a way). Maaïke (PN10): "Ik ben vooral opgelucht. Ik fungeerde eigenlijk als beheerder en dat hoeft nu niet meer." (I am mainly relieved. I functioned more or less as a church warden and that is no longer necessary now).

church building was not sold, the *Hervormde* congregation of SOH did not want Noordbroek to merge because they lacked the resources to take on another monument. The church community was not able to pay the sum that the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* asked for the transfer. Thus, for some time it was not an unrealistic scenario that the church would have to close altogether. Although the guides and the organist have keys themselves, the church community held the main key for opening the church, thereby playing a fundamental, but not very visible, role in the background. Now that the building has been transferred, the church community seems to have lost a point of contact with these other organisations in village life.

*In the experience of the de-churched population, all that remains is a stone building with an almost incomprehensible mixture of Christian beliefs of various periods. An architectural style that has been frozen in time, a painted choir without an altar, a pulpit without a pastor and music lovers and guided visitors without knowledge of the Gospel. The floor is appropriated by the government officials, ministers and the VIPs of their time.<sup>125</sup>*

### 8.2.4 | Overschild

The *Hervormde* congregation gathers only two times a year for a service in Overschild, six miles north of Hellum and Schildwolde. During the church council meetings Overschild is seldom mentioned, possibly because the village is not represented in the church council. Only a handful of *Hervormde* church members live in this village. However, there are more villagers who belong to a church. On Sunday morning people travel to various corners of the province. Some visit the *Vrijgemaakte* church in Schildwolde, others the *Gereformeerde* church in Ten Post, and a couple of people go to the Dutch Reformed Church in Groningen. Interestingly, when there is a worship service in Overschild, former residents who now live in Siddeburen return to the village.

The *Hervormde* church, which bears a striking resemblance to the churches in Brabant, is a *zaalkerk*, with a roof-turret. The interior has not changed since the church was built (see image 9). A small portal gives entrance to the church, an aisle with benches on both sides. In the aisle stand two large gas heaters, which are difficult to turn on, making it problematic to use the church during the winter months. In the pulpit enclosure stand box pews on both sides of the pulpit. In the right corner is a doorway to the consistory. Above the entrance is a gallery with a loose organ front and behind it an organ dating from 1945.<sup>126</sup> Until the early 1970s the village had its own minister, who lived in the parsonage next to the church. From 1990, the number of children in the Sunday school gradually dropped from 20 to 6 in 2004. In that year the Sunday school stopped, after the last teacher moved away. In 2001, the church transferred the cemetery to a local village foundation. The view of the village is

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<sup>125</sup> "In de beleving van de ontkerkte bevolking blijft er een stenen gebouw over met een welhaast onbegrijpelijke mix van Christelijke overtuigingen uit diverse perioden. Een in zijn ontwikkeling gevangen bouwstijl, een beschilderd koor zonder altaar, een preekstoel zonder voorganger en muzikliefhebbers en begeleide rondkijkers zonder evangelische kennis. De vloer toegeëigend door landschrijvers, dominees en de sociale top van mensen die er in hun tijd toe deden." (E-mail member history committee, 1 September 2017).

<sup>126</sup> De Vries, *Jubileumuitgave*, p. 13.

characterised by the windmill and the *Hervormde* church, and people find it important that they are maintained.<sup>127</sup>

### *From Christmas Service to Theatrical Performance*

In 2013, the church council wanted to do something with the villagers in the church building on Christmas Eve. One of the church members asked a couple of villagers to prepare the service and also a local band for the music.<sup>128</sup> The result was a crowded church, an accessible service, and community spirit. The Christmas service was organised for the first time in many years and was seen as a success. It enabled villagers who normally go elsewhere to attend the church in their own village. They felt this was a very unique experience (see sec. 9.1.2).<sup>129</sup> The service has also had some unexpected effects: the band discovered the church as a place to rehearse.<sup>130</sup> The service inspired a villager to use the church as a theatre for the performance of the local drama club. Instead of changing the scenery, the audience changed location. The play started on the sports field, and then people walked to the church, where a bar was created, which was a reference to the café that stood opposite the church. For the last scene, the public went to the village hall, where they could stay for a drink afterwards.<sup>131</sup> In this way the function of the church building in village life became stronger.

## 8.3| Church Life in a Regional Network

During a cluster evening organised by young parents, church members of various congregations discuss possibilities for cooperating more to ensure the continuation of the church in the region. The discussion focuses on the question of whether to have one church for all the villages or to have a church in every village. Matthias (P10) has the ideal of being present in every village, even if it is only once in a while, so that if a villager becomes curious, he knows when he can go to a worship service. Wietske (PSL2) pleads for a place which functions as a basis for meeting as a community, a place where her children feel at home. She does not want church to become a traveling circus which would leave the community drifting. When I raise the question of how to remain visibly present in the villages where no worship services are organised, a mother remarks:

*The church has many functions that we cannot carry out. It would be wonderful to be visible in the neighbourhood and the village. But how can we do that, or be a church with each other during the week? I would like to have an ideal church, but that is just not realistic now.*<sup>132</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Idem, p. 15; Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

<sup>128</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 12 December 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Christmas service Overschild, 24 December 2013; Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

<sup>130</sup> Interview during Spring concert, Hellum, 23 March 2014.

<sup>131</sup> *Schildjer Melk*, Overschild, 3 May 2014.

<sup>132</sup> "Nou ik zie dat de kerk heel veel functies heeft die we niet uit kunnen voeren. Heel mooi zichtbaar in de wijk en het dorp, nou ja, hoe doe je dat dan en hoe doe je dat door de weeks? Ik zou wel een ideale kerk willen, maar dat is nu gewoon niet realistisch, hoe ga je dat doen?" (Cluster meeting Protestant congregations Schildwolde-Overschild-Hellum, Noordbroek, Slochteren, 8 April 2015).

The remark illustrates the fact that surviving as a church, including the organisation of worship services and maintenance of buildings, requires most of the available time and energy. This means that there is a lack of human resources to invest in connections with church members who are not actively involved or with other village organisations.

The discussion also shows that the worship services are seen as the core business of church life. It is the moment when people from different villages and different ages can meet each other. Discussions about the future of the church tend to come down to the question of how worship services can continue, preferably in one's own church. A part of the *Hervormde* congregation faithfully attends the services, irrespective of where they are held. Others tend to only visit the services in their own village. There is another group who divides their Sundays between various churches. Several families with children feel a responsibility to visit the services of the *Hervormde* congregation, but also go to the New Church in Groningen to meet people of their own age.

In this section I take a closer look at how the local village churches function within regional networks on various levels. First, there is the level of the four villages of the congregation. Travelling between the villages raises questions about community building. This can be illustrated by the developments around the Sunday school. Second, the *Hervormde* congregation cooperates in a cluster with the Protestant Congregations of Slochteren-Schildwolde and Kolham. Third, people travel around in a wider area, visiting churches where they find another liturgical or theological tradition. The contact between the church community of Noordbroek and the *Vereniging Vrijzinig Protestanten - VVP* (Society of Liberal Protestants) in Winschoten is an example.

### 8.3.1 | Relations between the Hervormde Churches

#### *Sunday school and Children's Service*

The *Hervormde* congregation used to hold Sunday school in Schildwolde for more than 110 years. Children from the village, whether or not they belonged to the church, came to the learning room on Sunday for religious education. In the spring of 2014 six mothers from the area organise Sunday school, mainly for their own children, but they find this rather unsatisfactory. Running the children's service is not an easy task. There are only a few children, but a large difference in age makes it difficult to develop stories and assignments that are understandable for all. Rianne (PS25), for example, has three children, one of whom does not go to school yet. Her husband often has responsibilities on Sundays, so she has to take her youngest child along when she gives Sunday school. However, the oldest girls in Sunday school are almost old enough to go to secondary school.<sup>133</sup>

The Sunday school seems to be a separate circle within the congregation and it is difficult to make connections with the rest of church life. The children come together in the learning room in Schildwolde on Sunday mornings, also when the worship service is in another village. During my fieldwork, I hardly saw the people from the Sunday school on other occasions. In Noordbroek a group of 'import parents' runs the children's service, which

<sup>133</sup> Sunday school Schildwolde, 9 February 2014.

starts in the main service and then continues in the learning church.<sup>134</sup> After the mothers in Schildwolde decided to stop holding Sunday school in 2015, the group of 'import parents' tried to continue with something for the children. Now every fortnight there is a children's service in the church where the Sunday service is held.<sup>135</sup> An important motivation for the parents to attend the services is that children need to get to know each other.<sup>136</sup> But they live in different villages and attend different schools, so they seldom meet each other during the week and it takes some time before they bond.

### *Between SOH and Noordbroek*

Not only do the children need some time to bond, but also other members of the congregation have to find their way between Schildwolde/Hellum and Noordbroek. To my surprise the sextons from Hellum acted as hosts after a service in Noordbroek. I thought that for once they would not have to do anything. There is a sexton in Noordbroek, but in contrast with Hellum she does not partake in church life. The congregation is supposed to organise the catering around the services themselves. In the kitchen, the people who always do the washing up in Schildwolde, are helping Maaïke (PN10). We talk about the cooperation between the other *Hervormde* churches and Noordbroek. Quite a number of people from Schildwolde and Hellum come to Noordbroek, but the favour is not returned. For Mara (PH 6) the cooperation with Noordbroek has no added value: "Hardly any people come from Noordbroek to Schildwolde and Hellum." It seems that Noordbroek benefits more from the cooperation than the other churches of the congregation.<sup>137</sup>

The worship services in Schildwolde or Hellum are visited by only half a dozen Noordbroeksters. They form the backbone of the church community in Noordbroek and have joined the church council, the diaconal work, the discussion group and the organisation of the children's service. Two brothers who are involved in the children's service also form the link with 'import parents' in Schildwolde and parents in the Protestant congregation of Schildwolde-Slochteren. What about the other half a dozen? For some it is difficult to find a way to Schildwolde on Sunday morning, even though Lenie (PG65) comes to Schildwolde every week as a babysitting grandma. There is much unfamiliarity with the other *Hervormde* church communities. Lisa (P1- FGN) says:

*It is strange, I'm not occupied every Sunday, but it has happened more than once that I am unable to go on the specific Sunday that there is a service. I find that a bit sad. Once a month is nice, but sometimes it just does not happen. And I could go to Hellum, but I don't do that. It also has to do with my attachment to the building, and being able to go by bike.<sup>138</sup>*

<sup>134</sup> Church service Noordbroek, 2 March 2014.

<sup>135</sup> 'Bericht van zondagsschool "De Regenboog", ' *De Bron* (2:4), 2014, p. 17; 'Kindernevendienst en kinderoppas', *De Bron* (3:1), 2015, p. 4.

<sup>136</sup> Cluster meeting, Schildwolde, 8 April 2015.

<sup>137</sup> "Er komen nauwelijks mensen uit Noordbroek naar Schildwolde en Hellum" (Church service Noordbroek, 2 March 2014).

<sup>138</sup> "Ja, nou, gek genoeg is het, komt het, is het al meerdere malen gebeurd dat ik denk, dan zie ik in het krantje, o ja er is weer een dienst, gek genoeg, ik heb echt niet elke zondag wat, maar dan komt het net zo uit dat ik net die zondag om wat voor reden dan ook niet kan. Dat vind ik dan wel jammer. Eens per maand vind ik leuk, maar soms dan komt het daar gewoon helemaal niet van. En eerlijk gezegd, ja dan kun je zeggen Hellum, maar dat doe ik dan ook niet. Dat komt dan ook omdat ik die binding met dat gebouw wel heb ofzo. Ik kan op de fiets." (Focus group

Two participants in the focus group feel that the liberal tradition of Noordbroek does not quite suit the more confessional attitude of Schildwolde. The moments of drinking coffee after the services would have been a good opportunity for bridging the unfamiliarity, but people sit with familiar faces, creating groups along village lines. Various people from Noordbroek remark that they no longer drink coffee, because they feel somewhat excluded when people from the other villages are busy talking and they are not invited to join the conversation.<sup>139</sup> Mrs. Timmer (PG55) says that villagers no longer like the church newsletter, because most information is about the other villages. They do not recognize themselves in the newsletter, probably because most of them feel no relation to the other churches.<sup>140</sup> At the same it has to be acknowledged that this group not seems to make much effort to participate in church life around the church in Schildwolde (see sec. 8.3.1). It may be that after the community of Noordbroek joined the *Hervormde* congregation, attention was drawn to the transfer of the building which took several years. This may have limited the possibilities to develop bridging social capital. Considering that the church community in Noordbroek is rather fragmented, despite the efforts of Maaik (PN 10), it is not surprising that the cooperation with Schildwolde estranged some people from the church.

### *Church in Nursing Homes*

As indicated above, the *Hervormde* congregation is also active in the nursing homes in Noordbroek (*Gockingaheem*) and Slochteren (*Olderloug*). Both homes have a regional function and people from various neighbouring villages are residents there. They often remain members of their village church, which brings an added responsibility for those congregations. The evensong services in Noordbroek are organised by the churches of Noordbroek and Zuidbroek. Mrs. Timmer (PG55) says that there was some resistance at first: "We are not a Christian nursing home".<sup>141</sup> That is, until there appeared to be a need among residents who were not able to go to church. In Slochteren at least four congregations are involved in the nursing home. Here the churches play a larger role than in Noordbroek. Pastoral visits are paid in both houses, but in Slochteren the minister also leads a Bible group and every Monday afternoon church members hold a singing afternoon.<sup>142</sup> In this way the church community helps people from Schildwolde and Hellum to maintain a bond with their old village.

There are some interesting differences between the nursing homes. In Noordbroek a church member leads an evensong once a month. In Slochteren a minister holds a worship service with office holders and a collection every week. When I visited a service in the *Olderloug* it struck me that although the songs and sermon were different, the readings

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Noordbroek, 24 March 2015).

<sup>139</sup> Interview PG55, July 2014.

<sup>140</sup> PG55: "Kerkenblad is ook al helemaal samen, degene die nou die kerkenblad allemaal krijgen die vinden er niks meer aan. Er staat haast, anders kreeg je nog een paar blaadjes van Noordbroek, dat vonden ze veel mooier dan nou. Het meest is Schildwolde, er staat maar een klein stukje meer in." (The church newsletter is also joined now. Those who receive it don't find it interesting any more. There is very little now, though there used to be pages from Noordbroek. That was much nicer. Most is about Schildwolde, there is only a small part about Noordbroek).

<sup>141</sup> Interview PG55, July 2014.

<sup>142</sup> Bible group, 22 January 2014.



were closely related to the theme of the worship service that morning. Probably one of the reasons why the minister does not use the same liturgy is that the service in the *Olderloug* is also visited by family and church members. They bring along a sense of community, of church life as it used to be for the residents. In Noordbroek the service is not visited by other church members, apart from those who organise it. There is also a difference in the setting. In the *Olderloug* the service is an activity for the whole house; it takes place in the main hall, where people sit around tables, but also more or less in rows facing the lectern. The service is recorded and simultaneously shown on the residential TV channel. In Noordbroek, the number of attendants is smaller. The service does not take place in the community hall, but in a smaller room upstairs. The residents sit round a table, facing each other. The lay leader sits at the head of the table and the singing is accompanied by harmonium music.<sup>143</sup>

However, this point of connection with village society is about to disappear. One of the intended effects of the new social legislation is that less people have to make use of care. The idea is that people should live longer in their own home, which means that homes for the elderly lack occupants. The nursing organisation in Groningen, which runs twenty-four homes, has been forced to reorganise their residences. In October 2015, it became clear that at least 4 houses have to close and that people have to move to other homes – which means that they literally become further from home.<sup>144</sup> The minister writes in the church newsletter that the *Olderloug* is emptying; inhabitants are leaving gradually, moving to other homes in the region. When asked where people want to go, they tend to prefer places that are familiar because their roots lie there.<sup>145</sup> The closure of the homes not only has consequences for the inhabitants and the caregivers, but also affects volunteers and people who use the facilities in the homes like meals on wheels, game afternoons, etc. In a local newspaper, a villager calls upon churches, village society, the municipality, and welfare service to make sure that the inhabitants of the sheltered accommodation can still go to the location for Bible courses, the hairdresser, the blood bank, and the knitting club.<sup>146</sup> At the beginning of 2017 plans were made to give the buildings a new care function.<sup>147</sup>

### 8.3.2 | Church in a Cluster

Because of declining church attendance and difficulties with finding enough people to organise church life, Protestant churches in the region have formed a cluster to join forces. Around 2010 the *Hervormde* congregation started to cooperate with the churches of Slochteren-Schildwolde and Kolham. Representatives of the church councils meet each other once in a while to hear what is going on in the various churches and to plan joint activities.<sup>148</sup> Several times per year there are cluster services in one of the village churches.

<sup>143</sup> Evensong nursing home Noordbroek, 7 February 2014; Church service nursing home Slochteren, 16 February 2014.

<sup>144</sup> 'PvdA en VVD bezorgd over sluiting Gockingaheem Noordbroek', *RTV Noord*, 2 March 2016.

<sup>145</sup> 'Zonnehuisgroep Noord sluit vier tehuizen', *RTV Noord*, 7 October 2015; *De Bron* (4:2) February 2016, p. 13.

<sup>146</sup> Corry Noordman-Bonnema, 'Ingezonden, 't Olderloug', *t Bokkeblad*, 16 December 2015.

<sup>147</sup> 'Nieuwe stichting wil voortouw nemen in doorstart 't Olderloug', *t Bokkeblad*, 5 April 2017.

<sup>148</sup> A result of amalgamation and *Samen op Weg*-process is that the boundaries between the various congregations need to be formally re-established (Church council meeting, 17 June 2014; Church council meeting, 7 January 2015).

For once the church is totally filled. A large group of children come together in the children's service.<sup>149</sup> Every Wednesday during Lent there is an evensong, a tradition which comes from Noordbroek and has been adopted by the other congregations, an example of how regional contacts can lead to new practices.<sup>150</sup> The minister of Slochteren and the pastoral worker of Kolham organise catechism for the teenagers in the cluster. In 2014 three boys followed the evenings.<sup>151</sup> The three pastors also try to develop a joint formation programme by organising a series of three discussion evenings, one evening in each congregation. They hope that church members will become interested and visit all of the evenings, so that they become acquainted with the other cluster churches and with each other. In 2014 the theme was 'singing', because of the publication of the new hymnbook. After the Prayer day service, the minister of Schildwolde held an evening to explain about the background of the new hymnbook and showed the various liturgical traditions which were represented in it. This was the third evening of the series, but only churchgoers from the *Hervormde* congregation SOHN turned up.<sup>152</sup>

### *Tensions and Dilemmas*

One problem is that the churches of the cluster have different views on the level of cooperation. The church council of the *Hervormde* congregation suggested in 2014 that all services during the summer holiday take place jointly, because many people are away. For the other churches this was too soon.<sup>153</sup> There are also differences between generations. A group of young parents who are now scattered across the congregations are very eager to do more together, because they long to meet people of their own age. They would also like to be able to participate in an existing structure of children's and youth work, so that they are not always responsible for organising activities themselves.<sup>154</sup> Other people are more attached to their own church and want to maintain something of the church life in their own village.

Among church members a tension can be traced between working on a regional and on a local level (see app. C figures I). On the one hand people are positive in the survey about cooperation. It is necessary to increase the human resources to keep the church alive (Figure I.4b). Some also see cooperation as an opportunity to learn from each other and are striving for an ideal of community and crossing boundaries. On the other hand about half of the respondents are in favour of offering worship services in every village (Figure I.6a). Some say worship services strengthen their *geloofsbeleving* (faith experience) and the bonds within the community. Several respondents use accessibility as an argument: people who are less mobile can visit the church if there are services in every village.

Other survey respondents say that worship services contribute to maintaining the church building for the village and sustaining the bond with the village. For a family who

<sup>149</sup> Cluster church service, Hellum, 9 March 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Preparation evensongs ministers cluster, Slochteren, 14 January 2014; Evensong Ash Wednesday, Noordbroek, 5 March 2014.

<sup>151</sup> E-mail pastor Kolham, 17 February 2014.

<sup>152</sup> Evening new Hymnbook, Schildwolde, 12 March 2014.

<sup>153</sup> Meeting cluster church councils, 5 February 2014.

<sup>154</sup> Cluster meeting, Reformed Church Schildwolde, 8 April 2015.

has moved to the village from elsewhere and have their work and school elsewhere, the church can be an important connection to the village. It can be the place where they get to know people from the village, who they later recognise when they go to the shop.<sup>255</sup> When churches regionalise this bond with the local living environment grows weaker. A disadvantage of workshop services in every village is that some people only visit the services in their own village, because they are not comfortable with the liturgy in Schildwolde, or because they dread the cold in Noordbroek. Still, the cluster services invite people to visit other churches and they welcome the opportunity to meet other people from the area.

### 8.3.3 | Connections in the Wider Region

The survey (app. C fig. D.2-3) reveals how beneath the surface the *Hervormde* congregation is also connected with churches outside the cluster through individual contacts. People also visit other churches for various reasons. Among *Vrijgemaakte* respondents it is usual to attend other churches while visiting family or friends. Non-*Hervormde* respondents visit other churches mainly out of cultural-historic interests, during the holidays or for concerts. An important reason for *Hervormde* people to visit another church is because they feel attracted by another liturgy, theology, music or atmosphere. It is an opportunity to see the liturgical practice in another church. They attribute much value to celebrating together with other denominations. This point is not mentioned by the other groups. Some reformed, especially young families, visit other churches to meet people of the same age. Others return occasionally to a church community they frequented in the past, with which they still feel connected.

It is interesting to see which other churches are visited by respondents (app. C fig. D.3). It is striking that from Hellum and Noordbroek respondents visit other Protestant Congregations, Mennonite, Lutheran, Catholic or liberal churches, while people from Schildwolde, Overschild, and Slochteren go to other reformed or evangelical churches. It seems likely that this difference in 'ecclesial taste' also reflects something of the theological difference between the villages. People in Schildwolde are more confessional, while in Hellum liberal tendencies are evident. In chapter 6 I showed how belonging evolves over time and that ways of connecting alternate, but here there are traces of a phenomenon that could be called multiple belonging. People can be connected with several church communities at the same time and compose their own ecclesial programme in a regional setting.

#### *A Liberal Church Network*

A closer look at the situation around Noordbroek reveals how regional church life works in practice. It is not only unfamiliarity which causes people from Noordbroek to be less involved in Schildwolde and Hellum (see sec. 8.3.1). Gradually I discovered that the church community is partly orientated to another circle of churches, within which regional church life takes shape. To understand this, some congregational history is necessary. In 2003 Esther (PG49) was appointed as pastoral worker in Noordbroek, after the merging process

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<sup>255</sup> Ibidem.

with the *Hervormde* and *Gereformeerde* churches of Zuidbroek was broken off. She used her time to visit people, start a discussion group and attend some meetings.

*When I arrived in Noordbroek it was a divided bunch. I had heard that wherever you go, you should start a discussion group; ensure you have three or four people, so that you can start, and just begin. I did just that. It sort of created a sense of bonding, which changed something and taught people to trust themselves and each other... [...] at any rate, they felt they could be there for each other instead of arguing and being torn apart continually.<sup>156</sup>*

Meanwhile the liberal *Hervormde* church in Scheemda merged with the *Hervormde* church Exta-Nieuw-Scheemda, which is now the Protestant congregation of Scheemda. Two members of the liberal *Hervormde* church were not confident that the liberal tradition would continue in the new congregation. In 2001 they had started with monthly liberal services in the old *Hervormde* church of Scheemda, with the idea that if fewer than 25 people attended they would stop. The services are visited by people from Scheemda, Noordbroek, Winschoten and Woldendorp, who heard about the services via the monthly meetings of the *Vereniging Vrijzinnig Protestanten (VVP)* of Winschoten and its environs. In the autumn of 2014 I went to one of the services in Scheemda, which was attended by a dozen people.<sup>157</sup>

Thus, every month people can visit a liberal worship service in Noordbroek and in Scheemda. Some also go to the discussion group, which moved to Scheemda after the appointment of Esther (PG49) in Noordbroek ceased, due to a lack of financial resources. This means that the liberal group can meet 3-4 times a month during the services and the discussion group. Also the *VVP* of Hellum-Slochteren organises a couple of worship services each year in Hellum.<sup>158</sup> There are meetings of the *VVP* in Winschoten and every season starts with an outdoors day.

### *Is this still church?*

After the service in Scheemda people sit in a semi-circle under the pulpit around the table for a cup of coffee. I ask how people have ended up here. Some of them are original members from when the services started in 2001. Even though they do not live in Scheemda (anymore), they still visit the services, which does not stop them from being actively involved in their local church, such as Maaik (PN10). For other churchgoers the situation is somewhat different. Several come to Scheemda because their village church, of which they are often still a member, is too orthodox for their taste. One visitor comes from Winschoten, where the liberal congregation merged with a more orthodox *Hervormde* church and later with the *Gereformeerde* church.

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<sup>156</sup> "Het was een heel verscheurde club toen ik kwam. En ik had horen zeggen: Waar je ook begint in een gemeenschap, in een gemeente, begin een gespreksgroep. Je zorgt dat je drie of vier mensen hebt, zodat je kunt starten en begin het. Dat heb ik gedaan, daar ook. En dat geeft iets van binding en daardoor veranderde er iets en leerden mensen ook weer meer vertrouwen in zichzelf of in elkaar of in... [...] In ieder geval weer iets dat mensen er weer voor elkaar konden zijn in plaats van eindeloos ruziemaken en uit elkaar gerukt voelen" (Interview *VVP* pastor, 3 December 2014).

<sup>157</sup> Church service *VVP*, Scheemda, 30 November 2014.

<sup>158</sup> *Provinciale Vereniging van Vrijzinnige Protestantengroningen*, <http://www.vrijzinnig.nl/groningen/aangslotenverenigingen/hellum-slochteren.html>, accessed 5 December 2014.

## Four Village Churches in Groningen

*I heard from people in Scheemda – liberal people – ‘we would like to hold services.’ I feel at home there and I do find liberal Protestantism important.<sup>159</sup>*

What is interesting about this church place is that most people come from outside Scheemda. It is the community spirit and the liturgy which binds them together, but most people have no relation with the village.

Although the churchgoers on that Sunday morning in November say that the worship services and the group of people, feels like their church, they also indicate that officially it is not a church anymore. Their primary concern is the continuation of the services, which forms the aim and bonding force of the group. A social concern is clearly felt and expressed, such as donating to good causes, being active as a volunteer in various circles and asking what should be done about social crises such as xenophobia. But as a community the group does not feel called to display social initiatives in the village, because the group is small, relatively old, not a real church and most people live elsewhere.

A discussion in the group after the service is quite revealing.

Churchgoer: *Officially I belong to the Protestant church in Winschoten, that is where I am church member, but I hardly ever come there.*

*I: This feels like your church?*

Churchgoer: *Yes. [...] We visit the monthly meetings of the VVP in Winschoten, but of course that's not a church.<sup>160</sup>*

Carolien (PN 12) tells how she started visiting the church in Scheemda after her husband was appointed sexton:

Carolien (PN12): *In those days this was also a real congregation – Hervormde congregation Scheemda – with a liberal character. Every Sunday there was a service. That is how I came here, and I stayed, even when the congregation ceased to exist, when it merged with ... the PKN.<sup>161</sup>*

Wim (PG52): *We are a very small group who live here in the village, and the average age is high. I do not think that we have a dominant role in village society. If you are looking for that you should go to the other church, they have a much bigger role; they have a music band and a foodbank. And well, we're not really a church organisation anymore.<sup>162</sup>*

Carolien (PN12): *The only thing we collect for that could be considered diaconal is the continuation of our own services, which I find a pity.<sup>163</sup>*

<sup>159</sup> PG 63: "Maar ik hoorde van mensen uit Scheemda, vrijzinnige mensen, wij willen graag de diensten houden. Ik voel me daar best thuis, ja ik vind toch wel die vrijzinnigheid belangrijk." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>160</sup> PG63 "Nou officieel bij de PKN kerk in Winschoten, daar ben ik lidmaat, maar ik kom daar bijna niet." Interviewer: "Gevoelsmatig is dit uw kerk..." PG 63 "We bezoeken wel de maandelijkse bijeenkomsten van de VVP, dat is geen kerk natuurlijk." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>161</sup> "Toen was dit ook echt nog een gemeente, hervormde gemeente Scheemda, vrijzinnig van karakter. En er was elke zondag dienst, ja. Zo ben ik hier terecht gekomen en gebleven. Ook toen de gemeente ophield te bestaan. Die is samengevoegd met...niet gefuseerd, maar gewoon opgegaan in de toen hervormde gemeente Eexta-Nieuw Scheemda, nu de PKN Scheemda." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>162</sup> "Ja, in het dorp op zich, omdat wij een hele kleine groep zijn, die hier in het dorp woont en de gemiddelde leeftijd ligt redelijk hoog om het zo maar te zeggen, nou als ik even voor mezelf spreek, denk ik niet dat wij een groep zijn die daar een dominante rol in heeft. Ik denk dat als je dat zoekt, dan zou ik naar de andere kerk gaan, die hebben een veel grotere rol, die hebben een muziekbond en die hebben ook een voedselbank. Nou ja wij zijn ook geen kerkelijke organisatie meer eigenlijk." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>163</sup> "Het enige waarvoor, ergens vind ik dat wel jammer, het enige waarvoor wij collecteren, als onderdeel van iets wat

## Chapter 8

Churchgoer: *As VVP Winschoten we donate to Unicef and participate in the foodbank.*<sup>164</sup>  
Wim (PG52): *But our group in Scheemda doesn't, because we are much smaller and because we're not a church congregation.*<sup>165</sup>

However, Esther, the pastor, thinks that you could call the group a church:

*They come together to worship, with the Bible as the most important source of inspiration; they all believe in God, whatever you want to call him. That is what I call church. And what they do for each other is also church, they organise pastoral and diaconal care. [...] They look after each other, they know each other, they visit when someone is ill and they give each other a lift... Once a year they eat together... that's a group of at least 20-25 people.*<sup>166</sup>

Various characteristics of church are mentioned here. Reference is made to the institutional form with a church council, which no longer exists. Although regular meetings are constitutive for developing a community, it is not enough to be called a church, according to the respondents. As a third aspect the diaconal outreach, which the group as such is not able to offer, is mentioned as a reason why it is not a real church. Still, the group and the services feel and function like a church community.

The question arises as to whether the church network group in Scheemda is a foreshadowing of how church in Groningen will function in the future. In any case, it shows both the possibilities – the vitality – and the risks. The light organisation, without the burden of a church building and traditions from the past, makes the group easy to manage. It shows that it is possible to have something of a church, which can be maintained over distance. Esther (PG49) also points to one of the difficulties of this church structure, namely that volunteer aid is difficult to offer when people live far apart. An occasional visit or telephone contact is possible, but care on a daily basis, especially when people grow older, will be more difficult to realize. Furthermore, assuming that a church network group wants to mean something in local society, with people coming from different places, the question arises: where should the group seek points of contact? Should they relate to the place where they gather for their meetings or to the villages where members live?

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je diaconaal zou kunnen noemen, is dus inderdaad voor instandhouding van de eigen diensten." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>164</sup> "Er wordt wel, zoals voor Unicef geven we voor en voedselbank werken we mee, dus we geven wel bijdragen." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>165</sup> "Als Scheemda niet omdat we veel kleiner zijn en ook geen kerkelijke gemeente." (Church service VVP, Scheemda, 30 November 2014).

<sup>166</sup> "Omdat ze bij elkaar komen om samen te vieren en dan de belangrijkste bron is de Bijbel en ze geloven allemaal in, eigenlijk wel in God, hoe je hem ook verwoordt of noemt of bekijkt. En ik vind dat dus kerk. En wat ze doen voor elkaar en met elkaar vind ik ook kerk. Want daarin zijn ze wel pastoraal, diaconaal. [...] Ze kijken naar elkaar om, ze kennen elkaar ook en ze gaan op bezoek bij iemand die ziek is of ze halen elkaar op als er activiteiten zijn of vervoer. En dat is dan wel een aardige club. Eén keer per jaar eten ze ook met elkaar, daar ga ik ook altijd heen en dan zitten daar toch zeker 20 mensen, 25 misschien wel." (Interview VVP pastor, 3 December 2015).

## Concluding Remarks

The four villages of the congregation seem to represent various stages in the process of a disappearing church. In Schildwolde there is a church building, although the tower functions more as an identity marker than the church building. There are worship services and various church activities during the week in the learning room and the nursing home. Through the year there are a couple of events, such as the Harvest festival, which make the church more visible. With regard to people and network, cooperation with the *Vrijge-maakte* church is growing (see also chapter 9). Church members are primarily through activities connected with the church; for the broader village community events are more important. While in Schildwolde events are a joint venture of the churches, in Hellum events in which the church is involved are planned with village organisations.

In Hellum, regular church activities are lacking and church life primarily seems to encompass worship services and pastoral work. However, through the church building the community remains embedded in village life. The maintenance of the churchyard and cemetery is shared with the village community. The building functions as a venue for village activities, a place which attracts people from the whole region to Hellum, meaning that connecting with place is dominant. The commitment to protect the place of the church building is followed by connecting with people. The church and the surrounding area function as a meeting place for villagers and a venue for regional activities. Events, with the exception of the Christmas and New Year's Eve services, are organised in relation to the church building and the church community primarily plays a facilitating role.

In Noordbroek the situation is comparable with Hellum. Church life consists of occasional worship services, pastoral work and evensong services in the nursing home. The community is ageing rapidly and there are hardly any young people. The discussion group moved from Noordbroek to Scheemda. It is primarily by opening the church building for tours, concerts, and other activities that the church still fulfils a function in village society. Cultural church life is more visible than ecclesial church life. Thus, connecting with place is also important in Noordbroek, but it seems that most villagers do not explicitly belong to the church community. Ordinary activities like services and pastoral work are not in view. The community tries to draw on the place attachment to create events, which can bond people, but they lack the network and the human resources to organise these events themselves. Compared to Hellum the use and maintenance of the church building is less of a shared venture. Although in Noordbroek the space of the church is shared, there is little overlap in practices, which may form a hindrance in the building of a network. And the other way around, the lack of contact between people makes it difficult to share community initiatives.

In Overschild the church has virtually disappeared. Contrary to the other villages, the congregation no longer owns the church. Because the heating is not functioning properly the occasional worship services have stopped. There are still living churchgoers in the village, but they do not form a community. Does the fact that the church has virtually disappeared affect village life? The villagers fought to maintain the village hall, but show little concern for the church. Thus, in Overschild connecting with the church through activities,

## Chapter 8

events, place, and people is practically lacking. The ties with the village church have become very weak. Most villagers have no church attachment, and if they are involved in a church they belong to other church communities.

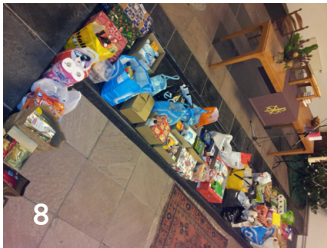
The explorations in this chapter reveal how people relate to the village church communities in different ways. The group of people who are involved in the church community and activities is limited, but attachment to the church building or tower, and involvement in the maintenance of the church binds a larger group of people to the church. The church can also fulfil a broader function in village life through events.<sup>167</sup> This might also explain why respondents in Groningen are more strongly convinced than people in Brabant that the Protestant church is meaningful in village life (app. C fig. 1.2 a-b). In the next chapter I further investigate events like Christmas and Remembrance Day to see what significance these events have for village society.

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<sup>167</sup> David Walker, 'The Social Significance of Harvest Festivals in the Countryside: an Empirical Enquiry among those who Attend', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, London, Equinox, 2012, pp. 266-280.







# Chapter 9

## An Intertwining Church in Groningen

The church seems to be disappearing from the Groninger villages. The situation raises the question of how the temporal and physical space of a church that is no longer employed for religious purposes is now used. In response to the proposition that the *Hervormde* congregation is meaningful for the villages (app. C fig. 1 2b), survey respondents remark that because a small number of people go to church, the congregation is a marginal phenomenon which is not very visible in daily life. They suspect that the congregation is meaningful for people who are more involved. Respondents seem to indicate that through the church building and events the congregation has a more public role. This confirms Walker's statement that churches are able to reach out to "varied categories of rural inhabitants and attract significant numbers of non-residents, occasional churchgoers and those who belong by virtue of people, events, or place rather than through activity base participation."<sup>1</sup>

The exploration of church life in chapter 8 revealed that the church communities cooperate not only with other churches, but also with village societies. In this chapter I change my perspective again to discover religious practices inside, on the borders of, and outside the ecclesial field of practice – places where sacred consciousness is regularly activated. For example, in Hellum, where the church choir stopped, a village choir now sings Christmas carols beneath the Christmas tree outside the church.<sup>2</sup> The public school holds Advent celebrations every morning in the week before Christmas. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, the commemoration of the Second World War is preceded by a Remembrance service in the church, which is prepared by the 4<sup>th</sup> of May committee, together with the school.

In this chapter I describe a number of these practices in more detail to address sub-question six: How do church related practices affect the quality of life in the Groningen area of Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild and Noordbroek? I describe how church becomes intertwined with other fields of practice such as care, education and culture. At the same time church functions are transferring to other domains. These developments lead to discussions about the role of religion in the public space, which is supposed to be secular and

<sup>1</sup> David S. Walker, 'The Social Significance of Harvest Festivals in the Countryside: an Empirical Enquiry among those who Attend', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, Sheffield, Equinox, 2012. pp. 266-280, there p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> Afternoon for elderly people, Schildwolde, 26 March 2014; Meeting church council and *Helmster Klokkeluiders*, Hellum, 15 May 2014.

neutral. It turns out that looking through the lens of the church building, the use and perception of space offers interesting insights into people's ordinary ecclesiologies, because the use of church buildings reflects people's vision on and experience of the sacred.<sup>3</sup>

I start with the church as a place for celebration during Christmas time. In each village, there are services and other activities. Interestingly in Schildwolde and Overschild the Christmas celebration is an ecumenical affair, while in Hellum and Noordbroek cooperation is sought with village organisations. Second, the churches offer a place for memorial in various ways: by maintaining the cemetery, commemorating all the villagers who have died and hosting a memorial service on Remembrance Day. In 9.3 I explore how church and culture relate to each other through art projects, concerts, theatre and opening the church for tours. In 9.4 I focus on the diaconal task of the church and see how the congregation is involved in diaconal networks. Finally, in 9.5 I show how churches in the whole province are searching for ways to engage with an urgent liveability issue: the earthquakes caused by the gas extraction. By analysing these various practices, I try to answer the main question of how the church contributes to the quality of life.

## 9.1 | Christmas Celebrations

In the previous chapter I showed that events make the churches more visible in village life because a broad group of people who relate to the church in different ways are involved and invited. Because the church council wanted to play a role in the village, they decided in 2013 to organise a Christmas Eve service in each village. An analysis of where the services took place, which parties were involved, and the aims of the organisers provides insight into the position of the various churches in village society. It also reveals something about the meaning of religious practices for the quality of life. It is interesting to see that the Christmas celebrations are slightly different in each village, reflecting differences in the context.

Before Christmas the church council shared their expectations of the Christmas services. Wilma (PS2) says:

*I expect to be inspired and receive a good feeling. I want to know for what reason I am sitting there: a feeling of fellowship, a little bit of peace, the beginning of Christmas and the idea that we all want the same thing after all.*<sup>4</sup>

Lea (PG 4) prays every Christmas service again:

*God, please take hold of these people, that they may come back. Please concern yourself with these people.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, 'Voor wie zijn kerkgebouwen bestemd?' in: Olav Boelens, Ton Meijers, (eds.), *Het kerkgebouw als religieus erfgoed*, Tilburg, Universiteit Tilburg, 2009, pp. 23-48, there pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> 'Ik verwacht geïnspireerd te worden en een goed gevoel te krijgen. Ik wil weten waarvoor ik er zit: een gevoel van verbondenheid met elkaar, een stukje vrede, het begin van kerst en het idee dat we toch allemaal hetzelfde willen.' (Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 12 December 2013).

<sup>5</sup> "Wilt U ook die mensen pakken, dat ze nog eens komen, God, bemoei ook met die mensen." (Ibidem).

The church council thinks that people want to re-experience the feeling of the past, when they participated in the Christmas service when they were in Sunday school, and sing familiar songs. The minister underlines that it is not just a birth story; it is also a message of hope, of lame people who can walk. The church council hopes that people will become inspired and that their conception of church will somehow change.

### 9.1.1 | Christmas Gathering in a Tent in Schildwolde

On Christmas Eve the *Hervormde* congregation and the *Vrijgemaakte* church organise since 2010 a service in the tent in front of the *Juffer* Tower. The tent is set up by the New Year's Eve Foundation of Schildwolde and the churches are actually guests of the foundation. For the service chairs are placed in rows facing the stage, with an electric tea light on each chair. The stage is equipped with a lectern, decorated with Christmas green and small lights hang from the ceiling (see image 1). The *Vrijgemaakte* brass band sits behind the lectern in a semi-circle. On the screen, the song texts, and Bible texts are projected. Although the interior of the tent and the performance of readings, prayers, and singing resemble a worship service, the event is called a Christmas gathering. People are asked to bring a pack of coffee for the food bank. Local employers have also donated a considerable amount. A woman welcomes everyone and connects the collection of coffee to the celebration of Christmas, as a reason to do something for one another and to look after each other. When I leave the tent after the sermon, because I also want to see the living nativity scene in Hellum, the bells of the tower are ringing. A young man tells me that he introduced this the year before when the restoration of the tower was finished. The bells ring during "Silent Night" so that people in the tent hear the bells and the good news is also heard in the village.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that this gathering takes place in a tent, although there are several church buildings available in the village. Villagers say that the two faith communities can organise this event together because the tent is a neutral space; otherwise it would not be possible. The space is not owned by a specific group, which makes it accessible to people of various backgrounds. The tent is also a familiar space for many people because of the New Year's Eve celebrations. It is interesting to note that this Christmas service bears a spatial resemblance to the *Ziekentriduüm* in Someren. In both cases a profane place is turned into a church-like space, where rituals are carried out, people sing, read, and pray. However, it requires some imagination to believe you are in a church. The tent can be cold, windy, and noisy and people miss the atmosphere of a church.<sup>7</sup>

In my view this Christmas service could be seen as an effort of an incarnational church to be present where people live and work, as Pim van de Kerk argues for. The tent and the Christmas service bring people from various backgrounds together, which is seen as an important gain, since it strengthens the social cohesion. The *Vrijgemaakte* minister expresses gratitude that fellow-villagers can celebrate Christmas together in freedom, joined together through the birth of Jesus. The service is primarily an ecumenical initiative, which leads to a growing familiarity between the church communities and more community initiatives.

<sup>6</sup> Christmas service Schildwolde, 24 December 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

In 2014 the service was preceded by an arts and crafts afternoon for children, which attracted more than 100 children.<sup>8</sup> The minister told me that in 2016 there was also a children's Christmas Eve service in the *Hervormde* church. More than eighty children turned up and the organisers had to do some last minute shopping to have enough Christmas cookies and hot chocolate.

### 9.1.2 | Christmas Service in the Village Church of Overschild

In Overschild a church member asked a couple of villagers to prepare a service and also a local band for the music.<sup>9</sup> The result is a crowded church, an accessible service, and community spirit. The Christmas service is organised for the first time in many years and is seen as a success. Many people have come and hope it will be the beginning of a tradition. Beforehand the service is publicised by advertising in the local newspaper and spreading flyers from door to door. According to the organisers the idea of the Christmas service alone already had some effect. People talked about it and saw the lights in the church when the band was rehearsing and wondered what was going on. For the organisers the idea that there would be a Christmas service again in the village church after so many years was important. Although they did not know what to expect in terms of attendance, many people came to the church. Rita (P4) remembers most of all:

*That it was just as it used to be, that everyone from the village was there again – everyone who used to be involved in Sunday school or youth work, what I did in in the past. There was a lot of recognition, yes.<sup>10</sup>*

Much attention is paid to the furnishing of the church. Outside the building stand a Christmas tree and a brazier. Inside the church is decorated with Christmas green: a wreath on the front of the pulpit, Christmas bouquets on the canopy of the box pews, and some Christmas green with seven unlit candles on the choir screen. The windowsills are decorated with tea lights and on the psalm boards 'welcome' is written. Before the services starts there is a pleasant bustle. A man behind a synthesizer and a boy on a flute play Christmas songs. The liturgical centre is crowded with the band and their instruments. A lot of families are present, but also a couple of people who have come alone.

#### *The Christmas Service*

The theme of the service is 'stars'. A star is printed on the booklet with the text:

A star shows the way on earth, revealed in a child: a new beginning. To come home people go different ways.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde 12 December 2013.

<sup>10</sup> "Voor mij wel dat het gewoon weer zoals eerder was, dat iedereen er weer is uit het dorp, die ook eerder wel iets met de zondagsschool of met ...eh, jeugdwerk wat ik het in verleden wel heb gedaan, gewoon weer herkenning, of ja." (Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015).

Upon entry people also receive a paper star. A villager who is a member of the *Hervormde* congregation welcomes everyone and says that it is a very special occasion, because people from different denominations have prepared the service. She hopes that the service will connect people with each other. She draws attention to people who do not experience the warm feeling of cosiness, lights and Christmas decorations.

*We have gathered here tonight, on Christmas Eve, for the story of the birth of a child in a manger, Jesus. We have gathered to sing together, to listen to music. We have also gathered to become silent together; to find space for that remarkable story of the birth of a child, small and vulnerable, but powerful in love. We pause to reflect that it's no coincidence that we are here, together, but that as people we are connected with each other and with whom we call God, [and that we are here] to allow ourselves to marvel about what is to come, to open our eyes and our ears to a reality which is not yet ours. At the start of this time of fellowship, we wish each other peace, courage, and zeal.<sup>11</sup>*

A woman reads a poem about a small light that has to light the world, enfeebles the darkness, ignites Gods love, a heavenly light that shines in the night. This raises the question of how the poem should be interpreted. Is it a prayer, does it function like a Kyrie? Or is it just a text that connects with the theme of stars and light?

In the sermon, the minister calls upon people to have faith in the story about a small, heavenly light that shines through into our world. He compares this story with a bench on which we can sit and rest. The visitors are addressed as human beings, who experience moments of love, loss, uncertainty, and challenge, but also as children of God who may find rest and the peace to step out of the rat race and to have an eye for the light of Christ. People are invited to write down on the paper star what or who are lights for them and how they could be a star to other people. A woman has tears of emotion on her face, while an eight-year-old girl wakes up and starts writing on her star. Intercessions are made for children, teenagers, people who have lost their partner, victims of violence, and people who feel uncertain and misunderstood. After each intercession one of the candles on the choir screen is lit. An important aim and an apparent effect of the service is to give voice to life difficulties and empower people. The sermon also seems to draw attention to how people's life attitudes and perceptions of life can influence their well-being. Sabine (P2 FGO) noticed how during the service a community spirit developed, which empowers people.

*What I remember most of all is the fellowship and the warmth you feel and that people just go along with it. That is very beautiful to see. [...] Not so much in words, but simply that you see how people smile to each other... that you experience a feeling of... that it was just pleasant. It is not always necessary to put that into words, but it's about noticing that people appreciate it.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> "Wij zijn hier vanavond bij elkaar, op kerstavond, rondom het verhaal aangaande de geboorte van een kind in een voederbak, Jezus. We zijn hier bij elkaar om samen te zingen, te luisteren naar muziek. We zijn hier ook bij elkaar om samen stil te zijn, te worden, om ruimte te vinden voor dat wonderlijke verhaal van de geboorte van een kind, klein en kwetsbaar, maar krachtig in liefde. We staan er bij stil dat we hier niet zo maar zijn, maar verbonden met elkaar, met wie wij God noemen, om ons te laten verwonderen over wat komen kan, onze ogen en oren te laten openen oor een werkelijkheid die niet meteen de onze is. We wensen elkaar aan het begin van ons samenzijn vrede, moed en geestdrift." (Christmas service, Overschild, 24 December 2013).

<sup>12</sup> "En wat me wel... is de samenhang en de warmte die je dan voelt en dat mensen daar in mee gaan, dat is gewoon heel mooi om te zien. [...] Nog geen eens in woorden, maar gewoon toch dat je mensen ziet glimlachen

The service is not very elaborate and rather low key. Efforts are made to make people feel at home and to connect people. The organisers stress the importance of accessibility in terms of the songs, language and performance. Songs have to be well known, but also have to fit in with the repertoire of the band. The band plays different Christmas songs, varying from classics like "Silent Night" to "O Come, O Come, Immanuel" in the local dialect, and "Little Drummer Boy." The organisers seem to have tried to make a very accessible service without overly explicit Christian formulas. Although certain rituals are adopted, like the lighting of candles and the blessing, new rituals are also developed, like the sharing of thoughts on paper stars and placing them in the tree in front of the church. The ordinary elements, like Kyrie, Gloria and Credo, and the reading or singing of a psalm are left out. In the texts, sermon, and intercessions general human themes are addressed. Although Jesus is often mentioned as a vulnerable child, as opposed to the harsh world of numbers and efficiency, the name of God is mentioned with some hesitation, and not without introduction. In the word of welcome there is a reference to an awareness that people are connected with each other and with whom we call God. In the sermon God is mentioned in relation to people: "We may know that in all pain and sorrow we may also grow as human being, as child of God."<sup>13</sup> Finally God is called upon in the Celtic blessing.<sup>14</sup>

People are invited to stay and have a drink. During the service, the focus point was the liturgical centre; afterwards this focus point is transferred to the entrance. Here stands a table with drinks and cookies and people are walking in and out to hang their star in the tree outside and get a drink. Then people scatter through the church to talk with each other. Several people say they appreciate the possibility to visit the church in their own village. A year later the Christmas service could not take place, to the disappointment of many people. The problem was that it was not safe to light the gas heaters in the church. I asked why they did not go to the village hall instead, but the focus group says that the village hall lacks the atmosphere of a church. Besides, part of the aim and meaning of the service was specifically to gather in the church.<sup>15</sup> The example makes clear that the lack of a suitable meeting place with the right atmosphere can form a hindrance to organising activities and strengthening community ties.

### 9.1.3 | Christmas in Hellum

#### *Advent service in the Helmster School*

The public school in Hellum has no official affiliation with the church. One of the teachers, who is a church member but seldom visits the church, teaches religious education and organises the Advent project. For several years the school has celebrated Advent in the

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naar elkaar... Dat je zo'n gevoel ervaart van... dat het gewoon prettig was, dat hoeft niet altijd in woorden uitgedrukt te worden. Maar dat je merkt dat het mensen goed doet." (Sabine, Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015)

<sup>13</sup> "Dat we weten dat we bij alle pijn en verdriet ook mogen groeien als mens, als kind van God" (Christmas sermon, Overschild, 24 December 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Christmas service Overschild, 24 December 2013, Overschild; Conversation minister, 20 August 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.



week before Christmas, because they wanted to give more meaning to Christmas than only food and Santa Claus.<sup>16</sup> Every school day is opened with a short celebration: candles are lit, texts are read and songs are sung dealing with themes like light and peace. In the classes, the teachers talk with the children about the theme and they make or write something to contribute to the celebration. At the end of the celebration a candle is lit for people who are in need.

The celebrations take place in the community hall, where chairs are placed in rows. On both sides are tables with percussion instruments. There is a table with a big white candle and four Advent candles. A dark blue curtain with yellow stars hangs behind it and a nativity scene is placed on a side table. To the right stands a Christmas tree. During the services, this 'dream tree' is gradually decorated with lights, stars, and garlands. On the floor stands a basket with objects that are used during the service, which remain there during the week (see image 2). The children look at them, but do not touch them, which may indicate that it is surrounded with a sense of sacredness.

Children play an active role in the gatherings: some read a text, or play an instrument, and they are honoured if they are asked to light a candle. A group has prepared a small play, in which they depict an abstract concept like light. In short interviews the teacher creates an opportunity to share personal experiences like the loss of a grandmother or anxiety in the dark. The idea of light that drives away the darkness is ritualized in the lighting of candles and putting on the lights of the Christmas tree. During the last service, the Christmas story is told. The teacher explains:

*It all started with the Christmas story. The Christmas child was the beginning and by telling the story we want to show that back then people already dreamed of peace.<sup>17</sup>*

Although drawing on the Christian tradition in the themes and songs, the teacher tries to avoid overly explicit references to God and Jesus, because of the context of a public school. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how in this secular context time and place are created for ritual. The children are very enthusiastic about it. They practice the glockenspiel and volunteer to light the candles. Reflecting on these practices, the teacher says that she has wonderful conversations with the children, which reveal a sacred consciousness:

*They become aware of things they would otherwise hardly think about. You want to get them thinking about it and some children find that difficult, but others are very keen. Having these conversations with them, it's surprising to hear what they come up with; it's fascinating. You don't realize it, because a lot of children do not know these little rituals, but they are actually very valuable to children, it's nice to see.<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> Interview teacher Hellum, 18 June 2014.

<sup>17</sup> "Met het kerstverhaal is het toch allemaal begonnen. Het kerstkind was het begin en daarmee laten we zien: toen droomden mensen al van vrede." (Advent celebration, Hellum, 16 December 2014).

<sup>18</sup> "Het is het bewust worden van bepaalde dingen die anders minder gauw aangesproken worden. Je wilt ze eigenlijk aan het denken zetten en sommigen kinderen hebben, vinden dat heel moeilijk en sommige kinderen vinden dat geweldig. Als je dan gesprekken met ze hebt, nou dan sta je altijd weer versteld wat er allemaal, hoe ze met dingen bezig zijn en hoe ze, dat vind ik, ja dat is altijd wel boeiend. Nou ja, maar dat, dat beseft je eigenlijk niet, zulke kleine, die rituelen dat kennen ze niet en dat is, tenminste de meeste kinderen kennen dat niet. En dat is toch, ja ik heb wel gemerkt dat dat, op zich wel heel waardevol voor kinderen is, dat vind ik wel heel grappig om dat ook mee te maken hoor." (Interview school teacher, Hellum, 18 June 2014).

*Organising a Christmas Celebration*

The church community would like not only the building, but also the church as a community to become more alive in Hellum, involving villagers more in church life. Inspired by the success of involving the village community in the Christmas service in Overschild, the church council seeks contact with the board of the *Helmster Klokkeluiders* to ask whether they are interested in organising a Christmas service together. And also to explore if the church community and the cultural committee can support and strengthen each other. However the *Helmster Klokkeluiders* is not really interested in joining the Christmas service. They have enough to do and think that the village association and the activity committee might be more helpful. The activities are too religious for the cultural committee who are focussed on enhancing the cultural use of the church (see 9.3.2).<sup>19</sup>

Together with the village activity committee, the village choir, band, and the school a Christmas service is organised. At the beginning of December, a group of people gathered to prepare the service. People from the village committee stress that visitors should feel welcome and that the tone of the service should be kept casual. To give the church a hospitable atmosphere, the building should be decorated, the lights dimmed, the bells should be ringing, and a brazier could be placed outside. People should have the feeling that they are being welcomed. Perhaps the Christmas gathering in the church should be announced as a celebration and not as service. Gradually the idea arose of having a *kerstzangdienst* (Christmas song service) in the medieval church around a living nativity scene.

Both the congregation and the village activity committee want to involve villagers in the preparation, to attract as many people from the village as possible and to create a community spirit. The children can play an active part in the service by reading a poem, lighting a candle or handing out cards. People come for the classic Christmas songs, the Christmas story will be told in passing, and there will be time for reflection.

*The Christmas message needs to be present, we are sitting in church after all, or we might as well meet in the village hall.*

*This means a moment of silence to reflect on the meaning of Christmas, which involves more than the lights, candles and bells.*

*To think about all the things that are going on in the world. Look around you. He has come for all of us and we need to pass that story on: reflecting on your neighbours and everyone that you miss and would like to have present here.*<sup>20</sup>

A couple of people with a Catholic background suggest some Catholic traditions, like eating fruit cake afterwards. And they wonder whether angels are too Catholic? People involved in the preparation become enthusiastic. In the past few years they have frequented various churches looking for a real Christmas service; maybe this year they will find it in their own village church.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Meeting Church council - *Helmster Klokkeluiders*, Hellum, 15 May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> "De kerstgedachte moet wel aanwezig zijn, we zijn per slot van rekening in de kerk, anders kun je ook in dorpswoning gaan zitten." "Er mag ook wel een stil moment mag zitten, dat je even bedenkt 'waar gaat het eigenlijk om met kerst?' het gaat niet alleen om lichtjes en klokjes en kaarsjes." "Even stil staan bij wat er in de wereld gebeurt, er is zoveel aan de hand. Kijk om je heen. Hij is hier gekomen voor ons allemaal en wij moeten het verhaal wel door geven. Stil staan bij je naaste, iedereen die je mist en er ook wel graag bij zou willen hebben." (Preparation meeting Christmas celebration Hellum, 4 December 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem

### *A Living Nativity Scene*

On Christmas Eve, the communion table has made way for a big party tent, which has been transformed into a barn (see image 3). Here sit Joseph and Mary, the three kings, angels and a blind shepherd with two goats and a donkey. A big star hangs above the stable. The Christmas tree is decorated with the hearts and lights from the 'dream tree' in the school. In front of the Christmas tree stand four musicians with Santa hats and the village choir. The lectern is placed in a corner and for this occasion the minister wears a suit and not his black robe with stole. Afterwards hot chocolate, glühwein, and homemade fruit cakes are served. For the sextons, the full church is a dream come true. The community spirit is praised, different village groups have cooperated to organise the service, and social bonds have been strengthened. People value the familiar songs and music. In the sermon, the theme of inclusivity and the tendency to erect walls between people is connected to world conflicts and to the situation in the village.<sup>22</sup>

### *Christmas Celebration or Christmas Concert?*

The result is a mixture of a worship service and a Christmas concert. God is seldom explicitly mentioned or directly addressed. Again, people seem somewhat hesitant to speak about God. There is only one prayer, which is announced in the liturgy as prayer/text. In the prayer God is not addressed directly, but people are asked to open themselves to the light, the love, for what transcends us and what we might call God. The blessing aims more at the blessing people can be for each other, than at the blessing they receive from God. The minister remarks that

*The margins of the church always hold surprises, which you can experience when you leave space for each other. That is why the blessing was formulated as it was, although we must first receive the blessing before we can share it.*<sup>23</sup>

The Christmas celebrations in Hellum could be considered 'basal sacred': rituals inspired by the Christian tradition, but without explicit reference to God and Christ.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, some churchgoers missed some depth. The focus group in Overschild evaluated the service in Hellum and the discussion reveals the various meanings attributed to the service.

Rita (P<sub>4</sub>): *It was as if the village owned it completely. The minister was there in his suit and when he said something from the Bible for instance – at any rate this is how I experienced it – he then had to translate it for the normal people who do not believe. That is how I experienced it.*

Sabine (P<sub>2</sub>): *I actually thought it was very beautiful that he did that, that he related the story to everyday life and the here and now. I thought it was very nice; it really made a very positive impression on me. [...] Next to me sat a lady who had never been to church. She wanted to applaud after a song. I had to smile about that. But she is also someone who needs a little bit of*

<sup>22</sup> Christmas celebration Hellum, 24 December 2014.

<sup>23</sup> "Op de rand van de kerk zijn er altijd verrassingen en dat kun je ook zo beleven als je er de ruimte voor open houdt met elkaar. Daarom de zegen, waarin overigens wel is opgenomen dat we een zegen met elkaar delen die we eerst ontvangen" (E-mail minister, 8 May 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Goedroen Juchtmans, 'Rituelen thuis: Van christelijk tot basaal sacraal, Een exploratieve studie naar huisrituelen in de Tilburgse nieuwbouwwijk De Reeshof', in *Jaarboek voor Liturgie-onderzoek* (24), 2008, pp. 225-230, there p. 230.

*help; she really has to make an effort to see the fun of life. And she spent the whole evening saying: 'What a wonderful evening.' That felt so good, if only because of that I was happy about it. Evidently, it is so accessible that people come and experience it as such a positive thing to simply be allowed to join. They may not have remembered every word, but they can probably live of it for some time; that's a wonderful feeling. [...] Everyone participates, that also creates a sense of community, especially in those cold winter months; not only organising a Christmas service, but also using it to bring people together.*

*Wilma (P3): But that means that you can also organise a kind of Christmas-inn, like in Hellum. And then someone else can tell a story, it doesn't have to be the minister. Something like that...<sup>25</sup>*

Judging from this discussion the service had both a community binding and empowering effect, but also evoked a feeling of estrangement. It functioned as a moment when various groups of village society came together. The groups of churchgoers and non-churchgoers also mix on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, but it is rare that the worlds really overlap. For one non-churchgoer, the service was predominantly a community event, in which everyone should be given free rein to attribute his or her own religious or philosophical meaning. He preferred songs with Christmas scenes with angels and shepherds, which are more accessible for non-believers than a song text in which God is addressed directly or in which Christ's expiatory death is mentioned.<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to see that spatial terms are used to refer to freedom of thinking and feeling. And evidently this worked for the woman who sat next to Sabine. It was an evening which gave her a warm feeling and empowered her. Nevertheless, the question remains: is this still church? In relation to the Christmas walk in Noordbroek this question becomes even more pressing.

### 9.1.4 | Christmas Walk in Noordbroek

The worship service on Christmas eve in Noordbroek is one of the rare activities organised by the church community that is visited by many villagers. But, contrary to other Christmas services in the other villages, it is not a collective initiative like the Christmas walk. The Christmas walk in Noordbroek has been organised for a couple of years by the guides, the bell ringers, the choir, the brass band, the women's society, the historical circle, the mill, and various other groups. The initiative lies primarily with the guides, but the event is

<sup>25</sup> Rita (P4): "Het was gewoon helemaal van het dorp, dominee was er ook in zijn pak en als dominee iets zei, uit de bijbel bijvoorbeeld, zo heb ik het ervaren hoor, dan moest hij het daarna even nog vertalen voor de normale mensen die niet gelovig zijn. Zo voelde ik het steeds."

Sabine (P2): "Dat vond ik ook wel mooi dat hij dat deed. Ik vond het heel mooi dat hij juist het verhaal zo alledaags en op nu betrok. Ik vond het wel heel prettig moet ik zeggen, het kwam op mij heel positief over. [...] [Naast me zat een vrouw] die is nooit in de kerk geweest. Er was een liedje gezongen en toen wilde ze gaan applaudiseren: 'O, dat doen we zeker niet.' Daar moest ik heel erg om lachen, maar ze is ook iemand die een beetje hulp nodig heeft, echt moeite heeft om het leven nog steeds leuk te vinden. En ze heeft de hele avond gezegd: 'Wat was het toch een mooie avond.' Nou ik voelde me gewoon zo fijn, alleen daar word ik al blij van. Dat het blijkbaar zo laagdrempelig is dat mensen komen en dat die dat zo ervaren als positiefs dat ze er gewoon aan mee mochten doen. Dat dat toch op hen over kwam, ondanks dat ze de woorden misschien niet allemaal onthouden hebben, maar dat ze daar vast nog een hele tijd op heeft kunnen teren, van nou wat een fijn gevoel was dat. [...] Ze doen wel allemaal mee, dat geeft ook wel weer saamhorigheid. Juist in de koude wintermaanden, dat je niet alleen een kerstnachtdienst organiseert, maar het ook gebruikt om mensen bij elkaar te brengen.'

Wilma (P3): "Dan is het op den duur dan kan je net zo goed een soort kerst-inn organiseren, zoals het in Hellum was en dan kan ook iemand anders een verhaaltje vertellen. Dat hoeft een dominee bij wijze van niet speciaal te doen. Zoiets." (Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015).

<sup>26</sup> E-mail correspondence organisers, Christmas service Hellum, December 2014.

wholeheartedly supported by the church community, although the congregation as such is not actively involved.<sup>27</sup>

On the evening of the walk in 2014 I approach the church. A man with a horse is followed by a van driven by someone wearing a costume. It is rather strange to walk through a village meeting shepherds and wise men. Visitors are welcomed into the church and receive a stamp card and a map. Walking through the village in the dark they meet various personages from the Christmas story. In the tower, the bell-ringers keep watch as Roman soldiers. On the north side of the church king Herod suddenly appears, screaming 'Where is the new born king?' Walking through the muddy fields a fire can be seen in the distance. Here a group of bell-ringers walks around as shepherds. Stumbling across the fields, guided by the light of a torch, I see in a distance a star, which hangs on the top of a mill sail. In the mill Joseph and Mary sit in the straw (see image 4). Next door is the inn, where visitors can warm up with pea soup and hot chocolate. Returning to the church, the path is crossed by three kings who are looking for the star. In the church, people can have a hot drink and listen to Christmas songs by the women's choir. A woman says that for her sons this is becoming the traditional opening of the Christmas holiday.<sup>28</sup>

The walk takes place in and around the church and serves to revive the church building for the village. It is a clear example of how a physical meeting place can lead to community initiative. Although in the preparations some underlying tensions are traceable, on the whole social cohesion is strengthened, which is important in Noordbroek. Church members are only indirectly involved as members of the women's society or otherwise. The human resources are lacking to become more involved and relate the Christmas walk to the Christmas service. Thus, as a community the church does not contribute significantly, but the church building and the Christian heritage bring people together. The Christmas walk is primarily a social event around cultural and religious heritage. There is ample opportunity for socialising, in the church, the inn or during the walk, but contrary to the Christmas celebrations in the other villages, there is no communal moment for ritual and reflection. The women's choir sings Christmas songs, but their singing is background music and not an activity in which all participate.

### 9.1.5 | Context of Christmas celebrations

Although the preparation, place, and character of the various Christmas celebrations are evidently shaped by their village contexts, they all seem to share the same threefold aim: to be accessible, inclusive and strengthen the community ties within the village. Rita (P4F-GO) draws attention to what Thissen calls the meaning of meeting places and communal activities for building a community:

*Of course it's great to do those things with each other. It is so important, especially for the village, because the school is closed. To maintain those contacts with each other, you have to find other things that connect people with each other.*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Kerstkuier Noordbroek brengt zo'n 250 deelnemers op de been', *Menterwolde.info*, 17 December 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Christmas walk Noordbroek, 20 December 2014.

<sup>29</sup> "Tuurlijk vind ik dat heel mooi dat je dat allemaal met elkaar doet. Dat is zo belangrijk en vooral voor het dorp ook

A comparison of where the Christmas festivities take place reveals some interesting differences. In Overschild and Hellum the service is in the church, but in Schildwolde people have chosen for the tent, for reasons I explained above. Still, it is interesting to note that in Hellum and Overschild it would be unthinkable for the service *not* to take place in the church, but in the village hall, because that would defeat the purpose of the service. So, when in Overschild the church building was not available, the service was simply cancelled. The church building also has a prominent role in Noordbroek. The building forms one of the reasons for organising the Christmas walk: to give the church a broader function with an activity that is in line with the religious function of the place and that brings more villagers inside the church. While in the previous chapter the church in Overschild almost seemed to have disappeared, the Christmas celebration in Overschild may have been the most full-blown worship service in the four villages, maybe even more so than in Schildwolde, where the Christmas celebration took place in a tent instead of a church building and was called a Christmas gathering. Meanwhile, in Hellum and even more so in Noordbroek the question arises: is this still church?

Another interesting observation is that all the churches want to involve the village more in the Christmas celebrations as an activity with and for the village community, but there is a remarkable difference. In Schildwolde and Overschild the services are presented as an inter-church initiative and have the aim of bringing people of various religious backgrounds together. In Hellum and Noordbroek cooperation is not sought with other churches, but with village organisations. In Hellum bridging the difference between churchgoers and non-churchgoers is stressed, while in Noordbroek people's ecclesial background is no longer an issue. This difference in cooperation partners can be explained by the fact that in Hellum and Noordbroek there is only one *Hervormde* church, so there are no other churches to approach, while in Schildwolde, and also in Overschild in the recent past, there are both a *Hervormde* and a *Vrijgemaakte* church.

The focus group in Overschild also noticed how this difference in who are involved and what aim people have in mind affects the practice and performance.

Rita (P4): *It depends; irrespective of whether all denominations join... it does determine the content of the service. If you compare it to Hellum you can say... what is the approach? What do people expect?*

Wilma (P3): *But of course the entourage is also important, the living nativity scene in Hellum, and a choir.*

Sabine (P4): *Yes, but if there is no longer a Sunday school and you have to fill in the service from a public school and to make it accessible for the children, starting earlier may not make a difference. It depends very much on who is in charge, a primary school, a teacher or a Sunday school.<sup>30</sup>*

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he, want de school is weg en om toch die contacten onder elkaar te houden, moet je toch andere dingen zoeken, dat je mensen toch met elkaar verbindt." (Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Rita (P4): "Het ligt er een beetje aan, ongeacht of je dan alle gezindte bij elkaar hebt... Maar dat bepaalt de inhoud van de dienst natuurlijk, als je het een beetje vergelijkt met Hellum dan zeg je... dat is een beetje de insteek? Wat verwachten mensen..."

Wilma (P3): "Maarja dat is natuurlijk een beetje, ja de entourage is natuurlijk belangrijk, zo'n kerststal in Hellum, zo'n koor, he"

Sabine (P2): "Maar goed als je geen zondagschool meer hebt en er moet vanuit een openbare basisschool invulling aan gegeven worden dan weet ik niet of als je eerder begint of je die invulling krijgt om die kinderen daarin mee te

Thus, the various services are clearly shaped by their context: the services in Overschild and Schildwolde can be characterised as ecumenical, while the celebrations in Hellum and Overschild are more village events. This means a difference in which life worlds are brought into conversation with each other, with their own dilemmas. In the ecumenical service church boundaries are crossed and people try to discover similarities. This can lead to unexpected surprises, but there is also a risk of theological confrontation. The services also have a missional element, an intention of bringing the Christian message to the village. This element is lacking in the village celebrations which have the aim of creating a space where people from different religious backgrounds can celebrate Christmas. The minister detects more of an attitude of equivalence. If the church community has a message, it is an attempt to overcome prejudices and show another side of church.

### 9.2 | Memorial

It could be said that the counterpart of the Christmas celebrations are moments of memorial in which the church plays a role. In this section I explore two examples. First, the commemoration of the villagers during the service on New Year's Eve in Hellum and Schildwolde is an example of how the church communities provide a service to the village community. Second, the place of the church building is very suitable for village gatherings on the 4th of May, when the Second World War is remembered. For a couple of years now Remembrance Day has also been held in the church in Noordbroek. In this section I focus on Remembrance Day in Hellum, which again is an example of how public ritual takes shape outside the ecclesial domain, although it takes place in the church building.

#### 9.2.1 | Commemorating the Dead

In the previous chapter, I briefly addressed the role of the church in commemorating the dead. In Schildwolde, Hellum and Noordbroek the church is (partly) responsible for the maintenance of the cemetery. The church buildings are used for the funerals of church members and villagers. Sometimes the minister is asked to lead the funeral of someone who does not belong to the church community. In Hellum and Noordbroek the church building is also rented as a venue for a farewell service without the involvement of a clergyman. Funerals are also important for the visibility of the church and offer a good opportunity for contact with people who are not regular churchgoers. As in the Christmas services, they are moments when various worlds are brought together, when the minister preaches in his own style, and songs from various liturgical traditions are combined.

In Schildwolde and Hellum the relatives of all deceased villagers receive a letter of invitation to join the service on New Year's Eve. Sometimes relatives live far away and are not able to come, but they reply that they appreciate the gesture. During the memorial service in Schildwolde relatives are invited to light a candle and place it in a tray filled with

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krijgen, het hangt er wel heel erg vanaf van is het een basisschool, een leerkracht of is het een zondagsschool die het oppakt". (Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015).

sand in front of the *doophek* (baptismal rail). The name of a boy who committed suicide is also mentioned and I see a group of young people looking moved. If there are no relatives, a church council member comes forward to light a candle. People leave the church in a subdued mood. Outside they join in the festivities that take place underneath the tower, where the bell-ringing of *Kloksmeer* has started. The church is nearly empty and the sextons are clearing up when a small company enters the church. A mother with two sons wants to light a candle for her son who died more than a year ago. The sexton says that although they are closing, they are welcome to light a candle and take their time.

The memorial service is a moment when the congregation presents itself to the village and provides a service. This means that questions about accessibility and inclusivity arise. The church council does not want to frighten people off. This can lead to dilemmas when guest ministers are asked to lead the service. When a rather orthodox minister was scheduled to lead the service in Hellum the church council was anxious that people's prejudices against the church would be confirmed. In Schildwolde the church council faces the risk of forgetting people. The cemetery is divided into two parts: the public cemetery is owned by the *Hervormde* congregation, while the *Vrijgemaakte* church has its own cemetery adjacent to it. Because the *Hervormde* church council does not have full knowledge of who is buried on the *Vrijgemaakte* part, sometimes names are not mentioned.<sup>31</sup>

The services confirm the relation with a broader circle of people who are connected with the church in various ways, the most obvious of which are connectedness through place and events. The service is a yearly event for the whole village community. It ties in with the place of the church building, where the service is held and the place of the churchyard, where the deceased villagers are laid to rest. But on closer observation it becomes clear that the relation with people also plays a crucial role. In these services, the names of former villagers are also mentioned, people who have died in a nursing home. They are included again in the village community that is gathered in the church. Furthermore, the event relates to people's family history, sometimes going back for decades or even longer. This reveals another aspect of connecting and belonging, namely belonging over time. The relation with people from the recent past is confirmed.

### 9.2.2 | Remembrance Day

Remembrance day has gained the status of a national service in Dutch society, the two minutes of silence and the laying of wreaths on the 4th of May is an important ritual commemorating the victims of war, especially the dead of the Second World War.<sup>32</sup> In Hellum the commemoration is preceded by a memorial service. The service takes place in the church, but is not an official worship service. There is no official representation from the church community, although many church members are present. The church is filled with people of different ages; children have come with their parents and grandparents. According to the chairman of the 4th of May committee in Hellum, the meeting is about the com-

<sup>31</sup> Church council meetings, Schildwolde, 12 December 2013; 14 January 2014; 7 January 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Schnabel (ed.), *Niet alle dagen feest: SCP Nieuwjaarsuitgave 2012*, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2012, p. 4.



## An Intertwining Church in Groningen

memoration of peace and freedom in the present, the past and the future. This is personified in the participation of the school children. The children of the school have adopted the monument near the church and therefore have the responsibility to maintain it (see image 5). The monument is erected in memory of twelve Jewish villagers who were deported during the war and did not come back. The children sing a couple of songs during the service and they read poems they have written themselves. Afterwards they lay a wreath on the monument.<sup>33</sup>

Remembrance day has been organised for a couple of years now. In the beginning, there were some doubts about using the church for the commemoration service. It should be a village activity, open to everyone. People wondered whether the church building was neutral enough. People from other denominations or with a strong antipathy towards the church could be put off from joining the commemoration in the building. This is also the reason why the organisers are hesitant to ask the village minister to deliver the commemoration speech. In their view, "it is a matter that needs sensitive handling",<sup>34</sup> although it is not doubted that the vicar is capable of delivering a contemplative and edifying story that is more philosophical than religious and not too heavy.<sup>35</sup> Their reasoning is an example of how a discursive distinction is made between religious and secular, but a closer look at the practices during the memorial service once again reveals that the secular and the religious become intertwined.

### *Religious Traits*

Interestingly, the church building is not the only ecclesial aspect. A white *antependium* hangs from the pulpit and I see flowers on the raised area in the choir. The service is preceded and concluded with organ music and the non-religious double quartet only sings Christian songs: *Notre Père*, *Ave verum corpus*, *Da Ispravitsja* by Pjotr Iljitsj Tsjaikovsky and *Abide with Me* by William Monk. The mayor's speech sounds something like a sermon: he stresses that freedom should not be taken for granted. Freedom depends on tolerance; it is something we have to fight for. He sees parallels between the suffering of people in the past during the Second World War and in the present in Syria and Ukraine. An important difference to a normal worship service is the absence of prayer and that the possibilities for participating in the singing are limited to the national anthem outside the church.<sup>36</sup>

The songs which are sung by the children do not refer directly to God or Jesus, but have Christian connotations. During an interview with the teacher she tells me that the songs came from a magazine for religious education. She uses the material frequently in class:

*Songs about being faithful, about how to treat each other, about peace, well, they enjoy songs about all sorts of things. They're the kind of songs you also sing in church with children, but I never use songs about God or Jesus.*

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<sup>33</sup> Remembrance day, Hellum, 4 May 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Want ik denk zelf sowieso dat het altijd wat gevoelig ligt." (Interview 4 May committee, Hellum).

<sup>35</sup> Preparation Remembrance day, Hellum, 1 April 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

Because it is a public school, the teacher wants to avoid the impression of wanting to convert the children.<sup>37</sup> The first song during the commemoration service is about sharing the world with each other, because “we enjoy the same sun, we breathe the same air and we all see the stars at night.” The other song is about social inclusion: no one should be left aside, no one should be forgotten or swept away, and no one should be rushed. The second strophe runs as follows:

Someone looked at you, gave comfort and love, rose up. Someone picked you up, someone, someone. Someone took a turn that brought you life. Someone had that strength, someone, someone.<sup>38</sup>

In this song, you can hear an oblique reference to the resurrection of Christ in the phrase that ‘someone went a road that brought you into life.’ There are also references to the Christian way of life of looking after each other.<sup>39</sup> In preparation for Remembrance day the children talked in class about war and liberation, and how people can live together in the world in a good way. Next, they wrote poems and when they are read in the service they sound like prayers. They ask questions like why did this happen? They express the children’s thoughts about the people who have been afraid and their views on the bad guys, who should be ashamed. One child says: “freedom is working together for happiness,” another child reads:

The 4<sup>th</sup> of May  
I am lying in my bed  
I see pictures of people  
I see wreaths  
A man against the wall  
His eyes closed in prayer.  
The air is loaded with the memory  
Such a small room  
I see my room with my laptop and my things  
and am ashamed....<sup>40</sup>

This poem evokes the most reaction from the public. I hear people mumbling, sighing and nodding.<sup>41</sup> In the interview the teacher tells me about the way the children deal with Remembrance day. They are very aware of their responsibility. She overheard a conversation between two boys. One of them was not sure whether he would join the commemora-

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<sup>37</sup> “Liedjes, nou over trouw zijn, over hoe je met elkaar om gaat, over vrede, nou van alles en nou dat vinden ze heel mooi. Want dat, ja die liedjes die horen, wat je ook wel een beetje in de kerk hè zingt dan, hè met kinderen. Dat... maar ik doe nooit liedjes wat over God en over Jezus gaat.” (Interview school teacher, Hellum, 18 June 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Iemand keek je aan. Gaf troost en liefde, is opgestaan. Iemand nam je mee, iemand, iemand. Iemand ging voor jou een weg die jou in het leven bracht. Iemand had die kracht, iemand, iemand. (“Het lied van zeven”, in: ‘Liedteksten Midden-Bovenbouw Doe maar mee!’ in: *Trefwoord, Methode levensbeschouwing voor het onderwijs* (12:3), Amersfoort, Uitgeverij Kwintessens BV, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Remembrance Day, Hellum, 4 May 2014.

<sup>40</sup> “4 mei, ik lig in mijn bed, ik zie foto’s van mensen, ik zie kransen, een man tegen de muur, zijn ogen gesloten in gebed. De lucht is zwaar van de herinnering, zo’n klein kamertje en ik zie mijn kamer met laptop en mijn spullen en schaam me.” (Poem, Remembrance day, Hellum 4 May 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Remembrance Day, Hellum, 4 May 2014.

tion, although he would probably be at home. The other boy responded in an outrage: "If you are around, you should come, if you don't, you have no respect."<sup>42</sup> According to the secretary of the village society the Remembrance service and the village Christmas celebration play an important role in bringing people who are anti-church over the threshold. Participating in the services gives people a positive experience. It seems that villagers in Hellum appreciate the rituals and the contemplation.<sup>43</sup>

### *Memorial Practices Compared*

The practices of commemoration and remembrance are both moments for collective memorial and reflection that take place in the public domain of village life. Both appeal to a notion of feeling connected over and through time with people from the past, which becomes tangible in the church building, the churchyard and the stories that are connected with it. The practices confirm the relation people can have with the village, but also with village history and people from the past. The memorial practices have an intergenerational aspect. Children, cousins, and sometimes parents light a candle for their loved one on New Year's Eve. In the remembrance service the children of the school play a central role. One of the aims of the whole project is to tell the children about the Second World War and how it affected village history. The generation of the baby boomers realises how the Second World War has also influenced their life. Some older villagers still have vivid memories of the departure of the Jewish family. For some people village history is closely related to family history. The commemoration services on New Year's Eve draw on family and community ties. The remembrance services are rooted in place attachment and sense of history and relate to village community as a whole.

One difference is that the commemoration services are in a way ordinary worship services which attract a broader group of people. Although the Remembrance service takes place inside a church and bears some ritual and reflective characteristics, it is not a worship service. Remembrance day is often characterised as civil religion, hence the emphasis on the neutrality and accessibility of the place of gathering, but our case gives reason to believe that religious elements are integrated into the ceremony. In a way the commemoration service and Remembrance day, together with the Christmas celebration, form the ecclesial year for ordinary non-churchgoing villagers. In that light a remark from an artist in Noordbroek is interesting:

*There could more gatherings of a spiritual nature, for example, a harvest festival. In that way, the church building could be kept alive. At those times I want to hear something that has to do with life in the here and now, with the meaning of the story for our daily lives.<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> Schoolboy: "Nou, dat kan echt niet, dat je er wel bent en niet komt, dan heb je geen respect, zo." (Interview teacher Hellum)

<sup>43</sup> E-mail secretary village society Hellum, 28 August 2017.

<sup>44</sup> "Er zouden misschien wel meer bijeenkomsten met een spiritueel karakter gehouden kunnen worden. Bijvoorbeeld een oogstfeest. Op zo'n manier kun je het gebouw levend houden. Ik wil dan iets horen wat te maken heeft met het leven nu, wat is de betekenis van het verhaal voor ons alledaagse leven nu." (Evaluation meeting Cultural day Noordbroek, 3 June 2014.)

The remark points to sacred consciousness, which places daily life in another perspective. Second, the artist points out that the vacant temporal and physical space of the church building can gain new use and meaning. In the next section I show how the intertwining of church and culture creates new possibilities, but is not without tensions.

### 9.3 | Church Intertwines with Culture

The churches of Noordbroek and Hellum regularly function as concert halls and sometimes also as theatres.<sup>45</sup> Here the church communities act as hosts, facilitating the events by making the church available. Occasionally the church community itself organises a cultural event. Taking a closer look at a couple of these events and the way the church communities and cultural committees relate to each other reveals how religion and culture can overlap, strengthen each other, be placed in opposition to each other and sometimes be approached as separate worlds.<sup>46</sup>

In this section I again travel from village to village and explore various cultural expressions: an exhibition, a performance of religious music, the church as a cultural historic sight, and as a theatre. I start in Schildwolde with the Festival of the Spirit. In Hellum during the Helmster Easter play village history and the Easter story blend into a shared frame of meaning, but there are also examples of how people make a sharp distinction between religious and cultural practices. In Noordbroek the historical cultural value of the church building plays a central role. As in Hellum, this can be a point of connection, but also lead to differing views. I end the journey in Overschild where on a Sunday morning a theatrical soup concert is organised.

#### 9.3.1 | Festival of the Spirit in Schildwolde

As mentioned before (sec. 8.3.3), since 2012 the *Hervormde* congregation has participated in the national Festival of the Spirit, which takes place between Ascension day and Pentecost. The national organisation frames the Festival as an interplay between art, Pentecost and the architecture of church buildings. Artists are asked to draw their inspiration for their work from the church buildings and Pentecost. Every year the festival has a theme which relates to Pentecost. The project is aimed at people who are interested in contemporary art, cultural history, forms of spirituality, faith, and recreation.<sup>47</sup> This leads to fruitful and interesting meetings with the artists. During the Pentecost service attention is paid to the art work which is exhibited in the church. This is the moment when it is actively placed in a religious framework.

The event is regional, ecumenical, cultural and leads to contact with the municipality. It is organised in a cluster association, together with the Protestant congregation in Hark-

<sup>45</sup> *Frontier Ruckus-What you are/Live@NoordbroekChurch*, 19 July 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUWDQfboO2Q>, accessed 20 January 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Elaine Graham, "'What we make of the world': the Turn to 'Culture' in Theology and the Study of Religion", in: Gordon Lynch, *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, London, Tauris, 2007, pp. 63-81, there pp. 72-74.

<sup>47</sup> *Feest van de Geest*, <http://www.feestvandegeest.nl/>, accessed 20 July 2017.

stede. The *Vrijgemaakte* church in Schildwolde also participates. The national organisation approaches the artists and provides some publicity. The cluster receives a subsidy from the municipality and every year the festival is opened in one of the churches by an alderman. It can be seen as an effort to do something together as churches that is directed outwards and which opens the churches in Schildwolde and Noordbroek. The churches in Hellum and Overschild stay closed. The sextons of Hellum think that they open the church often enough and fear that at the end of the day they will be the ones sitting in the church all day. In Noordbroek the guides open the church and in Schildwolde church members (i.e. church council members) are present in the church to receive visitors.

In 2015, sculptures of birds were exhibited in the *Vrijgemaakte* church. The artist was invited for an art class in the school, which resulted in bird paintings by children, which were also displayed in the church. In 2016 the theme was "Liberty of Spirit" and the churches organised a children's party in the Schildwolder *Gereformeerde* church. The children could make a large painting together and a parachute.<sup>48</sup> The work of art in the *Hervormde* church gained local media coverage. From the large box pew in the choir hung an enormous decoupage with a motif of drilling rigs, a reference to the earthquakes (see image 6 and see further sec. 9.5). The artist wanted to depict this theme in the church because "churches used to be safe havens, both physically and spiritually. But now the churches are threatened by the earthquakes."<sup>49</sup>

The open churches mainly seem to attract people from elsewhere, who when the weather allows cycle from one church to the other. On a sunny Friday afternoon, I sit in front of the church, talking agreeably with a church council member, but nobody visits. When I use the opportunity to visit the *Vrijgemaakte* church, the hostess tells that earlier that afternoon a youth band played, but that the number of visitors was also disappointing. Nevertheless, a church member who had not been in the church for some time did pop in, so the open church seemed to lower the threshold.<sup>50</sup> The *Hervormde* congregation hopes that the Festival increases the visibility of the church and strengthens its role within the village. The festival, however, does not seem to find much resonance in the villages. Regularly the question is raised as to whether it is worth the effort. The first time the congregation organised the Festival independently of the national organisation. A committee from the congregation approached artists and together they visited the church buildings. They needed to join the national organisation, because otherwise they were not allowed to use the name. This has the advantage that the congregation can profit from the national publicity and that the organisational work is less. However, because the contact with the artists runs via the national organisation, the congregation hardly has any direct contact with them and therefore the interaction between church community and artists is lacking. This is one of the reasons why the initiative finds little resonance within the congregation.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Uitnodiging Kinderfeest*, <http://www.gereformeerdekerkschildwolde.nl/nieuws/161-uitnodiging-kinderfeest.html>, accessed 14 May 2016.

<sup>49</sup> "Kerken waren vroeger een veilige haven, zowel fysiek als geestelijk. Nu worden de kerken bedreigd door de aardbevingen." (Richard Lamberst, 'Kunst over aardbevingsproblematiek in Kerk Schildwolde', *Groot Groningen*, 6 May 2016; "Met papier de aardbevingsproblematiek laten zien", *RTV Noord*, 13 May 2016.)

<sup>50</sup> Open Church during Festival of the Spirit 2014, Schildwolde, 6 June 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Contact Jan Hommes, 1 August 2017.

### 9.3.2 | Helmster Easter Play

In the Catharijne Convent in Utrecht lies a missal from around 1200, which was used in the church of Hellum. The missal contains three prayers to Saint Walfridus, the titular of the church and an Easter play.<sup>52</sup> As mentioned before, in the choir of the church is a long low niche, which is thought to have functioned as an Easter sepulchre during the Middle Ages. In the niche the cross and/or the host in a pyx were symbolically buried during the Mass on Good Friday. 'The Easter Sepulchre was locked and guarded until Easter morning, when the objects in it were raised in the *elavatio* ritual.'<sup>53</sup> In 2001 the Easter play was reconstructed on the occasion of an exposition about the Middle Ages in the museum of Groningen.<sup>54</sup> Once in a while the Easter play is performed in the church of Hellum by a choir from the region.

On a Sunday after Easter in April 2015, the Helmster Easter play was performed once again. Some publicity was done for the event and I noticed that the worship service was attended by a number of villagers whom I had not seen before in regular services. The event was a kind of *raamvertelling* (frame story). Within the context of a worship service the Easter play was performed as one of the readings. This meant that in the context of a Protestant liturgy a (reinvented) Catholic liturgy was carried out. The minister led the service, the prayers and read the sermon, while a priest from the *Oud-Katholieke Kerk* (Old-Catholic church) performed the role of priest in the play.<sup>55</sup> Centre stage was a table covered with a white cloth, on which stood a cross with palm branches and a plate with a host. The host represents the risen Christ. In a way the congregation celebrated Easter after Easter. The minister focussed on the image of the searching women at the grave. A villager who found the content on Christmas eve a little disappointing valued this 'Easter' sermon because he recognized the image and could relate the Easter story to his personal life.

*When we visit the grave of my father or mother, we know exactly where it is, we don't have to search for it. But the deceased are not there, the search for them never ends.*<sup>56</sup>

Within the context of the church building, where this Easter play was performed centuries ago, it also tells a story about the history of the village. In the Helmster Easter play the religious and cultural worlds almost completely overlap with each other. The performance of the Easter play is a mixture of re-enactment with the choir and the community following in the footsteps of the community centuries ago.<sup>57</sup> Liturgy and culture form two sides of the same coin referring to an invisible world, which becomes tangible in the space of the church. The place of the church is the location of both historical attachment and belonging over time with people from the past. Church history and village history are brought

<sup>52</sup> E. Barel, *et al.*, *Hellum, een parel in de Woldstreek*, Scheemda, Actief Scheemda, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Justin Kroesen, Regnerus Steensma, *The Interior of the Medieval Village Church*, Leuven, Peeters, 2004, pp. 290, 294.

<sup>54</sup> H.H. Grimme, *et al.* (eds.), *Hellum, een parel in de Woldstreek - 2, Old/Nij*, Bedum, Profiel, 2008, pp. 17-21.

<sup>55</sup> The Old-Catholic church is independent from the Roman Catholic church

<sup>56</sup> "Als we naar het graf van mijn vader of moeder gaan dan weten we precies waar dat is, we zoeken niet, maar de dode is daar ook niet, die blijf je zoeken." (Worship service Easter play, Hellum, 26 April 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Grimme, *Hellum, Old/Nij*, pp. 17-21.

together, which creates bridging social capital. Although some visitors feel unfamiliar with the Catholic rituals, they express a feeling that the service shows how it should be: people from liberal, reformed, and catholic backgrounds celebrating together in a Catholic service within a Protestant service, with a minister and a priest.

Although in the case of the Easter play the fields of religion and cultural heritage overlap, on other occasions a sharp distinction is made. The cultural committee did not want to participate in the Christmas service and replied guardedly to other suggestions for cooperation. Members make a clear distinction between their own activities and ecclesial life. They want to show that the church can also be used as a stage for cultural activities. "But we don't act religious."<sup>58</sup> Their aim is not to stir any religious emotion among the visitors, although this may very well happen.<sup>59</sup> At the same time the committee members say that the church building is more than just a nice background and should not be reduced to a decorative meaning. The cultural activities should not stand in opposition to the religious use of the church. This means that the building shapes the practices. The respondents seem to attribute religious meaning to the building, or at least are aware of the fact that other people do. The ecclesial use and the religious meaning of the building limit its cultural use in some ways, but also give an extra dimension to the cultural activities. Thus, in Hellum, church and culture seem to be two attracting forces, but are also placed in opposition to each other.

### 9.3.3 | Cultural Church Noordbroek

Once a month on Saturday afternoons, from April to October, the guides open the church for guided tours. Helen (PN70) takes her seat behind a table near the south entrance of the church. She welcomes visitors, who may be drawn to the church by the sign on the pavement and the waving flag. She registers the number of visitors and sells cards, booklets, and CDs. Lenie (PG65) and Anne (PG71) act as hosts, bringing cups, coffee, and tea from the learning church. The other members of the group guide visitors through the church. The guides welcome various groups to the church, such as a school class from Noordbroek. A while ago residents from the nursing home visited the church, some of whom had lived in Noordbroek for eighty years and had never entered the church before. Every year descendants of the nineteenth-century minister Rutgers van der Loeff also come along.<sup>60</sup>

In 2014, the guides were involved in the project 'Replaced churches', which was also organised in Noordbroek, Scheemda, and Zuidbroek. A shared history led to regional cooperation. In the thirteenth century the region was flooded by the Dollard and people had to flee because of the water. New, magnificent churches were erected.<sup>61</sup> For Sven (PG103), a local historian, it is a mystery why people built such large churches: "It doesn't make any sense when you are trying to escape the water."<sup>62</sup> He shows a wooden frame on the church-

<sup>58</sup> "Maar we doen niet religieus." (Interview Helmster Klokkeluid, 26 August 2014).

<sup>59</sup> Interview Helmster Klokkeluid, 26 August 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Open Saturday Noordbroek, 5 April 2014.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.kerknoordbroek.nl/?p=1136>, accessed 7 August 2014.

<sup>62</sup> PN 103: "Dat is toch niet heel logisch als je op de vlucht bent voor het water." (Open Saturday Noordbroek, 5 april 2014).

yard. When you look through the frame you see the landscape where the river used to run. The historical circle, of which several guides are members, has placed the frame together with a wooden gravestone relating the story about the evacuation.<sup>63</sup>

### *Tangible History*

History becomes almost tangible in the church and this is the most important motive for the guides to devote themselves to the maintenance of the church.<sup>64</sup> The guides speak enthusiastically about the frescos, pointing out innumerable details, such as the green men that can be noticed between the floral motifs. But walking through the church the overdue maintenance can hardly be ignored. Sven (PG 103) points to the ceiling: the fresco of the coronation of Mary is disappearing. When the guides walk with people through the church they always try to show not just the building, but also tell about the people who believed there and why they painted those images on the ceiling. Helen (PN70) can tell lively stories about dozens of ancestors who lie buried in the churchyard and who have left their traces in the church. Her family history is closely connected with the building. The guides seem aware that the church building embodies the communities from the past who built, used and redecored the church.<sup>65</sup>

Also, the almost legendary story is told about how the church escaped demolition in the 1960s. Several socialist members of the local council had severe objections against investing large amounts of public money in an ancient church building which was only used by forty churchgoers, instead of a swimming pool or a village hall for thousands of people. The subsidy for the restoration was granted with six votes against five.<sup>66</sup> The council members were correct that the building would continue to be a burden for future generations, but the prediction that the people who restored the church in 1967 would be declared crazier than the people who built it in the first place in the Middle Ages, was not realized.<sup>67</sup> In 2008 the exhibition 'Work in the Church' depicted with photos, newspaper articles, and stories how the village community raised money for the restoration with concerts, exhibitions, a bazaar, doughnut ball actions, and the sale of church souvenirs.<sup>68</sup>

### *A Place for Religion or a Place for Culture?*

Esther (PG49) tells that the guiding group and the church community used to be interrelated, until the question was raised where the primary responsibility of the church lay: with the church building or with the church community?

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<sup>63</sup> Open Saturday Noordbroek, 5 April 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem; Focus group Noordbroek, 17 July 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Rouwhorst, 'Voor wie zijn kerkgebouwen', p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> 'Herv. Kerk te Noordbroek bijna door raad geruïneerd: Restauratie uitgesteld wegens sentimenten', (Van onze redactie te Veendam), [s.l., s.n.].

<sup>67</sup> Idem.

<sup>68</sup> A. Omta, 'Inwoners van Oosterbroek en omgeving', [s.l., s.n.]; 'Oliebollen-aktie groot succes', [s.l., s.n.], March 1970; 'Kerk of zwembad', *Tussenklappen*, 29 July 2008



## An Intertwining Church in Groningen

*Some people thought that the church community was not the most important part of the church. Of course, the church council said that the church building and the church community are inextricable bound up with each other. [...] A church is a church because there is a community. That was a point of slight controversy.<sup>69</sup>*

The church council was not amused when the church was presented as a culture church on the website of Noordbroek. Although several guides are registered as church members and all receive the church newsletter they talk about the church community in a detached fashion.

Thea (PN 101): *Most people never go to church, apart from at Christmas.*

Roel (PN 106): *Religion is no longer rewarding. There are other activities such as the cultural day and the Christmas walk during which the church has still a function. The point is to give the church a place in the village.<sup>70</sup>*

Still, the guides see the value of religion for the public sphere. Sven (PG 103) is attached to the symbolism of the building, through which he connects with the church. In his view, the church belongs to everyone, but what worries him is the indifference with which religious history is approached. He had heard of a project in the primary school to visit historical buildings. The church is the oldest building by far, but when it was suggested that they go to the church, the teachers had responded: "Go inside the church? We are not Christians!" Sven: "They ignore the historical sensation, which is the spark I've always tried to pass on."<sup>71</sup> This example illustrates how the religious and secular, in this case in relation to cultural history, are approached as opposites.

### *Interaction between Religion and Cultural History*

The Christopher service on Heritage day, is an interesting effort to bring the worlds of religion and culture together. Because the theme of the National Heritage day 2014 is traveling, the guides want to repeat a service about St. Christopher, the patron of travellers, a beautiful fresco of whom is visible in the church (see chapter 8, image 7).<sup>72</sup> In the preparation they want to skip several moments of prayer, leaving only one short prayer at the end. For them a reading from the Bible is not necessary, but a short sermon, prayer and blessing are thought more or less essential, because otherwise it would not be a worship service. In the preparation the guides show the same hesitation to use explicit church discourse that is noticeable in the Christmas services. Intriguingly, however, after the preparation several guides remark that in this way religion is also relevant for their daily lives.<sup>73</sup> One of the guides hopes that it is the beginning of more contact between the guides and the church

<sup>69</sup> "Ook doordat er ook nog een aantal mensen waren die vond dat de kerkelijke gemeente niet het belangrijkste was van de kerk. En de kerkenraad vond natuurlijk van het kerkgebouw en de kerkelijke gemeente zijn onlosmakelijk met elkaar verbonden. [...] Maar een kerk is een kerk doordat er een gemeente is. En dat was ook een beetje een strijdpunt." (Interview pastor VVP, 3 December 2014).

<sup>70</sup> PN 101: "De meeste mensen komen nooit in de kerk, ja met kerst. PN 106 merkt op dat godsdienst niet meer lonend is. Andere activiteiten zijn de culturele dag en de kerstkuier, op die manier heeft de kerk nog wel een functie. Het doel is om de kerk een plaats in het dorp te geven." (Open day Noordbroek, 5 April 2014).

<sup>71</sup> PN 103: "Zo gaan ze voorbij aan de historische sensatie, dat is wat ik altijd heb geprobeerd: het vonkje over te spelen." (Open Saturday Noordbroek, 5 April 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Karin Weijts, 'Open Monumentendag in kerk van Noordbroek', *Veendammer*, 30 August 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Preparation meetings 'Bezinning rondom Christoforus' Noordbroek, 19 August 2014.

community. Thea suggests doing something on Prayer day with the fresco of St. Margaret, who was called upon for a good harvest.<sup>74</sup>

In the previous chapter I mentioned that the church community thought that the religious and cultural uses of the church could strengthen each other. But due to lack of human resources they have not been able to stir interaction. Therefore, other groups have been asked to organise the cultural activities: the guides, the graveyard group, and the organ committee. But since the members of these groups have little church affiliation, they lack a frame of reference to see how the church community can be of value for their activities. This is strengthened by the cooperation with the other *Hervormde* churches, because the groups have the idea that the church community has more or less left the village and only pops in occasionally. The result is that church and culture are often approached as different entities. The question seems to be what the dominant meaning of the church building is. In the eyes of the guides the cultural use has replaced the religious use, which is hardly relevant anymore. For them religion is mainly *frozen* history, 'devotion expressed in the wood and stone'<sup>75</sup> of the church building, although this religious cultural history can be revived when the opportunity arises.

### 9.3.4 | Theatre Church in Overschild

After the Christmas service the church of Overschild was discovered in 2014 as a theatre. In May 2014 the play *Schildjer Melk*, written by a villager, is performed at the sports fields, the church and the village hall. The church functions as village pub, with people hanging around a bar under the pulpit, gossiping about village events and village people, while a secretary commits adultery with the director of a milk factory in the gallery of the church. On the pulpit stands a minister who comments on the village talk by quoting biblical verses.<sup>76</sup> The performance leads to diverse reactions. One focus group member is offended by the way biblical texts are pulled out of their context. Others can separate the church building as church from the church building as theatre and are glad that the building gains a broader use. They recognize the shocked reaction when they heard the Bible quotations, but also experience it as refreshingly confronting and an eye-opener.<sup>77</sup>

In that same year the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken* is approached by a theatre maker who wants to start a theatre church (see image 7). The church of Overschild seems suitably small, with enough space around the pulpit and a small room in the back. Interestingly, one of the first activities is a soup concert on a Sunday morning. The programme consists of Dutch songs and local stories about the first inhabitants of the village in the middle of the nineteenth century, about elderly people who live out their days in an old people's home in a neighbouring village and have to cope with physical inconvenience, and some remarks about contemporary daily life. Afterwards, people comment: this was like a new kind of worship service, why not do this more often?<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Open Monumentendag Noordbroek*, 13 September 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Regnerus Steensma, Alex Luttmer, *Vroomheid in hout en steen: Langs Middeleeuwse kerken in Noord-Nederland*, Baarn, Bosch en Keuning, 1984.

<sup>76</sup> *Schildjer Melk*, Overschild, 3 May 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Soup concert Overschild, 14 September 2014.

It seems that in the theatre church of Overschild, the fields of church and culture are hardly related anymore. The church community is not involved in the activities. When there is a connection this is mainly in terms of an opposition: in the village play the field of the church is more or less ridiculed and the soup concert is a replacement of the Sunday service. It seems that an event like the soup concert, a mixture of music and song, stories and poetry is not so much organised as a new form of worship service, but is an example of using the opportunity that the vacant space and time offer, while at the same time the place and the time evoke references to and associations with the Sunday morning worship services. Participants in the focus group in Overschild are glad about the cultural initiatives, to a certain extent, because these are needed to give the church a broader function, which is a condition for restoration, but they see the cultural activities as a necessity rather than an opportunity to increase the role of the church within village society. The cultural activities are secondary to the primary aim of a church building to host services.<sup>79</sup>

### 9.3.5 | Church and Culture

Reviewing the cultural activities in the four villages, some general observations can be made. In Schildwolde and Hellum the initiative lay primarily with the church communities, while the congregation was hardly involved in Noordbroek and Overschild. This has consequences for the message of and meaning which is attributed to the practices. The exhibition and the Easter play are explicitly placed in a religious framework. The exhibition is connected to Pentecost and the Easter play is part of a worship service. In Overschild the time and the place are reminders of the ecclesial field, but otherwise the religious framework is absent. In Noordbroek overly explicit ecclesial references are avoided, but as in Hellum a personal appropriation of stories from the Christian tradition takes place. The discovery that these stories are not frozen ancient history, but can have relevance for one's life here and now sheds new perspective on this life. While in Overschild the church building is reduced to décor, in Schildwolde, Hellum and Noordbroek the church building becomes a site for religious meaning and a source of inspiration. The practices give evidence of a degree of sacred consciousness. People seem sensitive to the 'cloud of prayers' of previous generations.<sup>80</sup>

Most of the cultural activities in churches are carried out by non-church members, one of the reasons being that the church community does not have the human resources to organise the concerts, the tours, and the exhibitions. In Noordbroek the faith community searched for a group of people in the village who were able to set up a program for opening the church for visitors and offer some activities. In Hellum the cultural foundation was started by a church member, but most members do not feel connected with the church community. These groups mainly operate separately from the faith community, but their activities are certainly appreciated and supported by this community because they

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<sup>79</sup> Ibidem; Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015.

<sup>80</sup> 'Dit huis van hout en steen dat lang de stormen heeft doorstaan - waar nog de wolk gebeden hangt van wie zijn voorgegaan.' (Sytze de Vries, Willem Vogel, 'De vreugde voert ons naar dit huis', lied 280 in: Roel A. Bosch, Pieter Endedijk (eds.), *Liedboek, zingen en bidden in huis en kerk*, Zoetermeer, BV Liedboek, 2013.

strengthen the position of the church in village society. For example, the churchgoers in Hellum are very loyal and visit all the cultural activities. In their view these activities are part of church life.<sup>81</sup> The other way around, the cultural groups are not very interested in the church community, but they see the value of liturgy and pastoral care and some members would regret it if the church community were to disappear altogether.<sup>82</sup> This could be interpreted as a sign of vicarious religion; people are not actively involved, but see the meaning and value of church life.<sup>83</sup>

## 9.4 | Church Intertwines with Care and Welfare

Sections 9.4 and 9.5 look at liveability questions with which the *Hervormde* congregation engages to some degree. The liveability questions bring people of various ecclesial backgrounds together around a shared concern. They also bring the church into contact with other fields of practice: the fields of politics, care and welfare. Section 9.4 focusses on the developments in the field of care and welfare and the development of diaconal networks. Section 9.5 describes the effects of the earthquakes and how the *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* developed. In these sections I see what happens when a change of perspective takes place. A shared concern for liveability and welfare questions results in regional ecumenical cooperation, which may be a condition for linking social capital.

At first sight, it seems that diaconal work consists of collecting money and bringing flowers. Diaconal work is often the responsibility of one or two deacons, who try to keep things going but lack the time and energy to start new projects and involve other people in them.<sup>84</sup> In chapter 6 I already signalled a certain diaconal uneasiness, which hinders congregations from explicating how a church can contribute to welfare issues. This does not mean that there are no developments. The focus of diaconal work seems to be moving from collections for good causes in other countries to more local charity.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, a couple of deacons think that the church is often focussed on neighbours far away on other continents, but there are also people closer to home who are in need.<sup>86</sup> These people, however, are not always in the picture and therefore it is also necessary for churches to look beyond the church walls. In this part I explore how changes in society prompt the development of diaconal networks. In this way, the church tries to respond to the liveability questions.

<sup>81</sup> Focus group Hellum/Schildwolde, 20 May 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Evaluation Cultural day, Noordbroek, 3 June 2014; Meeting *Helmster Klokkeluid*, 26 August 2014; Focus group Guides Noordbroek, 17 July 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Grace Davie, *Europe, the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, London, Longman&Todd, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> "Gemeenten in Groningen zijn niet heel actief zijn op het gebied van Werelddiaconaat en Kerk-in-actie. Het ZWO-werk, werelddiaconaat en zending zijn een wat ondergeschoven kindje, ZWO-commissies zijn vaak opgeheven, het werk is ondergebracht in het takenpakket van één diaken." ("Congregations in Groningen are not very active with regard to World Diaconate and Church in Action. Missionary work and world diaconate have been somewhat neglected. World mission committees are often discontinued and the work is often placed under the supervision of one diaconal worker.") (Conversation Inge Landman, diaconal congregation advisor, 18 September 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Idem.

<sup>86</sup> Interchurch meeting of churches in municipality of Slochteren about decentralisation and diaconal work, Schildwolde, 11 November 2014.

### Poverty

Gradually a turn to the local can be detected among village churches.<sup>87</sup> In December 2014, the congregation joined a collection for a food bank, an initiative of the regional broadcasting company. Together with the village association, leaflets were distributed through Helium and on a Sunday morning people from both inside and outside the church community brought their bags and boxes with groceries to the church (see image 8).<sup>88</sup> A week later people were asked to bring coffee to the Christmas eve service in the tent in Schildwolde, again for the food bank. The result was a wall of red coloured packages.<sup>89</sup> In 2016 the congregation also organised a collection of clothes for a clothing bank in Hoogezand, following a visit by the deacons to the clothing bank. In Noordbroek the clothing collection point is located in the home for elderly.<sup>90</sup>

This shows that the church communities welcome the possibility of offering help in a very practical way:

*We prefer giving things instead of transferring money. It comes close to people; that person could be your actual neighbour.<sup>91</sup>*

The deacons suspect that there is silent poverty in the village, but probably out of false shame they do not receive signals.<sup>92</sup> Besides, a deacon expresses his doubts about offering financial support.

*I would be very careful with that because people risk losing some of their social benefits if the church supports them. And you really can't consult social services about it; that's not possible because things have to remain confidential. I think as a diaconate, we should first refer to the municipality. I want to help people, but I am also careful about it. In the past, the system was sometimes abused; the church exercised social control over people. Not all church councillors were okay; bank accounts were checked sometimes.<sup>93</sup>*

He prefers to hang a bag with groceries on the doorknob when he notices that a child has been running around in the same coat for three years.<sup>94</sup> The problem that poverty often remains unknown was also discussed during an evening for deacons in Slochteren. Because

<sup>87</sup> Harry Bisseling, Henk de Roest, Peet Valstar, *Meer dan hout en steen, Handboek voor sluiting en herbestemming van kerkebouwen*, Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2011, pp. 71-72.

<sup>88</sup> 'Actie voor de voedselbank december 2014', <http://www.woldkerken.nl/bestuur/diaconie/activiteiten-2014/actie-voor-de-voedselbank-december-2014/>, accessed 16 December 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Christmas service Schildwolde, 24 December 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Conversation deacon Noordbroek after transfer of the church, 26 February 2016.

<sup>91</sup> "We geven liever iets, in plaats van geld over te maken. Dit komt dichtbij mensen, dit kan je buurman zijn." ('Voedselbank,' RTV Noord, <http://www.rtvnoord.nl/ipad/index.asp?v=32402>, accessed 12 February 2015).

<sup>92</sup> P. de Bie, et al., *Armoede in Nederland 2010*, Utrecht, Werkgroep Arme Kant van Nederland, Kerk in Actie, 2010, p. 17 in: W.A. Sinninghe Damsté, *Gedeelde zorg: De rol van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk / Protestantse Kerk in Nederland bij de bestrijding van armoede in relatie tot de overheidstaak*, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 2011, p. 119.

<sup>93</sup> Karel (PH7) "Ik zou daar heel voorzichtig mee zijn, je loopt het risico dat mensen dan juist gekort worden als de kerk ondersteunt. En je kunt ook niet overleggen met de sociale dienst. Dat kan niet, moet vertrouwelijk blijven. Ik vind, als diaconie moet je eerst naar de gemeente verwijzen. Ik wil mensen wel helpen, maar ben daar ook terughoudend mee. Vroeger werd er ook misbruik van gemaakt, en werden mensen vanuit de kerk onder druk gezet. Kerkbestuurders waren niet allemaal even fraai en werden bankrekeningen gecontroleerd." (Meeting deacons SOHN, 13 May 2014.); Chris van Esterik, *Een jongen van het dorp: Honderd jaar Ingen, een dorp in de Betuwe*, Amsterdam, Bakker, 2005.

<sup>94</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 5 November 2014; Interdiaconal meeting, Schildwolde, 11 November 2014.

of privacy legislation the municipality is not allowed to pass on personal details to organisations like churches, who could offer practical and mental support to people in distress. A guest speaker from *Humanitas* told that they distribute cards with information about the support they can offer and return to people to ask whether they require assistance.<sup>95</sup>

### *Changes in Care*

In the municipality of Slochteren half of the population uses one of the provisions for care or income.<sup>96</sup> Not everyone, however, is capable of submitting an application for support. The main problem is that not everyone has people around them who can assist. The children of elderly people do not always live next door, people with physical or psychological problems may be lonely, and the unemployed see their social network shrink. Several projects aim at strengthening people's social network, for instance the project 'Networkcoach' in Slochteren.<sup>97</sup> The municipality is looking to societies, clubs, and churches, especially deacons, to recognize requests for help and, when necessary, offer support. Nevertheless, both the municipality and the churches find it difficult to trace requests for assistance.<sup>98</sup>

### *Diaconal Networks*

In response to these developments the congregation is gradually exploring the possibilities of offering diaconal support in a wider context. Two trails of exploration are taking shape, one in Slochteren and one in Menterwolde. The trails are connected in the person of Carolien (PN 12), the administrator of the diaconate of the *Hervormde* congregation, who participates in both networks. She sees diaconates struggling with the question how they can trace requests for help and on the other hand how volunteers can be mobilised.<sup>99</sup>

In the meeting between pastors of the various churches in Slochteren and the municipality, liveability issues are discussed, like ageing, poverty, the closing of the nursing home, and earthquakes (see sec. 9.5). In the autumn of 2014, this consultation led to a meeting of deacons from the ten churches in the municipality. The local councillor explained the changes in legislation and what this meant for the provisions and facilities for inhabitants in need of extra support. During this meeting the participants concluded that they should gather more often to exchange experiences and ideas, and maybe also to find possibilities for cooperation. They now gather two times per year, each time in a different church. During the meetings that followed several concrete themes were discussed, such as relief for refugees in the region and the developments in care institutions.

On the invitation of the Protestant congregation in Muntendam, representatives of different churches in Menterwolde came together. The aim was to explore the possibilities for becoming involved in the participation society. They felt a need to reflect upon the place of the church in society. The administrator of the *Hervormde* congregation accepted the

<sup>95</sup> Lineke Kok, 'Verslag van de derde bijeenkomst "Decentralisaties en diaconale zorg"', Schildwolde, 15 October 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Presentation local councillor, Interdiaconal meeting, Schildwolde, 11 November 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Workshop 'Networkcoach', *Open Inspiratie Festival 2014*, Siddeburen, 19 February 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Interdiaconal meeting, Schildwolde, 11 november 2014.

<sup>99</sup> Notulen Project Zorgmaatje Muntendam, period March 2015 - October 2015.

invitation and ended up as the secretary of the project *Zorgmaatjes* (Caremates) (see image 9).<sup>100</sup> In August 2015 I joined an evening for church councils, where the group presented their work. The aim of the project is to pick up requests for help and support from people both inside and outside the church communities. The project group wants to facilitate a network of people who want to offer assistance to other people, who need support in finding the right resources and applying for aid from the municipality and other welfare organisations. In the spring of 2015, after the new legislation became operative, they had started contacting the municipality and social teams to ask how churches could offer assistance. It turned out to be quite difficult, partly because public organisations did not really know what the church could and should do.<sup>101</sup>

In both Slochteren and Menterwolde a concern about the consequences of governmental policy leads to ecumenical cooperation. Both diaconal networks initiate contacts with the municipality and local welfare organisations. In Slochteren the contacts are mainly informative and explorative. In Menterwolde the network works as a project group, with the concrete aim of launching a care network. Further contacts are made with organisations in the area of poor relief, such as the food bank and the clothing bank. Although an initiative like *Zorgmaatjes* requires a long-term commitment to start the project, a collection for the food bank is easily realised, leads to concrete results and cooperation with the village association or the supermarket and makes the church more visible in the village.

## 9.5 | Church and Earthquakes

In the examples, I have discussed so far the involvement of the church with quality of life issues follows from the traditional tasks of the church. The church is called to offer support and have an eye for people who are vulnerable. This leads to collections for the food bank and the development of diaconal platforms in response to changes in care and welfare provision. Celebratory or memorial gatherings are in line with the liturgical function of the church. Also, the maintenance of the physical environment around the church has historic roots. In worship services, during discussion evenings, and in church newsletters, questions related to quality of life and well-being, where it affects the personal life arena, are addressed. Pastoral contacts are important in relieving loneliness, while public religious gatherings can strengthen the social cohesion. Thus, the congregation is engaged in various questions related to the quality of life, but this often remains implicit.

*Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* explicitly addresses a liveability question. Around the time I started my research a heavy earthquake took place near Huizinge on the 16th of August, 2012.<sup>102</sup> This confirmed, as people in Groningen had long suspected, that the gas extraction in the province leads to subsidence and earthquakes. In section 9.5.1 I describe how the earthquakes cause severe damage, not only to buildings, but also to people. This was the

<sup>100</sup> *Zorgmaatjes in Menterwolde*, Projectgroep Zorgmaatje Menterwolde, 24 September 2015, <https://sites.google.com/site/zorgmaatjesinmenterwolde/home>, accessed 27 July 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Presentation *Zorgmaatjes*, 25 August 2015; 'Stichting ZorgMaatjes', *MiddenGroninger.nl*, 7 February 2017; <http://www.zorgmaatjesmenterwolde.nl/>, accessed 27 July 2017.

<sup>102</sup> 'Epicentrum beving lag bij Huizinge', *RTV Noord*, 26 August 2012; 'Vijfduizend schademeldingen bij de NAM', *RTV Noord*, 25 February 2013.

reason why in 2014 a couple of pastors started *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*. In section 9.5.2 I explain how the regional ecumenical Platform developed. Soon it became clear that the involvement of the church in this issue was not self-evident. In section 9.5.3 I discuss how inhabitants of Groningen see the role of the church. I conclude with various ways in which the church can contribute in this liveability question.

I was involved in the Platform from the beginning because it offered the opportunity to investigate how the church (as represented in the Platform) sees its role in society and to what extent the church is capable of contributing to a liveability issue like earthquakes. It started with a symposium *Kerk op een bevende aarde* (Church on quaking ground), organised by the Protestant Theological University (PTHU).<sup>103</sup> Following from an organisational role in the symposium, my role in the Platform was one of support: giving advice and sharing my thoughts. I followed the Platform's initial explorations about how the church could become involved in the topic. Since this question almost coincided with my research on how churches can contribute to the quality of life, participating in the Platform offered an excellent opportunity for Action Research.<sup>104</sup> This meant that I had an active role in the meetings, asking members what they wanted to achieve and trying to keep plans on the agenda. At the request of the Platform bachelor students from the PTHU interviewed fifteen Groningers about how they experience the earthquakes and to what extent they expect something of the church. In September 2015, the Platform published their vision on what would be necessary for Groningen and what the role of the church could be.<sup>105</sup> I take this as the finishing point of my description. After this my role changed from being an observer to participant in and representative of the Platform.

### 9.5.1 | From Gas Extraction to Earthquakes

In 1959 a huge gas bubble was discovered in Slochteren. Over the past fifty years billions of normal cubic meters have been extracted from the ground. In the 1980s houses were damaged because of subsidence. In 1986 the first earthquake was felt. Inhabitants of Groningen suspected a relation between the gas extraction and the earthquakes for decades.<sup>106</sup> It was only in 2013 that the *Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen* (State Supervision of Mines) acknowledged this suspicion and reported that if the extraction were not drastically reduced earthquakes could reach 5.1 on the Richter scale.<sup>107</sup> After a heavy earthquake of 3.1 on the Richter scale in August 2012 near the village of Huizinge it became clear that the earthquakes not only led to material damage, but also endangered the safety of inhabitants.<sup>108</sup> However, the government is hesitant to reduce the gas extraction, because the gas

<sup>103</sup> 'Themamiddag Kerk op een bevende aarde', <https://www.pthu.nl/actueel/agenda/Agenda%202014/Kerk%20op%20een%20bevende%20aarde/>, accessed 13 May 2014.

<sup>104</sup> J. Jellema, H.A.J. Mulder, 'Public Engagement in Energy Research', in: *Energies* (9:3), 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Harmen Jansen, *Zienswijze Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*, September 2015, <https://sites.google.com/site/kerkenaardbeving/standpunten/zienswijze>, accessed 16 March 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Margriet Brandsma, Heleen Ekker, Reinalda Start, *De gaskolonie, van nationale bodemschat tot Groningse tragedie*, Groningen, Passage, 2016, pp. 28-29, 57-61.

<sup>107</sup> 'Groningen moet zich voorbereiden op zwaardere aardbevingen', *RTV Noord*, 25 January 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Remark mair Loppersum, *Earthquake conference*, Kenniscentrum Aardbevingen en Duurzame Ontwikkeling, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 17 February 2016.



production provides 98 percent of the Dutch households with energy and the sale yields a significant amount of money for the treasury.<sup>109</sup>

Approximately fifty earthquakes each year encroach deeply on daily life and affect the liveability in different ways. The built environment was not designed to cope with these kinds of earthquakes and has been considerably damaged. Dikes have become weaker, houses and other buildings have developed cracks, and some houses have become unsafe and uninhabitable. Although the renovation of the damaged houses creates a lot of work for the building industry, the earthquakes have serious consequences for the housing market. People face difficulties selling their houses when they have to move to another area because of work, or because they need to go to a nursing home. Potential inhabitants and employers are hesitant to settle in the area.<sup>110</sup> This has serious effects on social life in the villages.<sup>111</sup> People are afraid because they do not know what the next earthquake will bring. They are also angry because claim settlement is a lengthy and tiresome process. The whole situation forms a serious threat to the safety of the inhabitants and clearly shows how people are affected by sociopolitical and economic structures. In 2009 Slochteren celebrated '50 years of gas' in good spirits. Now drivers on the highway between Groningen and Germany can hardly miss a large sign in a field which says: "This is where the misery began" (see image 10-11).<sup>112</sup>

The consequences of the earthquakes also cause considerable nonmaterial damage. On an individual level people have to simultaneously cope with uncertainties about the process of claim settlement, new damage, and the future. Settling claims and conducting repairs has serious effects on daily life.

*It is on our mind morning and evening; it demands a lot of attention, even if you don't want to think about it. The College for Human Rights has said that everyone is entitled to an undisturbed family life, but this makes that impossible. And we haven't even been hit worst of all, I don't want to give that impression. But I have noticed that all of our spare energy goes into this.*<sup>113</sup>

Dealing with the consequences of the earthquakes influences the planning of family life, spare time, and personal space. The subject dominates conversations on the street and

<sup>109</sup> *Onderzoeken naar gevolgen van mindering gaswinning*, <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/aardbevingen-in-groningen/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2014/01/17/onderzoek-geschied-maken-van-ander-gas.html>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>110</sup> *Dialoogtafel*, <http://www.dialoogtafelgroningen.nl/category/nieuws>, accessed 15 March 2015; *Groninger Bodem Beweging*, <http://www.groninger-bodem-beweging.nl/>, accessed 15 March 2015; 'Aardbevingen', *Provincie Groningen*, <http://www.provinciegroningen.nl/actueel/dossiers/aardbevingen/>, accessed 15 March 2015; 'Gaswinning in Groningen', *Rijksoverheid*, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gaswinning-in-groningen>, accessed 15 March 2015; *Dossier Aardbevingen in Groningen*, <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/aardbevingen>, accessed 19 December 2017.

<sup>111</sup> 'Aardbevingen vergallen woongenot', *RTV Noord*, 3 December 2014.

<sup>112</sup> Blog 'De Groningers zijn er klaar mee', <https://storify.com/lotteproce/hallo>, accessed 18 February 2016.

<sup>113</sup> "Daar sta je mee op en daar ga je mee naar bed. Het vraagt een enorme, het is iets wat een enorme aandacht vraagt. Zelfs als je besluit dat je er niet aldoor over na wilt denken.. [...] Ze zeggen, het College van de rechten van de mens heeft dat ook geschreven: we hebben allemaal recht op een ongestoord gezinsleven. Nou, dat is allemaal verstoord, en dan hebben wij het helemaal niet het allerergste getroffen, zo wil ik dat zeker niet schetsen, maar je merkt dus dat je reserves, al je reserve energie gaat daar naar toe." (Respondent 1, Interview bachelor student, course Practical Theology II, Protestant Theological University, 2015).

with family and friends. Less visible is the feeling of powerlessness. People feel at the mercy of a process that lacks transparency and in which they have limited influence. It has to be stressed that certainly not everyone is so seriously affected. People who live on the borders of the 'earthquake area' have less damage. For them the repairs obviously have less far-reaching effects.

There are also social consequences.<sup>114</sup> The damage around Loppersum is more severe than around Winsum. This can lead to a lack of understanding and impatience in the social environment: "Look, our neighbours had 20,000 euros in damages, that's a different story altogether. We only had 1100 euros."<sup>115</sup> Even along a street the degree of damage can differ significantly. What people find more difficult to digest is that similar damage is evaluated differently by loss assessors from the *Centrum voor Veilig Wonen* (Centre for Safe Living).<sup>116</sup> This tries the mutual solidarity and understanding between neighbours, which is intensified because people judge the impact of the earthquakes on life in Groningen differently. Some people react laconically, shrug their shoulders and say that the whole situation should not be dramatized. Others see this as an attitude of denial and avoidance of the social and environmental effects in the long run. They suspect that there is also another group of deniers with 'silent damage', who do not report it. They are afraid of the fuss it will cause: the paperwork, the nuisance of the repairs, and the lobbying.<sup>117</sup>

Underlying these social tensions is a lack of trust. The relation between gas extraction, subsidence, and earthquakes was denied for a long time. In 2014 the Research Centre for Safety judges that the Dutch state and the *Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij* (Dutch Oil Company), referred to as the NAM, have for decades placed economic interests above the safety of citizens.<sup>118</sup> This means that people have little faith in the government and the NAM offering an adequate solution and compensation. The NAM was held responsible for the compensation, which meant that the company judged the damage and determined the compensation. People complained that this meant that the fox was guarding the chickens and insisted on independent assessment and claim settlement.<sup>119</sup> In January 2015 the Centre for Safe Living (*Centrum voor Veilig Wonen* or *CVW*) took over claim settlement from

<sup>114</sup> 'Leefbaarheid aardbevingsgebied holt achteruit', *RTV Noord*, 21 January 2016.

<sup>115</sup> "Kijk, naast ons, hier tegen ons aan die hadden voor €20.000 schade, dan praat je wel heel anders natuurlijk. Maar wij hadden maar €1.100 euro" (Respondent 2, Interviews Practical Theology II, 2015).

<sup>116</sup> *Centrum Veilig Wonen*, <https://www.centrumveiligwonen.nl/>, accessed 28 July 2017.

<sup>117</sup> "Ik denk dat de grootste groep in het dorp heel laconiek is. Ik denk dat het grootste groep in het dorp eigenlijk niet beseft wat er aan de hand is en dat ook niet wil weten. Omdat, nou ja, omdat ze weten hoe van anderen die er middenin zitten, hoeveel heisa dat allemaal geeft. Er zijn ook een aantal mensen, want ik geloof dat het meldingspercentage in Loppersum nu op de 69 procent ligt. [...] Er zijn heel veel mensen die beginnen niet met schade melden. Die willen al die poeha niet, geen zin om al die mensen over de vloer te hebben." (I think that most people in the village are very laconic. I think that most people in the village do not realise what is going on and that do not want to know either. Because, well, because they know how much hassle it brings to people who are in the middle of it. There are also some people, I believe that the percentage of people in Loppersum who have reported damage lies around 69 percent. There are a lot of people who do not report the damage. They do not want all that hoo-ha, they don't feel like having all those people about the house.) (Respondent 3, Interviews Practical Theology II, 2015).

<sup>118</sup> Onderzoeksraad voor de Veiligheid, *Veiligheid geen rol bij gaswinning Groningen*, 18 February 2015, <https://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/nl/onderzoek/1991/aardbevingsrisico-s-in-groningen/publicatie/1620/veiligheid-geen-rol-bij-gaswinning-groningen#fasen>, accessed 16 March 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Brandsma, *De gaskolonie*, pp. 169-181.

the NAM.<sup>120</sup> Although the CVW should work independently, the centre still has close contact with the NAM via the engineering firm Arcadis.<sup>121</sup>

Groups have repeatedly asked for a national coordinator who can take the lead in this complicated issue, which affects the housing market, the climate for investment, the quality of life, and energy policy. In May 2015 a national coordinator was appointed, representing the state, province, and municipalities. His task is to direct the repair of damage and to make buildings and infrastructure earthquake-proof.<sup>122</sup> Although a significant part of the damage repair has gone smoothly, there are also a large number of people who have struggled for years with authorities to have their damage recognized and repaired. The result is that a lack of trust has turned into mistrust.

### *Prayer Sunday in Schildwolde*

Before the Platform started in the summer of 2014, the churches had already showed their concern. The discussion of the subject in the work group of ministers triggered the minister of the *Hervormde* congregation SOHN in January 2014 to contact his colleague from the *Vrijgemaakte* church: How could their churches pay attention to the need in the province as a consequence of the earthquakes and the bankruptcy of a large factory?<sup>123</sup> This resulted in a Prayer Sunday in February 2014. In an E-mail the ministers suggested not only praying about feelings of anger and uncertainty, but also for people who have to develop and carry out policy. Their aim was to raise awareness that this crisis is caused by a way of life and to mobilise people to look after each other. Via E-mail various networks of ministers were reached and several colleagues in the province joined the initiative.<sup>124</sup>

The Prayer Sunday raised some questions both inside and outside the church. The local broadcasting company reported about a 'remarkable initiative by churches.' The minister of Schildwolde was interviewed, but the journalist did not quite understand what the meaning and effect of prayer could be.

Journalist: *You would like to hold a provincial day of prayer on Sunday; what exactly does that entail?*

Minister: *Intercession in a service means bringing worries to God, but also appealing upon people to care for each other [...]*

J: *But you don't have to pray to do that, do you? Isn't that something...*

M: *Well, that is what we do in church every Sunday.*

J: [laughs a bit] *Yes, well, I understand.*

M: [...] *With this initiative, we want to show that we also want to play a role in this problem.*

J: *So the church is taking a bit of stand here, isn't it?*

M: *Yes, you could say that.*

J: *Yes, can we?*

M: *Yes, of course that is exactly what we want; we want to stand with people. I think that we can contribute more than it seems sometimes.*<sup>125</sup>

<sup>120</sup> 'Centrum Veilig Wonen neemt schadeafwikkeling NAM over', *RTV Noord*, 15 October 2014.

<sup>121</sup> 'Is Centrum voor Veilig Wonen onafhankelijk?' *RTV Noord*, 18 December 2014.

<sup>122</sup> *Nationaal Coördinator Groningen*, <https://www.nationaalcoordinatorgroningen.nl/over-ons>, accessed 10 February 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Meeting work group pastors classis North-East Groningen, 19 January 2014.

<sup>124</sup> E-mail Jan Hommes and Kees Dusseldorp, January 2014.

<sup>125</sup> Journalist: "Nou zou u zondag een provinciale voorbede dag willen houden, wat houdt dat nou in?" [...] Minister:

The interview also shows that a public statement of the church is unexpected and that a frame of reference for how the church can contribute is lacking.

Church council members also had their doubts. Some church members had reacted sceptically: does this bring people back to the church? Others wondered whether the church should have sought publicity. This question was partly triggered by the reading of Matthew 6: 5-6, which was coincidentally read in the worship services, the church council meetings, and the Bible group at that time (see sec. 8.3.1). Does Matthew not say that you should not pray in the middle of the street, but in the silence of your inner room? The minister responded that by publicizing the initiative in the local media non-churchgoers also received the message. If the initiative had stayed 'indoors' the sign of solidarity would have partly missed its purpose.<sup>126</sup> In this way the Prayer Sunday gained the status of a public ritual, in which a wider audience was addressed.<sup>127</sup> It seemed that the initiative was successful. Participants in the Bible group heard in the swimming pool in Hoogezand that people of various religious backgrounds had appreciated the gesture and found it wonderful.<sup>128</sup>

### 9.5.2 | Platform Kerk en Aardbeving

Frits Postema, a pastoral worker in the area, was confronted with the social and personal problems caused by the earthquakes in his pastoral work and he wondered whether the church should do something. His idea was that the church should make a public statement of solidarity and draw attention to the psychological and social consequences: repairing the cracks in the buildings does not repair the social ruptures. He laid down this question in regional networks of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and a couple of colleagues joined him. Soon it became clear that the pastors needed to find a way to explain what the church could mean in countering the effects of the gas extraction and the earthquakes, both for people inside the church as well as outside. Therefore, the Protestant Theological University was approached to support local churches in developing a workable policy: How can the nonmaterial problems be put on the agenda of the NAM, state, and social organisations? But more importantly how can professionals in the church and local church communities offer support for individual needs, give voice to the marginalised and seek connections with social partners?<sup>129</sup>

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"Voorbeden doen in de kerkdienst betekent dat we bidden, dus het voor God leggen als het ware, maar ook dat we een appel doen op mensen om goed oog en oor voor elkaar te hebben, dus om te zien naar elkaar. Dus om naast elkaar te staan." Journalist: "Ja, maar daar hoeft je niet voor te bidden toch? Dat is toch iets...." Minister: "Dat is wat we in de kerken iedere zondag doen." Journalist: "Ja, nee, dat begrijp ik". Minister: "Voorbede doen voor dingen die spelen in de samenleving. Dus dat is wat we sowieso doen. Met deze actie willen we ook laten zien dat we als kerken proberen een rol te spelen in deze problematiek." [...] Journalist: "De kerk neemt een beetje stelling in deze dan, hè". Minister: "Nou, laten we het zo zeggen." Journalist: "Ja, mag dat?". Minister: "Ja, dat is ook wat we willen natuurlijk, we willen gewoon naast de mensen staan. Nou ja, misschien kunnen we een steentje bijdragen. Ik denk dat we misschien wel meer kunnen bijdragen, dan soms lijkt." ('Dominees bidden voor getroffen Groningers', *RTV Noord*, 28 January 2014).

<sup>126</sup> Church council meeting, Schildwolde, 4 February 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Martin Stringer, "The future of public religious ritual in an urban context." (Lecture during symposium *The future of ritual: spots and shapes*, 18 February 2015, Amsterdam, The Netherlands).

<sup>128</sup> Bible group, Schildwolde, 5 February 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Letter Frits Postema to Classes Winsum and North East Groningen, 11 January 2014.

These questions were addressed from various disciplinary perspectives during the Symposium *Kerk op een bevende aarde* (Church on Shaky Ground) in May 2014.<sup>130</sup> Herman Noordegraaf explained how churches had developed an attitude of endurance and advocacy in relation to poverty issues.<sup>131</sup> Trinus Hoekstra placed the developments in Groningen in a worldwide perspective, drawing attention to the fact that the mining of raw material for our economy and prosperity leads to social and ecological damage.<sup>132</sup> From a pastoral perspective Riet Bons-Storm explained how one's identity is harmed when people are not taken seriously and the place where they live becomes occupied by other powers. The church can listen to their stories, show solidarity, and be attentive to how people envision God in this situation.<sup>133</sup>

The immediate result of the symposium was the forming of the *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* (see image 12). The Platform started with six representatives of Protestant congregations and a Catholic pastor.<sup>134</sup> Gradually the Platform gained a more ecumenical character. After a couple of months Wiebrand van Weerden of the Waardevol Leven congregation in Loppersum and Jako Jellema, a researcher and member of an evangelical church in Scheemda joined. For the visit of the church leaders other churches were also invited, such as the *Vrijgemaakte* Church. In the beginning of 2016 the Mennonite Church and the Free Baptist Church also joined the Platform. This means that the Platform is the most ecumenical network within the province. People of very divergent theological backgrounds meet each other and learn to find common ground.

The Platform is not only ecumenical, but also regional. It forms an example of how local churches, predominantly their pastors, search for regional cooperation. It is not the 'survival mode' that brings them together, as is the tendency within clusters, but a joint contextual concern. Information from local churches is brought together within the regional network. Since the earthquakes affect parts of the region in different ways, exchanging experiences is very fruitful. During the meetings the members take ample opportunity to share experiences, information, and ideas: what is going on? This enables the Platform to analyse, see trends, and developments.<sup>135</sup> Over the years the Platform has gained a considerable level of expertise. The interaction on a regional level feeds into local practices. A couple of pastors prepared a liturgy for Prayer day together, which they held in their own local churches.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Folkert van der Meer, 'Kerk luistert naar frustraties over gaswinning', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 13 May 2014; Hanneke Goudappel, 'Pastoraat bieden bij aardbevingen, én opkomen voor getroffen', *Friesch Dagblad*, 14 May 2014.

<sup>131</sup> Herman Noordegraaf, 'Wat kunnen we leren van de kerkelijke anti-armoedebeweging?', *Symposium Kerk op een bevende aarde*, PThU, 13 May 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Trinus Hoekstra, 'Wereldwijde spanningen op postzegelformaat', *Symposium Kerk op een bevende aarde*, PThU, 13 May 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Riet Bons-Storm, 'Pastoraat in een instabiel gebied', *Symposium Kerk op een bevende aarde*, PThU, 13 May 2014.

<sup>134</sup> The platform started with Jacobine Gelderloos; Nellie Hamersma (pastoral worker catholic church), Wiebke Heeren (minister Delfzijl), Tjalling Huisman (minister Loppersum), Harmen Jansen (minister Winsum), Frits Postema (pastoral worker Krewerd), Marco Roepers (minister Loppersum), Reint Wobbes, (church council member Huizinge).

<sup>135</sup> 'Verslag werkgroep Platform Aardbevingen', 28 August 2014, Vredekerk Loppersum; 'Bijeenkomst werkgroep kerk en aardbeving', 28 October 2014.

<sup>136</sup> Harmen Jansen, 'Werken en wonen op bevende aarde', Prayer Day, 11 March 2015 (<http://www.pgwh.nl/nl/ds-harmen-jansen/preken/298-dominee-harmen-jansen/preken/357-overdenking-ds-harmen-jansen-bidstond-werken-en-wonen-op-bevende-aarde>, accessed 16 March 2016).

### Motivation

The members of the Platform have various motives for their involvement. First, they have a pastoral concern. They see how the earthquakes and claim settlement disrupt the daily lives of church members. After taxation, a family had to leave their house immediately and were offered a house in a village near Assen, but this was only for a couple of months and they had no idea where they would go afterwards. This also had a huge impact on their social relations. It illustrates one of the main problems people are facing, which is uncertainty about the future: what will happen to their house and their life? The participants are also worried about the social tensions within the region. People who work for the NAM or CVW are regularly approached with animosity. Furthermore, outside the 'earthquake region' there is a lack of understanding about the effects of the earthquakes. Jitse van der Wal is minister in the *Vrijgemaakte* church in Appingedam. He regularly preaches in Westerkwartier, where there are no earthquakes and people have no idea what is going on Appingedam. People also deal with the damage in different ways, which leads to tensions between couples, parents and children. Some people have even divorced because of the earthquakes.<sup>137</sup>

Platform members are also motivated by their love for the region, for the people, the landscape, the little villages dominated by medieval church buildings, the red-brick nineteenth-century houses, the architecture of the 1930's, and the stately farmhouses. The participants are often rooted in the area and they fear that the beauty of the land will be destroyed.<sup>138</sup>

*Living is a biblical concept that characterises the relation of people to their environment as worthwhile and meaningful. In addition, the church has a duty to stimulate and strengthen the value and meaning of living. The extraction of gas has made living in Groningen more difficult.*<sup>139</sup>

Platform members are aware that the church is part of the regional society, which is affected by severe problems. These problems are caused by human action which raises questions about responsibility, justice, and reconciliation. They wonder which values are governing political decisions, the economic or the social interests.<sup>140</sup> Related to this is the reference to Psalm 8:

1. O LORD, OUR LORD, HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.  
.....
3. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
4. what is man that you are mindful of him,  
and the son of man that you care for him?
5. Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
and crowned him with glory and honour.

<sup>137</sup> 'Verslag Kerk en aardbeving', 28 April 2015; "'Na 46 jaar heb ik door alle NAM-ellende nu een latrelatie'", *RTV Noord*, 8 September 2016.

<sup>138</sup> 'Verslag Kerk en aardbeving', 28 April 2015.

<sup>139</sup> "Wonen is een Bijbels geïnspireerd begrip om de verhouding van mensen met hun omgeving te karakteriseren als waardevol en betekenisvol. Ook heeft de kerk de taak het waarde- en betekenisvolle van het wonen te stimuleren en te versterken. Door de aardgaswinning is het wonen in het Groninger wingebied bemoeilijkt." Marco Roepers, Liebrecht Hellingsa, *Positie en taak van de kerk met betrekking tot de problematieken van de aardgaswinning*, Platform kerk en aardbeving, August 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem.

## An Intertwining Church in Groningen

6. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under his feet...<sup>141</sup>

Among Platform members there is an awareness that the earth and all who live on it belong to God, who has entrusted it to us. This entails a feeling of responsibility towards a sustainable way of living to protect the earth.<sup>142</sup> People do not have the right to squeeze all the resources from the earth without giving account for the consequences. The Platform endorses the prayer of Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato Si*. The prayer praises the care and tenderness with which God surrounds the earth and all creatures. In return, we should protect its beauty. In the context of Groningen some phrases resonate strongly:

*Make our life healthy once more, so that we may protect the world and not plunder her, so that we may sow beauty and not pollution and destruction. Touch the heart of everyone who seeks only to profit at the expense of the poor and the earth.*<sup>143</sup>

The call to care for the earth and to act as stewards forms an important motivation for the members to argue for another, more sustainable way of living and to give voice to those who suffer under the circumstances.

Members of the Platform feel an urge to take a prophetic stand and expose injustice. They try to remind the government of their responsibility towards its citizens and to call upon responsible parties such as the NAM and CVW to do justice to people.<sup>144</sup> They think that the church should not remain silent. Harmen Jansen states:

*In the future, I don't want it said that the church stood on the wrong side of history, like it did a century ago when the church did not stand up for the land workers in east Groningen.*<sup>145</sup>

He refers to the *Graanrepubliek* by Frank Westerman, who describes the large social inequalities between farmers and labourers.<sup>146</sup> When during a service on Prayer day Micah 6:8 is read, the words of the prophet gain new relevance

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> English Standard Version.

<sup>142</sup> Marco Roepers, *Bezinning Kerk en aardbeving*, 2 June 2015.

<sup>143</sup> "Maak ons leven weer gezond, opdat wij de wereld beschermen en haar niet plunderen, opdat wij schoonheid zaaien en geen vervuiling en verwoesting. Raak de harten van allen die alleen maar voordeel zoeken ten koste van de armen en de aarde." (Pope Francis, 'Gebed voor onze aarde', *Encycliek Laudato Si*, Utrecht, 2015, p. 138 in: Jitse van der Wal, 'Woede zet in beweging', in: *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode, Groningen, Fryslan, Drenthe* (5), March 2017, pp. 5-7).

<sup>144</sup> Marco Roepers, Frits Postema, *Brief namens de Werkgroep Kerk en aardbeving aan de Tweede Kamer*, 9 September 2015.

<sup>145</sup> "Ik wil niet dat in de toekomst gezegd wordt dat de kerk aan de verkeerde kant van de geschiedenis stond, zoals een eeuw geleden toen de kerk niet opkwam voor de arbeiders in Oost-Groningen." *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*, 28 October 2014.

<sup>146</sup> Frank Westerman, *De Graanrepubliek*, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2013.

<sup>147</sup> New International Version.

The verses stand in sharp contrast with the experiences of day to day life in Groningen. This draws attention to the ethical consequences of prioritizing economic interests. Is the government as a party with certain interests completely reliable?<sup>148</sup> Tjalling Huisman writes:

*There were no rules of conduct formulated and there was no reflection about positions of power – and immediately, things went wrong.*<sup>149</sup>

### 9.5.3 | The Quest of the Platform

When the Platform began in the summer of 2014 there was no real programme. The work of the Platform can best be described as a quest to answer the question of what the church should do and what the church can mean in this situation. It is a quest for relevance, to offer something that is authentic of the church that no other party can offer. It is a quest to make clear to other parties what the *specific contribution* of the church can be in language that is understood outside the church. I first show how the Platform tried to find a way to communicate its message and, second, how it tried to build a network in order to participate in the public discussion.

#### *Making Statements*

In the autumn of 2014 the Platform started to respond to current events. On the 30th of September 2014 a heavy earthquake startled the city of Groningen. In a reaction two platform members wrote a statement. They drew attention to the social and psychological consequences of the earthquakes and claim settlement. Further they stated that the Platform was worried about the threats the situation posed to the quality of life in the region. This letter was publicized in local church newsletters.<sup>150</sup> Marco Roepers, a minister in Loppersum, was interviewed on *RTV Noord* to inform church members and other inhabitants of the church's support and involvement: "Believing also means engaging with society."<sup>151</sup> This signal was also recognized. An informal group in Hellum welcomed the support and invited the Platform to join an initiative to offer flowers to the Royal Commissioner for every earthquake that occurred in 2014. As a result the Platform decided that they were not an activist group and would not stand on the barricades.<sup>152</sup>

During the meeting that followed the first statement in October 2014 I asked what was specifically ecclesial about this letter, apart from the concluding sentence that "a liveable earth, of which we are good stewards, is a matter of faith to us."<sup>153</sup> Some saw this as the core of the letter from which the rest followed. For other members the sentence was too explicit,

<sup>148</sup> 'Verslag werkgemeenschap predikanten en kerkelijk werkers Noordoost-Groningen', 22 May 2014.

<sup>149</sup> "Er zijn geen gedragsregels opgesteld, er is geen bezinning geweest over de verschillende machtsposities en gelijk gaat het mis" (E-mail Tjalling Huisman, 26 July 2014)

<sup>150</sup> Frits Postema, Marco Roepers, 'Reactie Platform Kerk en Aardbevingen op de aardbeving in Groningen', October 2014.

<sup>151</sup> "Geloven betekent ook dat je bezig bent met de maatschappij" ('Kerken komen in actie tegen aardbevingen', *RTV Noord*, 21 October 2014).

<sup>152</sup> E-mail discussion *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*, 29 October 2014.

<sup>153</sup> "Een bewoonbare aarde waarop wij goede rentmeesters horen te zijn, is wat ons betreft een geloofszaak." (Reactie *Platform Kerk en Aardbevingen* op de aardbeving in Groningen, October 2014).



because the Platform serves no specific interests. In the discussion that followed Platform members remarked that the letter shows that the church is aware of social problems and can offer a listening ear. What you say does not have to be explicitly theological. The ecclesial contribution is concealed in the pastoral effect of showing solidarity, recognizing problems and injustice and prompting an exchange of thoughts about caring for the earth.<sup>154</sup>

On the invitation of the national coordinator, in September 2015 the Platform wrote a vision document. In the document the Platform gave its perspective on the situation. The Platform signalled how not only buildings are torn apart, but also people and communities. People feel that similar damage is compensated differently. Therefore it is necessary to be more transparency about how and why the CVW, the NAM and the government are working. The Platform pleads for more attention to the nonmaterial damage. Furthermore they suggest establishing an ethical committee that can judge the effects of claim settlement. The Platform states that the church can offer pastoral support to people who are facing an uncertain future. Second, the churches raise ethical questions about our style of living, sustainability, and how people are treated by the system. Third, they want to strengthen social cohesion, since groups of people stand in opposition to each other.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, the Platform wants to show solidarity and raise awareness among Groningers and in the whole of the Netherlands. Therefore, the Platform supported the initiative of the *Groninger Bodem Beweging* (Groninger Earth Movement) and the provincial Council of Churches to sound the alarm by ringing church bells.<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, the Platform tries to address the issue in the media by publishing in various magazines, newspapers, and church newsletters.<sup>157</sup> The vision document and information about the Platform's initiatives are published in local church newsletters.<sup>158</sup> Pastors are interviewed by newspapers and in radio programmes such as *Vroeg op Noord* and *Wierook en Peperpunt*. This contributes to the name recognition of the Platform, and offers it a stage to explain why and how the church should be involved with the issue of earthquakes.<sup>159</sup>

### Networking

The Platform has tried to join in the public discussion by seeking contact with different networks on various levels. The networking has several functions. It aims at gaining more visibility for the Platform, but more importantly it has to do with becoming informed and showing solidarity. At first the Platform wanted to become informed about developments and the work of other parties. In the summer of 2014 a member of the *GBB* was invited

<sup>154</sup> 'Bijeenkomst werkgroep kerk en aardbeving', 28 October 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Jansen, *Zienswijze*.

<sup>156</sup> 'Kerken moeten noodklok luiden bij gasdebat', *RTV Noord*, 7 February 2015.

<sup>157</sup> E.g. Frits Postema, Harmen Janssen, 'Kerk zijn op een bevende aarde', in: *Woord & Dienst* (65:2), 2016, pp. 30-31; Liebrecht Hellinga, Jitse van der Wal, 'Ingezonden brief: SP-kamerlid Paul Ulenbelt naar de NAM, van harte welkom in Groningen', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 3 January 2017; Marco Roepers, "Op bedevaart door aardgaswingebied", *Oecumenisch bulletin*, January 2017, p. 26.

<sup>158</sup> Pieter Bootsma, 'Groningen is te mooi om weg te zakken', *Kerk in Stad*, September 2015.

<sup>159</sup> 'Kerken komen in actie tegen aardbevingen', *RTV Noord*, 21 October 2014; Report *Wierook en Peperpunt*, 7 March 2015; 'Kerken wijzen op onmacht en woede in Noord-Groningen', *RKK*, 8 March 2015, [http://www.rkk.nl/nieuws/kerken\\_wijzen\\_op\\_onmacht\\_en\\_woede\\_in\\_noord-groningen](http://www.rkk.nl/nieuws/kerken_wijzen_op_onmacht_en_woede_in_noord-groningen), accessed 10 March 2015; *Vroeg op Noord*, 4 November 2015; Eline Kuijper, 'Jitse van der Wal: duidelijk, direct en weinig pretentieus', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 17 December 2016.

to speak about how she evaluates the psychological consequences. In these contacts the Platform displays a listening attitude and awareness that others have more expertise on certain subjects.<sup>160</sup> In some cases these contacts also led to cooperation, for example with the *Stichting Groningen Noord* (Groningen North Foundation), which aims at creating a positive atmosphere and mobilising the strength of the region. Together with the ministers of Loppersum a pop-up house of potato boxes was erected in front of the church. Various speakers were invited to give information about the procedures, but also to tell about their love for the area.<sup>161</sup> This shows another aspect of the work of the Platform: facilitating meetings to offer space and resources.<sup>162</sup> At the same time contacts are made that increase the visibility of the Platform.

### *National Churches*

The Platform also tried to establish contacts on a national level. In the autumn of 2014 Frits Postema, Harmen Jansen and I visited Arjan Plaisier, the secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, again with a double aim, to inform him about the initiative and to ask for support. Postema hoped that the national church could help to raise national awareness, but could also offer practical support in the search for what churches can and should do. Plaisier indicated that he was aware of the problems and that he had wondered what the national church could do, but had not yet found an answer. One of the problems was that he did not know enough about the matter to lobby in parliament and with the government. Therefore he suggested that he visit the area together with the Bishop of Groningen-Leeuwarden.<sup>163</sup> The aim of the visit was to hear from the NAM, policymakers, interest groups and inhabitants what was going on, and again to show the churches' solidarity with the area. The preparation for the visit formed a reason for the Platform to make contact with the Royal Commissioner, Max van den Berg, and to refresh previously made contacts with the *GBB* and *Groningen Noord*. Furthermore the Platform released a press statement and in several media attention was paid to the visit.<sup>164</sup> Afterwards the church leaders wrote a letter stating their views on what would be necessary.<sup>165</sup>

### *From Dialogue Table to Gasberaad*

The church's involvement in the earthquake issue was not self-evident, as became clear when Postema tried to participate in the dialogue table in 2014. In 2013 the state had launched a dialogue table where the state, the NAM, the municipalities and various social organisations

<sup>160</sup> 'Verslag werkgroep Platform Aardbevingen', 28 August 2014.

<sup>161</sup> Theme service churches Loppersum part of 'Programma 2e dorpsplein-ontmoeting Loppersum', <http://www.lopstermijns.nl/2014/09/10/programma-dorpspleinontmoeting/>, accessed 10 September 2014; Ivo Lochtenberg, 'Stichting Groningen Noord gaat van start!', 17 June 2014.

<sup>162</sup> Jansen, *Zienswijze*.

<sup>163</sup> 'Bijeenkomst werkgroep Kerk en aardbeving', 28 October 2014; Arjan Plaisier, 'Commentaar bij de tijd - In Loppersum beeft de aarde', 27 November 2014; <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/actueel/Nieuws/nieuwsoverzicht/Paginas/Commentaar-bij-de-tijd---In-Loppersum-beeft-de-aarde.aspx>, accessed 10 February 2015; Bijeenkomst werkgroep Kerk en aardbeving, 3 February 2015.

<sup>164</sup> 'Kerkelijke leiders laten zich onderdompelen in bevingsgebied', *RTV Noord*, 17 April 2015; Gerard ter Horst, 'Traumapastoraat in Groningen', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 18 April 2015.

<sup>165</sup> Verklaring dr. Plaisier en mgr. dr. De Korte, 23 April 2015.

and interest groups were represented with the aim of restoring mutual trust. In January 2014 the mayor of Loppersum introduced the church at the request of Postema as a conversation partner: the churches represent a substantial part of the Groninger population and are important for the social cohesion. Furthermore the church could offer ethical reflection on how the welfare interests of inhabitants are dealt with. However, the representative of the dialogue table did not immediately recognize this possible contribution. Not for the first time the churches were confused with the *Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken*, which was already participating in the dialogue table. Although it was acknowledged that welfare organisations and churches should be involved in the dialogue, there was no room for the church at that moment.<sup>166</sup> This was partly due to the fact that at that time the Platform was not yet established and a central contact was lacking. Later, someone who had contact with the dialogue table revealed that it had been a very painful experience.

*The churches wanted to join the table, but they were not welcome. Not that I had any influence on it, but it was a very painful experience. Inviting certain organisations of modest substance and leaving out the church is rather incomprehensible in my opinion<sup>167</sup>*

Two years later the dialogue table was dissolved. From 2015 the national coordinator for Groningen organised the discussions with governors, the NAM and social organisations.<sup>168</sup> The social organisations continued their cooperation in the *Gasberaad* (Gas deliberation). In November 2016 the *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* joined the *Gasberaad* and I was asked to represent the Platform. The Platform addresses questions on social cohesion, personal well-being, feeling at home in the living environment and sustainability. This means that the Platform has common ground with various organisations in the *Gasberaad*, such as *Milieufederatie* (Environment Federation), heritage organisations, *Vereniging Groninger Dorpen* (Association of Groninger Villages), and housing associations.<sup>169</sup>

### 9.5.4 | Church and Earthquakes?

Notwithstanding the abovementioned activities, Platform members kept wondering what the church can and should do. What specific contribution do the churches have to offer? How can the relevance of the church's involvement be explained to other parties? Are people waiting for the church, do they expect something of the church? Some pastors met with (acute) pastoral problems, but colleagues in regions where the damage was less severe wondered what the impact of the earthquakes actually was.

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<sup>166</sup> E-mail Frits Postema, 25 March 2014; 9 April 2014.

<sup>167</sup> "De kerken hadden zich daar bij willen aansluiten maar die waren niet welkom, niet dat ik daar enige invloed op had, dat werd wel als heel pijnlijk ervaren gewoon. Als je sommige organisatie wel uitnodigt van een vrij lichte allure en de kerk sla je over, dan vind ik dat vrij onbegrijpelijk." (Respondent 8, Interviews Practical Theology II, May 2015).

<sup>168</sup> "Wallage en Kamminga uit Dialoogtafel", *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 3 September 2015; Ellis Ellenbroek, "Dialoog over gaswinning nooit serieus genomen", *Trouw*, 10 September 2015.

<sup>169</sup> *Gasberaad*, <http://gasberaad.nl>, accessed 28 July 2017.

## Support

The interviews conducted by the students confirmed the weariness about the church's possible role. Most respondents indicated that they did not see an immediate link between church and earthquakes and would not know what the church can do. A churchwarden who was busy with the renovation of church buildings said that he thought the church already had enough to worry about, referring to the decline and the changes in care provision. But when an inhabitant of Loppersum thought a little longer about it, she remarked:

*If I am honest, I have to say that when the ministers started with it [earthquakes], I thought: is this really necessary? But now I see how the earthquakes are ruining our lives in a negative way. So I think that it is important that the church also becomes aware of it.<sup>170</sup>*

What possible tasks do respondents see for the church? First, the churches can offer support, either in a practical way to assist people in finding their way in the jungle of regulations, or by offering psychological support in pastoral personal contact and discussion evenings. At the same time there are various ideas how this should be done. The church should not push itself to the forefront, but be available when people appeal to it for help. Various respondents wonder whether people would go to the church for support. They expect that people would either find support in their social network or would go to other interest organisations when they seek advice. Respondent 1 would welcome discussion evenings to share experiences about repair after repair for those who lose faith that all will be well in the end.

*What are the consequences if my house is beyond repair? Do I have to leave my precious house; am I able to cope with that loss? These are existential questions people have and I think by talking about them with neighbours or soulmates, it makes you a bit stronger and then you might be able to move on instead of being stuck in your grief. Because there are many people who experience a lot of grief right now [...] I can imagine that, when you organise events or evenings, they should be very open and accessible to all people, irrespective of church affiliation [...] because this really is an issue that affects all of society.<sup>171</sup>*

The question remains whether the church is able to offer this kind of support if the human resources are rapidly declining. Support and recognition can be offered by the minister in pastoral contact or liturgy, but it also seems important that awareness is raised in church communities about the need for the church to do something, so that church council members and members of the congregation find ways to discuss the subject.

<sup>170</sup> "Ik moet eerlijk zeggen dat toen de dominees daarmee begonnen, nou anderhalf jaar terug, dat ik dacht van moet dat nou? Maar het zou wel moeten, want het gaat ook echt je leven beheersen in negatieve zin. Dus ik denk wel dat het goed is dat de kerk daar ook bewust van wordt." (Respondent 3, Interview Practical Theology II, May 2015).

<sup>171</sup> "Als eigenlijk blijkt dat mijn huis helemaal niet te repareren is, wat betekent dat dan? Durf ik dan wel dat toe te geven, en kan ik dat wel. En kan ik wel afscheid nemen van mijn dierbare huis als dat van mij verwacht wordt, als dat de uitkomst wordt? Hoeveel verlies kan ik dan aan? Het gaat om zijnsvragen van mensen denk ik, die je soms, waar je juist door het te delen, met burens of zielsverwanten, daar wordt je een beetje sterker van en dan kun je misschien met elkaar naar een volgend moment komen. En lukt het misschien om niet te blijven steken in je verdriet. Want er zijn heel veel mensen met, die, heel veel verdriet ervaren nu. [...] En ik zou in die zin me voor kunnen stellen dat evenementen die je organiseert, of avonden die je organiseert, dat je die wel heel openlijk toegankelijk maakt voor mensen die wel of niet bij de kerk horen. [...] En dan gaat het om iets wat de samenleving als geheel raakt". (Respondent 1, Interview Practical Theology II, May 2015).

### Public Debate

Respondents also contest the idea that the church should participate in the public debate. Respondent 4 does not think that people expect the church to openly condemn gas extraction. The church should keep aloof from the issue, in the same way as the church should keep from intervening with politics.

*The church should stand with the village and the surrounding area, should be able to offer a listening ear and maybe some comforting words. [...] But the church should be careful about taking up a position, remain a bit neutral, because a story has various sides. Some clerics are fanatical in the position they take. I am always a bit wary about that. I think that the church should actually bring people together, irrespective of your background.*<sup>172</sup>

Respondent 6 has another argument about why the church should not engage in the public debate: because the church cannot claim to speak on behalf of all Groningers, since not everyone would recognize themselves in the church's statements. An organisation like the *GBB* is more likely to represent more people. She thinks that more people will be likely to connect with the *GBB*, because they do not belong to a church. The Platform's standpoint that the church should not play an activist role is shared by respondent 7. "I am not sure that the church has the social function that requires it to protest on the doorstep of the NAM: the church should not stand on the barricades".<sup>173</sup>

However, respondent 7 also says that the pop-up house in Loppersum was a sign of the churches' connectedness with the village community, not just with the church congregations, but also with the region. Various respondents affirm that it is important to give voice to people in Groningen, to raise awareness about the nonmaterial damage and have sufficient eye for individual circumstances. Respondent 3 thinks that the national church should support the regional church and raise awareness in the rest of the country. It is important to show that the church is involved. The ringing of the bells is seen as a good initiative.

Two respondents, who are active in politics, would welcome the public support of the church. Respondent 8 says:

*The state does too little and that is really unethical in my view. Nothing is said about it, though that's where churches have their role: the relation to ethical and thoughtful deeds. We need the churches for that. This is about whether or not we should allow these things to happen to people.*<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Dat je er als kerk er bent voor het dorp en de omgeving. Dat je een luisterend oor kunt bieden dat je wellicht wat troostende woorden hebt. [...] Maar pas op met het nemen van stelling, weet je wel. Een beetje neutraal. Elk verhaal heeft meerdere kanten. [...] Zoals je ook wel eens hoort dat bepaalde geestelijken heel fanatiek stelling innemen in iets, wat dat dan ook is. Dat staat me altijd een beetje tegen. Ik denk juist dat, dat, dat, ik vind dat de kerk moet verbreederen, tot welke stroming je ook behoort". (Respondent 4, Interview Practical Theology II, May 2015).

<sup>173</sup> "Ik weet niet of je als kerk zo'n maatschappelijke functie hebt dat je bij de NAM op de stoep moet gaan liggen En dan vind ik niet dat de kerk op de barricades hoeft te staan." (Respondent 7, Interview Practical Theology II, May 2015).

<sup>174</sup> "Ze (de staat) doen wel dingen maar het is gewoon te weinig. Het is wat mij betreft echt onethisch gedrag. En daar wordt niks van gezegd, daar hebben de kerken hun rol, als het gaat om ethiek en zorgvuldig handelen. Daar hebben we de kerken voor nodig. Of het wel of niet geoorloofd is om mensen dit aan te doen, dat is hier aan de orde". (Respondent 8, Interview Practical Theology II, May 2015).

At the same time this respondent very much wonders if the church is not too marginalised to be taken seriously. He thinks that churches have limited possibilities for influencing policy and procedures. The Platform has mainly been networking and organising various public actions, in an effort to support ministers in explaining the calling of the church to expose abuses and advocate for the helpless. However, it seems that this work has hardly been noticed by respondents. The question can be asked about the extent to which churchgoers are aware of the church's prophetic task.

### *Epilogue*

Nearly five years after the earthquake near Huizinge, the future is still uncertain. In that period the level of gas extraction has gradually decreased, from 48 billion normal cubic meters in 2012 to 24 billion in 2016. However, many people find it incomprehensible that in 2013, after the State Supervision of Mines had urged the government to scale down the gas extraction as soon as possible, a top production of 54 billion normal cubic meters was extracted.<sup>175</sup> The whole process has also caused severe nonmaterial damage. On 1 March 2017 the judge held the NAM responsible for the nonmaterial damage caused by the earthquakes and the process of claim settlement.<sup>176</sup> The question is what the future will bring. In 2017 the national coordinator wants to start by making the buildings earthquake proof.<sup>177</sup> This will probably mean that in various villages people will have to leave their homes for some time while their houses are strengthened or rebuilt. When they return the physical living environment and the village community will probably have changed enormously. Bearing in mind how Thissen states that a beautiful and agreeable living environment where people feel they belong is a condition for liveability, the question about what this will mean for the quality of life seems justified. Since meeting places will probably not be available for some time, social networks are in danger of falling apart and people have little time and energy left to start community initiatives. It will be interesting to see how the church will act in response to this situation.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have explored how churches engage with various other fields. Chapter 7 described how in Brabant ecumenical contacts are developing and how the church interacts with the worlds of care, education and culture. In Groningen, these same overlapping fields occur. The section about Christmas services not only reveals ecumenical contacts between the *Hervormde* and *Vrijgemaakte* congregations, but also how Christmas celebrations can transcend the differences between people who are connected with the church in various ways. The celebrations appeal to people with a strong attachment to place or event. In Hellum, the church's relation with the school can be traced in the Advent celebrations leading up to the Christmas singing services and in the Remembrance service. The role of the

<sup>175</sup> Brandsma, *De gaskolonie*, pp. 123-135.

<sup>176</sup> 'Rechter: NAM aansprakelijk voor immateriële schade, Staat niet', *RTV Noord*, 1 March 2017.

<sup>177</sup> Gerdt van Hofslot, 'Versterking van huizen is nachtmerrie voor Groninngen', *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 7 December 2016.

## An Intertwining Church in Groningen

church as a village church becomes especially clear in memorial events. These are events that attract people from the whole village because they concern the village community and confirm people's relation to the village as a place, both in the past and in the present. Most significantly, these events fulfil a need that people feel for collective ritual and reflection. Furthermore, it is intriguing to note that while people tend to make a sharp distinction between religious and secular space when talking about religion, various practices seem to indicate that religious and secular spaces and practices are intertwining.

As in Brabant, the church in Groningen relates to the field of care and welfare in various ways: first, by organising services and through visiting work in the nursing home (see chapter 8.3), and second, by engaging in care and welfare questions. Here it becomes apparent that the churches are exploring ways of becoming involved in liveability questions, especially where they concern people's quality of life. The fact that the diaconal meeting in November 2015 was the first gathering of diaconal workers in the municipality of Slochteren, and that the *Zorgmaatjes* project was a new venture, shows that churches are trying to overcome their diaconal uneasiness. Although they are still struggling somewhat to answer the question about what the specific contribution of the churches can be. A similar struggle is going on in relation to *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*. The idea that churches should respond to the consequences of the earthquakes met with surprise, both inside and outside the church. Thus, the question of how churches affect the quality of life in the countryside is not easily answered, although some patterns can be traced, as will become clear in the next chapter.





# Chapter 10

## Reconsidering the Meaning of Village Churches

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, churches, particularly the Dutch Reformed churches, played a central and vital role in Dutch cities and villages and offered various functions apart from the religious use. First, churches were places for social display, where councils and guilds funded stained-glass windows and where large box pews reflected the social position of local authorities. Secondly, churches were places for commemoration, where people were buried, *rouwborden* (memorial plaques) were hung and historical events were commemorated. Furthermore, churches functioned as service centres for poor relief, safety, administration, and education. Finally, the church was a cultural location for musical performances.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last two hundred years the church has gradually become marginalised due to secularisation, differentiation of society and deinstitutionalisation. Therefore the church is no longer a prominent place for social display; more people can be reached in a football stadium. In this study I have shown that although the church has lost most of its service functions, churches still provide services, such as the maintenance of the church yard. Furthermore, churches are still places for memorial and culture. The fields of memorial and culture contain elements which transcend ordinary life, which connect people with the past and the future, which offer the possibility to reflect, to become inspired and empowered, and in this way, contribute to people's quality of life. The title of this book, *Meaningful in the Margins*, refers to the marginalisation of the church, which raises questions about the role and relevance of the church in the twenty-first century. The story of village churches is characterised by decline, and the question seems inevitable: when has a church disappeared? A change of perspective, taking quality of life as its point of departure offers a way out of the survival mode and overcomes the feeling of marginalisation.

Margin also signifies 'the area around a border' and in my research I came across various intriguing borders and edges. First, as a result of the deinstitutionalisation of religion, it seems that 'religiosity is migrating away from the walls of the church to other domains.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In my master's thesis I explored the non-liturgical use of churches in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Jacobine Gelderloos, *Het kerkgebouw als publieke ruimte*, Unpublished Masterthesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Hanna Rijken, Martin Hoondert, Marcel Barnard, "My Soul doth Magnify": The Appropriation of the Anglican Choral Evensong in the Dutch Context – Presentation of a Research Project', in: *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical studies* (29), 2013, pp. 83-98, there p. 96.

What this research has revealed is that the church and the Christian tradition overlap with the worlds of culture, memorial, care, and education, which raises questions about where the ecclesial field ends and another field begins, or whether it is even possible to draw such lines. At the very least, the practices described in this dissertation call into question the strict line which is often drawn between the secular and the religious. It is exactly the overlap between religious and secular repertoires which makes it possible to bridge religious differences and cross social boundaries. Second, the church can fulfil a meaningful role on the borders of life, for people who live in the margins of society and when people are confronted with sickness and death. When people are confronted with life difficulties in their personal life arena which affect their quality of life, the church can offer support through pastoral contacts, but also in the public sphere of worship services, church newsletter, and events.

The main question of this research was: what role do local Protestant churches play in village life and how do churches affect the quality of life in rural areas in North-Brabant and Groningen? I have explored how the concept of quality of life can be used as a perspective to capture the different roles of village churches in both the material and the personal life arenas. In this chapter I draw on various theoretical perspectives to place my ethnographic fieldwork in a broader perspective. I use a variety of theoretical concepts that have been developed by David Walker, Jan Hermelink, Nancy Ammerman, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Jeff Astley, and Pete Ward. I propose a fundamental change of perspective for Dutch rural theology, from a focus on the church as organisation to a focus on the village context of churches. In this chapter I present my rationale for this change of perspective and the theological issues that it raises.

First, in 10.1 I disentangle the various relations between church and village: in what ways does the church become visible in the village? Through the three dimensional framework of place, people, and practice the various functions and meanings of a village church come into view. This reveals that there are various ways in which the church interacts with other domains in society. An analysis of the various interfaces provides insight into what church as a place for communal ritual, support and reflection can contribute to the quality of life in villages. In section 10.2 I present how quality of life and church can be related to each other in various ways. In 10.3 I argue that rural theology should have its starting point in how rural people talk about the meaning church and faith, and where they see traces of God. In 10.4 I address what a practical theological perspective can add to the concept of quality of life: is it possible to add another dimension to the concept? In 10.5 I sketch the outlines of a 'village ecclesiology'.

### **10.1 | The Church-Village Relation**

When facing the decline and marginalisation of the church, as discussed in chapters 6 and 8, the question becomes inevitable: when has a church disappeared and what is needed to still speak about church? In a rural context, it is sometimes far from evident that a church has a future: people cannot be sure that there is always a worship service in their own village and they feel that the continuation of the praise of God, both liturgically and otherwise, depends very much on their participation. At first sight the stories of the two case studies seem to be of a declining and disappearing church. In Brabant, the Protestant congregation Astens-

Someren was forced to sell the church building in Asten. In Groningen each of the four village churches of the *Hervormde* congregation Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild and Noordbroek seems to represent a different stage of a receding church. Both congregations are occupied with the running of daily affairs, which forms a challenge when there are hardly any people to fill the vacancies in the church council and committees and less people visit the worship services and activities. Therefore both congregations are exploring the possibilities for cooperation with other Protestant congregations on a regional level.

Regional cooperation has the tendency to be motivated by a survival attitude. The deficiency of such an attitude is that it can limit one's view to what is crumbling and one's efforts to maintaining existing activities. Furthermore, there is a risk of reinforcing an internal focus, which decreases attention for the role of the church in the village context. A problem resulting from the decrease in human resources is that all available time and energy goes into the organisation of church life. This means that energy can be lacking to address fundamental questions. First, how do we, as a church community, see our calling and task in the world? Second, how do we remain visibly present in all villages? Third, how do we become or remain involved with the village communities? Although regional cooperation can be inspiring and expand possibilities for starting projects, it has the risk that a church community becomes less visible and accessible locally, as became clear in villages as Asten and Overschild.

These questions may evoke a change of perspective, away from an organisational approach towards a contextual perspective, which enables one to look at the resources of a church differently. For this change of perspective, the concept of quality of life and the model of various ways of connectedness prove helpful. My research shows that the notion of quality of life brings into view a variety of different functions that churches perform in addition to their religious function: they maintain churchyards, provide services to villages and contribute to the general wellbeing with the social capital of volunteers. Furthermore, churches have many opportunities to contribute a theological perspective to liveability discussions. Churches are an important source for social interaction and care. And, last but not least, churches offer opportunities for a community to worship together as a whole, which is fundamental for community building. In my view it is important for a village church community to be aware that in a time when the church is deinstitutionalizing, there are various ways of relating to a church. But also to appreciate it and seize the opportunities it offers to engage with a broader group of people and fulfil various functions both locally and regionally. Furthermore, when Walker's model is related to questions of cooperation, this leads to some surprising new insights about rural churches.

### Place

The concept of place offers a useful lens for mapping the relations between the church and the village community. Attachment to place connects a broad group of people to the church building, also non-residents.<sup>3</sup> For some the church is the house of God, for others it

<sup>3</sup> Henk de Roest, "'Losing a Common Space to Connect': An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods", in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* (17:2), 2013, pp. 295-312; Lynn C. Manzo, 'Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places', in: *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (23:1), 2003, pp. 47-61, there p. 53.

is a place to meet other people. Especially older church buildings can make history tangible and evoke a feeling of connection with people from the past.<sup>4</sup> The architecture and the use of the church building reflect the position of church in society. First, there is the physical position of the buildings: in Brabant Protestants have formed a minority for ages and when they lost their dominant position in administration and public life in the nineteenth century they built small churches on the outskirts of the village. The large and impressive Catholic church buildings bear witness to a regained self-awareness among Catholics in the late nineteenth century. In Groningen the presence of various Protestant churches reflects a history of church schisms. In Groningen Protestant churches, especially the medieval *Hervormde* church buildings, are perceived as the village churches more than Protestant churches in Brabant, because of their age and often central location in the village.

The *use* of the churches is a second layer of analysis. Churches can offer a space for people to meet and organise activities. The maintenance work also leads to cooperation with other people from the village. In most villages, except for Asten, the congregation shares the space of the church with other groups. In both case studies the church communities are eager to open the church building and welcome village groups, guests and passers-by. Church buildings are used for non-religious activities, such as concerts, receptions, and lectures. There is a practical reason for this, to raise money for the building's use and maintenance, but also to expand the building's *raison d'être* and to (re)gain relevance in village life. Yet opening the church also springs from a theological motivation to form a hospitable and welcoming community.

Third, the *closing* of church buildings reflects the marginalisation of the church in society. In Asten, Overschild and Noordbroek the church buildings are no longer owned by the congregation. In these villages the church, as both a community and an organisation, has become almost invisible. A church building can help a church community to be visible in village life. Most of the cultural activities in the church buildings are carried out by non-church members. Even though the role of the church community is marginal, it makes a difference when a church community no longer owns a church building. Not only is the church community no longer physically present in village life, it also loses embeddedness in village life. Or, put differently, when a church building is scheduled for closure, the church body that owns it needs to address the question of how to remain visible in the village and connected to the village community.

Therefore, it is interesting to see what happens when church communities leave the church building and *emerge* in other places such as a nursing home, village hall or barn. In both case studies the church is involved in the nursing home; in Groningen this is a long-established practice, while in Brabant this is a recent development. The church communities become more visible when they participate in village events such as the *Ziekentriduüm* in Brabant and the Harvest festival in Groningen. In Brabant involvement in activities outside the church building is the primary source of visibility for the Protestant congregation, because here the Protestant church building has less of a village function than in Groningen.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, 'Voor wie zijn kerkgebouwen bestemd?' in: Olav Boelens, Ton Meijers, (eds.), *Het kerkgebouw als religieuze erfgoed*, Tilburg, Universiteit Tilburg, 2009, pp. 23-48, there p. 41.

### People

When the church becomes visible outside the church building, this is primarily through the person of the *minister*. A comparison between the case studies also reveals the role of the minister in making the church visible. In Brabant, Jaap (PB 71), the conductor of a village choir, says: "Everyone knows the minister here [in the village]. Everyone knows who she is too, both young and old."<sup>5</sup> Outsiders in Brabant indicate that they see little of the Protestant congregation, but that the public performances of the minister during the *Ziekentriduum*, the *Koepelkerk* concerts and Remembrance day make the congregation more visible.<sup>6</sup> In Groningen, on the contrary, the minister is not such a familiar face in the villages, although he visited village groups when he became a minister in the *Hervormde* congregation and participates in village events such as the harvest festival and the Christmas service. The minister strives for church involvement in the village. He makes efforts to build contacts with village organisations, cooperates with his *Vrijgemaakte* colleague and was the driving force behind the information evening for all diaconal workers in the municipality. Thus, ministers are important in representing the church in contact with other organisations.

Nevertheless, the fact that the minister in Groningen does not live in one of the villages makes him less visible. Thus, it does make a difference whether or not a minister actually lives in a village. The minister in Brabant also indicates that she is more involved in Someren than in Asten, because she lives in Someren and does her shopping in the village. This remark points to a dilemma in regionalisation processes. Even when a minister lives in the area, (s)he cannot live in more than one village so the absence or part-time presence of a village minister raises the same questions about staying visible as the closing of a church building does.

This leads to a question regarding *who personifies and represents* the church. In congregations with a part-time minister or none at all this means that lay leadership could become more important, both in the running of daily affairs and in representing the church in the village. In both case studies, I found examples of *formal cooperation* between the church (council) and village organisations. In Hellum the church is represented in the village hall committee and the cultural committee. In Lierop people from the Catholic and Protestant churches participate in the *Koepelkerk* concert committee. Since a lack of human resources forms a problem for many churches, the question of how lay leadership can be developed, would be interesting for further research.

Church council members, sextons and organists might be obvious *candidates* for these kinds of representative functions and sometimes they more or less embody the church. But since their workload can already be heavy, it is worthwhile investigating with which village organisations the church already has informal ties through church members who are active as volunteers. People who connect various groups and circles are very valuable because then groups may inform each other what they are doing and what they want to achieve, but more importantly what they share or how they could complement each other. In this

<sup>5</sup> "Iedereen kent de predikant hier wel hè. Iedereen weet wie het is ook, oud en jong." (Interview *Bonum Tenete*, 14 April 2015.)

<sup>6</sup> Interview *Bonum Tenete*; Interview teachers school; Interview *Onis*.

way bridging and linking social capital can be built. In this research I have not focussed on the social capital generated by individual churchgoers. Further research might provide insight about the extent to which people are able to see connections and parallels between church and other groups.

I think this depends to a large extent on people's ordinary ecclesiology and their perception of the tasks of the church, as the discussion about *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* made clear. The interviews carried out by students of the Protestant Theological University made clear that respondents see the support of people struggling with the consequences of the earthquakes primarily as a pastoral task and not so much as a diaconal one. They argue that churches should provide comfort, consolation, and empowerment, but should not support people financially. I see this as an example of diaconal uneasiness, in which diaconal work is primarily understood in financial terms and is not directly connected with values of solidarity or questions concerning justice, stewardship, and sustainability.<sup>7</sup>

### Practice

Regular activities are important for binding people together, becoming acquainted with each other and knowing how people are doing. A large part of the church's activities, such as worship services, visits and discussion groups are hidden from the villagers' view. Nevertheless, in various ways local churches offer a place where community is sustained, which also makes clear how closely related connection through activities and connection through people are.

*Community* is sustained, first, through worship on Sunday morning and socializing afterwards. Second, people support each other. This is organised by the church council, but practical and emotional support is also offered through informal contacts. Third, community bonds are strengthened through reflective conversations in discussion groups or otherwise. The fieldwork suggests that churches provide something special, because these kinds of conversations hardly ever develop spontaneously. This helps children and adults to form their own worldview and develop their faith. The practices of worship, support, and reflection can inspire and empower people to deal with life difficulties and to look after other people.

Through *occasional events and projects* a broader group can be related to the church. Special events like concerts and exhibitions can draw people to a church. These can be real village-events, bringing people from the whole village together. The churches further contribute to village life by organizing celebratory and memorial events. In this way a kind of village ecclesial year can be discovered. Moments of reflection and ritual for a whole community are rather scarce in society today.<sup>8</sup> In section 10.3 I discuss how various groups of people can relate to these events, which makes it possible to bridge social differences. Ideas about unity and inclusivity are strongly felt in the Christmas services and the memorial gatherings.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Walton, Jacobine Gelderloos, Henk de Roest, "Het was vroeger een weerpraatje, nu een aardbevingspraatje": *Onderzoek naar de verhouding kerk&aardbevingsproblematiek in Noord-Oost Groningen*, Groningen, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, 2015, pp. 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke: Over geloof en kerk in de moderne maatschappij' in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk *et al.* (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp. 417-434, there p. 422.

By being involved in village events the congregations almost automatically *cooperate* with other organisations. The case studies reveal cooperation with other churches, with village groups and with social organisations. Ecumenical contacts lead to liturgical and diaconal activities. In both Brabant and Groningen, activities with a diaconal dimension also involved contacts with social organisations. The play about refugees was organised with the Catholic Church, the municipality, the school, and refugee work. The diaconal and earthquake networks in Groningen also include contacts with municipalities, social teams, and health and welfare organisations. Interestingly, the cooperation and visibility of the church in Brabant is grounded primarily in ecumenical activities, and in Groningen in activities in and around the church building entail contacts with the village, followed by ecumenical initiatives.

### *The Dynamics of Connectedness*

From the perspective of 'solid' church, which sees church primarily as an association in a pillarized environment with clear boundaries, there is often a tendency to distinguish between churchgoers and non-churchgoers.<sup>9</sup> To transcend this dual way of thinking, people also speak of non-practicing church members, the so called '*randkerkelijken*'. Riet Bons-Storm has tried tell the story of this group of *randkerkelijken* in the book *Met één been in de kerk* (With one leg in the church).<sup>10</sup> Walker's model reveals that people who at first sight do not seem to belong to the church can still have affinity with the faith community, with certain events or with the church building. Grace Davie calls this phenomenon of believing without belonging 'vicarious religion'.<sup>11</sup> A large group of people, who do not visit the church regularly, still find it important that there is such a place as a church where people can find community, support, empowerment, and reflection.

If we want to take this phenomenon seriously, it is necessary to think about church in a more nuanced way. Walker's model enables one to see how people are connected to the church in various ways, through relations with people, place attachment, and practices, the affinity with activities and involvement in events. It is important to draw attention to the aspect of time, which Walker does not explicitly mention. The fieldwork confirms Jan Hermelink's observation that belonging to a church is dynamic and changes over time. Hermelink states that the way people are connected with a church develops depends for a significant part on people's life circumstances and story.<sup>12</sup> Periods of intense involvement can alternate with a period of keeping a distance and only appearing occasionally. Not only can people be related to a church in various ways, they can also be connected to various churches at the same time.

When the temporal aspect of connectedness is inserted into Walker's model it becomes clear that being connected to a church is a fluctuating and dynamic concept and that the solid village church is already becoming liquid. It can raise awareness that modes of connected-

<sup>9</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Truth*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2017, pp. 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Riet Bons-Storm, *Met één been in de kerk: Verlangen naar een kerk die verschil maakt*, Gorinchem, Narratio, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Grace Davie, *Europe, the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, London, Longman & Todd, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie der Kirchenmitgliedschaft: Interdisziplinäre Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung kirchlicher Beteiligung*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000, p. 347.

ness can alternate for every individual. In that way, it may be possible not only to differentiate between ways of being connected, but also to appreciate these various modes. In this way tensions between people who are connected in various ways can be dealt with. This may be one of the main challenges for a village church: to offer people the opportunity to connect to the church in their own way, without judging or expecting more commitment. This is not an easy task, but it begins with acknowledging that people relate to the church in various ways, that this can change over time for people personally, and that people can feel connected with several churches at the same time. This acknowledgement may lead to another way of organising church life, with lighter structures, that is more locally rooted.

### *Playing Chess on a Local and a Regional Board*

The dynamic and multidirectional nature of connectedness opens new perspectives for the rural church. In chapter 5 I showed that Dutch rural theology has been in two minds with regard to the future of small village churches. On the one hand the discussion evolved in the direction of regionalising and joining forces. On the other hand, a turn to the local is noticeable which stressed the importance of being involved locally. In chapter 8 it became clear that on the one hand people are hesitant to travel on Sunday morning to another church if this is more or less imposed upon them. People need time to bond with other churches and people from other villages. The importance of local bonding is stressed. People fear that a regional church is less visible and less accessible. At the same time are people prepared to travel considerable distances if they are attracted by a community spirit, liturgy or theology in another church.

These various manifestations of regionalisation raise questions about accessibility and visibility, and also community building. When people live in various villages it requires extra effort and commitment to build up relationships, especially in a time when people are inclined to hang around for a while and then leave again. It becomes clear that it is not easy for people of various ages and various villages to bond. It occurs among children who see each other incidentally in Sunday school, teenagers who are supposed to participate in regional youth activities and catechism and also among adults, who tend to sit with people from their own village when they are drinking coffee. Given the extra effort required to build new relationships, regionalisation is not an easy answer for a declining church.

In my view, it is inevitable for rural churches to play chess on several boards, both locally and regionally. But is this possible for declining churches, who are absorbed with organising church life? Therefore, the change of perspective seems of fundamental importance, most notably because it can reveal that churches may already be further involved in various local and regional networks than church communities realise. In this study, I have uncovered various patterns of cooperation in which village churches are engaged:

1. Local ecumenical cooperation
2. Local contact with village organisations to be present and involved in village life
3. Regional inter- and intra-denominational cooperation with other congregations to support and inspire each other
4. Regional contacts with social organisations as a discussion partner



## Reconsidering the Meaning of Village Churches

The success of cooperation depends considerably on the reasons for cooperation. Does the aim of the cooperation lie in survival of the organisation, or have groups come together with a shared care or longing, a transcending aim? The model of connectedness seems helpful for bringing into view how a local and a regional church function differently.

A regional church functions mainly on the basis of connectedness through people and regular activities. The stories about churches in a regional network show that people can connect to the church over distance, drawing on the resources of people and activities. Through worship services, Bible group, and singing afternoons, people in the nursing home still belong to the church community. The church connects them to their old village. Bonds are sometimes maintained after people have moved away, because they return once in a while or keep in touch with family and friends. Through church newsletters a broad circle of people remains in touch with the church community, even though many of them are not regular churchgoers. Furthermore, it becomes clear that people can belong to various congregations at the same time. Attracted to a certain liturgical style or theological position, people can choose to divide their time among various churches. Multiple belonging creates a rather invisible network between church communities, which can sometimes lead to an exchange of ideas and activities. In this way, regional and local church can interact and reinforce each other.

For regional church networks, local social involvement, and cooperation with other organisations in villages is not their primary concern. Examples of such networks are the churches of the regional network in Brabant, which are tied together through a programme of discussion evenings, the liberal network around Scheemda, in which church members of Noordbroek participate, and the cluster of Protestant churches in Groningen, which are rooted primarily in worship services. A difference between the networks in Brabant and Groningen is that the network in Brabant springs from organisational issues and a shared programme of discussion evenings and lectures, while people in Scheemda have found each other through shared liturgical-ecclesial views. The cooperation within the cluster has a more geographical and denominational basis, while people fear a loss of liturgical and place identity. A regional network based on a shared identity can create strong ties and a strong motivation to travel over larger distances.

The place of the building and involvement in local events are important for a local church to relate to the village community. Local events and place prove to be especially important reasons and motivations for cooperation with other parties. In the church building or in village church events, people can discover a common ground which motivates them to cooperate in a shared pursuit, although personal intentions and aims may differ. When a church building is closed or seldom used or activities such as Sunday school stop, the question arises as to how to remain visibly present in such a village. It is a question that in a regionalising church often remains unanswered. It may prove helpful to investigate the strength of the remaining modes of connectedness. When the place of a church building disappears, the question can be asked whether there are other places to gather and be present. Or are there village events or activities to which the church community can contribute? Rita (P4) sums it up nicely:

*Of course, I think it's great to do those things with each other. That is so important, especially for the village, because the school is closed. To maintain those contacts with each other, you have to find other things that connect people with each other.<sup>13</sup>*

## 10.2| Church and Quality of Life

In this study, I argue for a change of perspective as far as village churches are concerned. This change of perspective entails looking at the village church from a quality of life framework. During the research I discovered that 'church' and 'quality of life' can be related in various ways. In the previous section I already touched upon the question of how church life is shaped by rural developments and liveability issues. For example, there are demographic developments such as ageing and population decline, but also the increased mobility which enables people to be connected with various churches, as mentioned above, as well as the tendency in present-day society to participate for a limited period of time.

In this section I show how the relation between 'church' and 'quality of life' can also be approached differently. First, the question can be asked how churches contribute to various aspects of liveability, such as the quality of the physical and social environment or services. Such an analysis is insufficient to grasp the full meaning of church life, because it limits church to social-geographical terms. Already in the 1960s people remarked that liveability research, did not take into consideration people's religious backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it proves to be an interesting exercise because it helps churches to become more self-conscious about their contribution to village life. Furthermore, researchers in the field of liveability should take the role of churches in village life more into consideration. They should seriously reflect on the effects that the regionalisation and local disappearance of churches have on quality of life because this not only affects church communities but also the physical and social environment of a village.

Second, church communities should ask themselves how they should relate to liveability questions that affect people in the village community. What does it mean for people personally and for a village community if services close, if an industrial zone expands or when there is an agricultural crisis? Such a change of perspective allows one to see how circumstances in the living environment can affect the personal quality of life. Here general liveability becomes personal, because it creates possibilities for and obstacles to how people want to live their lives and raises questions about what people find valuable and important in their lives. It is exactly on this interface, where a place of reflection, care, and rituals such as a church is important, because in such a place people can be empowered to develop their personal worldview which helps them to deal with life circumstances, both good and bad. If churches are able to answer the question of what they have to offer in a pastoral, diaconal, liturgical or a prophetic way to their context, they might be able to overcome their ecclesial uneasiness.

<sup>13</sup> "Tuurlijk vind ik dat heel mooi dat je dat allemaal met elkaar doet. Dat is zo belangrijk en vooral voor het dorp ook he, want de school is weg en om toch die contacten onder elkaar te houden, moet je toch andere dingen zoeken, dat je mensen toch met elkaar verbindt." (Focus group Overschild, 20 January 2015).

<sup>14</sup> "Levensbeschouwing had volgens de bewoners van Kloosterburen te weinig begrip gekregen in *Bedreigd Bestaan*." (Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio*, p. 129; H. Boerland, *Kloosterburen beziet zichzelf: Verslag van een bevolkingszelfonderzoek gehouden in de gemeente Kloosterburen*, Groningen, [s.n.], 1962.

### *Churches in a Quality of Life Framework*

Looking at churches from a quality of life framework brings into view how churches affect the liveability of the countryside, sometimes in unexpected ways. Churches particularly tie in with the spatial and sociocultural dimensions that Ruth Panelli distinguishes.<sup>15</sup> From a landscape architecture point of view, the maintenance of church buildings and churchyards is important. When a church is removed, the whole structure of the village disappears, not only physically but also temporally.<sup>16</sup> Churches are historic sites that connect people, not only with earlier generations but also with their personal history. Churches are places for rites de passage, like baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Or people used to play in the churchyard when they were children. The importance of the churches and the towers for village identity illustrates this. Through its involvement in the maintenance of the buildings and the cemeteries churches contribute to the physical living environment.

With regard to the sociocultural dimension, the practices of working together and drinking coffee not only improve the physical, but also the social environment by strengthening social ties. In Schildwolde bridging social capital develops between *Hervormden* and *Vrijgemaakten*, in Hellum between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Also in a village like Lierop the church building and everything which happens around it is seen as important for the social cohesion, which includes networks of informal support, visiting work, and the social involvement of church members, which is often high. Cooperation with other organisations is seen by survey respondents as a possibility to strengthen the social cohesion in the villages. In this way, churches can “help to sustain and strengthen a sense of community and safety in the village community.”<sup>17</sup> Or, as Bettina Bock observes, liveability can particularly be found in community feeling, participation in collective activities and care for each other.<sup>18</sup> In this perspective we have seen in the case studies how new opportunities open up for church communities who want to be involved and mean something for their environment

The fact remains that church buildings are losing their function as places of worship. Gradually other forms of use are emerging to fill the space that is no longer used for religious purposes, such as concerts, exhibitions, and lectures. At such occasions the church has a facilitating function. Concerts and plays can function as a showpiece for the village, entertaining people from both inside and outside the village. At the same time, these occasions offer a podium for musicians and artists, both amateurs and professionals to perform in the church. Jeremy Martineau describes how in this way churches contribute to the local rural economy, because in small villages churches are often the only tourist attraction. ‘The

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Panelli, ‘Young Rural Lives: Strategies beyond Diversity’, in: *Journal of Rural Studies* (18), 2002, pp. 113-122.

<sup>16</sup> W. van de Donk, J. Janssen, ‘De kerk: De veranderde rol van kerkgebouwen in het publieke domein’, H. Dijkstra, Bloem, et al., (eds.), *Bestemming gewijzigd, moderniteit en stedelijke transformaties*, Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 40-59, there p. 54; *Een toekomst voor kerken: Handreiking voor het aanpassen van kerkgebouwen in religieus gebruik*, Amersfoort, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, 2012, p. 5; Maaïke van Houten, Jonathan Ploeg, ‘Dorpen en steden zonder kerk, wie kan zich daar iets bij voorstellen?’, *Trouw*, 14 July 2016.

<sup>17</sup> “Meewerken, samenwerken om de gemeenschapszin en veiligheid van de dorpsgemeenschap te behouden en bevorderen.” (Groningen Survey question 9).

<sup>18</sup> Bettina Bock, *Leegte en ruimte: Over bevolkingsdaling en leefbaarheid in Noord Nederland*, Groningen, Universiteit van Groningen, 2016, p. 7.

loss or closing of the church would seriously damage the local economy.’<sup>19</sup> Thus, on closer observation churches can also be related to the economic dimension.

### *Social Capital*

With regard to social capital, churches have both a connecting and a segregating effect. Both case studies are examples of how in the past the presence of various faith communities resulted in a segregation of village society and today traces of this are still visible. In Brabant Catholics and Protestants have lived in different worlds for generations. In Noordbroek the church was part of a class distinction between rich farmers and poor labourers, a distinction which still colours the image villagers have of the church. In Schildwolde a church schism in 1944 is very much present. Although there are growing contacts between the church communities, they remain to a large extent separate worlds and the village still shows traces of pillarisation. In Hellum the church building is part of village life, but church life is largely hidden from view. In Overschild the church as unifying factor is lacking and people travel in various directions to attend churches elsewhere. Furthermore, within the congregations the community can fall apart into various groups because of differences in age, the village where people live and whether people have come from elsewhere.

In both case studies the churches are involved in initiatives to bring groups together. To create bonding, an atmosphere for reflection, community between church communities, church councils, and youth groups, it is necessary to meet regularly. In Brabant, the ecumenical activities aim at bridging differences and learning to see similarities. In Groningen, the Christmas services are important for bringing *Vrijgemaakten* and *Hervormden* in Schildwolde together, in Hellum churchgoers and non-churchgoers. In Noordbroek, bringing groups together requires extra effort, but sometimes by accident a communal aim is discovered, bringing groups together for Remembrance day, the Cultural day or the Christmas walk. However, the role of the church community remains limited in these events, although the congregation applauds these initiatives wholeheartedly.

A closer look at the case studies reveals that the connections with people and through activities predominantly create bonding social capital, while the connections via events and buildings are particularly important for the development of bridging social capital. The community bonds within the congregation are mainly rooted in the connection people have with each other and through regular activities, while other village organisations are often involved in events and the use of the church building. A shared social concern about the position of refugees, the social and nonmaterial damage cause by earthquakes, and policy changes in care and welfare, leads to both bridging and linking social capital. The shared concern brings churches of various denominations within a region together. It also generates linking social capital, because the cooperating churches approach governmental bodies and other organisations in their quest for more information, common understanding, and shared interests.

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Martineau, ‘The Contribution of Church Tourism to the Rural Economy’, in: Alan Smith, Jill Hopkinson, *Faith and the Future of the Countryside: Pastoral and Theological Perspectives on Rural Sustainability*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2012, pp. 219-239, there p. 229.

## Reconsidering the Meaning of Village Churches

At the same time, it becomes clear that both religious illiteracy and ecclesial uneasiness can hinder the development of bridging and linking social capital. The fieldwork confirms Langrish's conclusion:

When it comes to being allowed to build on the potential by applying for community funding or joining partnerships for local renewal and regeneration, churches are often discriminated against through prejudice or sheer ignorance of the role they can and do play. One of the challenges for the rural Church is to be more upfront and confident about what even a small congregation can and does contribute to community life.<sup>20</sup>

This also means that people need to have a clear image of what the church is, what the church has to offer, and what makes the contribution of the church unique.

### *Church on Quality of Life*

Thus, a quality of life framework leads to surprising insights about village churches, revealing that churches fulfil not only religious, but also various other functions. However, quality of life frameworks are not sufficient to grasp all aspects of church life and to understand what makes church different from other movements and organisations.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, from a theological point of view, I think the question should be asked whether this understanding of quality of life does justice to how people live their lives. Within sociological research it is supposed that quality of life depends on social security, public services, the quality of the physical living environment, and the social environment, participation in civil administration, and lastly the accessibility of the area and services. These are all aspects of what Rogerson calls the material living arena, but they leave no room for the 'more than ordinary' dimension of life.<sup>22</sup> In my view churches can add a perspective to liveability by focussing on the question of how personal well-being is influenced by social, political, and economic developments in the material life arena. In pastoral contacts it can become clear how such developments affect how people are able to shape and live their own lives.

In the personal living arena people attribute meaning to what happens in the material living environment and this is fundamental for how they experience their quality of life. Churches raise questions about personal well-being, life attitude, and how to deal with life difficulties. On Prayer day, the minister in Groningen addresses how people live with contingency. How do you experience your life, is it worthwhile? People are living between personal responsibility and the knowledge that they cannot control everything. Churches can address these kinds of questions in relation to care, illness, poverty and support. In worship services, church newsletters and discussion groups the question about how people are personally affected by social-economic developments in the material life arena is addressed. It is in the interface between the material and personal living arena that religion comes into view. This is where questions about anxiety and contingency, which arise from

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<sup>20</sup> Michael, L. Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', in: Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J. Francis, Peter Francis, *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2004, pp. 21-43, there p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke', p. 419.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 292.

the material living environment, are addressed and people are empowered 'to transcend the deceptions, uncertainties and frustrations of everyday life'.<sup>23</sup> Sven (PG103) thinks it an impoverishment that religion is disappearing from the public space. He used to listen to a radio programme in which a minister reflected on the news.

*Apart from the theological content, it makes you think. It is a different language with more abstract words and it touches you now and again. Resistance against something like nuclear weapons is part of your life attitude. The disappearance of these kinds of things is a loss that leads to superficiality and hypes.*<sup>24</sup>

In modern society, there is little attention for what lies beyond our control. People are left to their own devices to deal with life's contingencies, both the good and the bad. On the one hand, people deal with problems on their own, rather than with others, and do not ask for help, but also the other way around 'modern people have few possibilities for expressing their gratitude' or their lament in a collective form.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, people are searching for an overarching story that points to transcending ideas and practices that can connect people from different backgrounds. The fieldwork gives reason to suspect that even though the church is marginalising as an institution, which combines community building, meaning making, and rituals, people still search for and create places where sacred consciousness is socially created and sustained, as will be discussed in section 10.4

The church can be a place where support can be offered and found and where questions about dealing with contingency are asked and sometimes answered. Religion offers reflection on frames of meaning in the personal living arena. Ideas about how to deal with diversity and form a community are nurtured. Religious and ecclesial practices as worship, rituals support, and reflection in particular make sacred consciousness visible and tangible in the material life arena. In this way space is created in the material life arena to reflect on difficulties in the personal life arena. People can mirror their own stories in biblical narratives, which can also provide another perspective on life. In these practices of worship, support and reflection people can experience the presence of God, which can empower them to deal with life's difficulties and to look after other people.

### *Church with an Eye for the Countryside*

An intriguing aspect of rural theology is investigating how churches theologise on rural quality of life issues.<sup>26</sup> Why should churches become involved with liveability issues? What have churches to do with agricultural crises, earthquakes, the housing market or employment issues? The congregations in the case studies address quality of life issues in various

<sup>23</sup> Danièle Hervieu Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> "Los van de theologische inhoud, je wordt even aan het denken gezet. Het is een andere taal met meer abstracte bewoordingen en zo nu en dan raakt het je wel. Bijvoorbeeld over de atoombom. Opstand zit in je levenshouding. Dat dit soort dingen verdwijnen vindt PG 103 armoe, het leidt tot oppervlakkigheid en hyperigheid." (Open Day Noordbroek, 5 April 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Van den Brink, 'De migratie van het goddelijke', p. 421; Armand Léon van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship: Anglican Liturgy in Relation to Stories of Suffering People*, London, New York, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Astley, 'Ordinary Theology for Rural Theology and Rural Ministry', in: Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins, *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, London, Equinox, 2012, pp. 42-51.

ways, both implicitly and explicitly. There is a tendency within village churches to primarily pay attention to elderly people and questions concerning health, care, death, and mourning. The question can be asked about whether churches pay enough explicit attention to diaconal needs in other age groups, such as day care, relational problems, uncertain future, work stress, and unemployment.<sup>27</sup> The Protestant congregation in Brabant interacts with the worlds of care and welfare during the *Ziekentriduüm* and in the nursing home. Also the theme of refugees looking for a new home is addressed during a play. The *Hervormde* congregation in Groningen also relates to the field of care through activities in the nursing homes and participation in diaconal networks. Indirectly, the congregation is also involved with *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*. These practices show various points of interest.

First, in diaconal work an awareness is growing that support should not be limited to the congregation's own community. Both churches organise collections for the foodbank. In Hellum flowers are also brought to non-churchgoers and in Noordbroek everyone can ask for pastoral care, although this is not generally known. On various occasions respondents stress that a church should also have an eye for people outside the church. In both case studies, there are also examples of social concern leading to resistance against the social state of affairs. The initiative to organise a play about refugees stems from a felt social concern. The aim was to raise awareness about what it means to leave your home and feel lost. The same goes for the *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving* where the pastors are concerned about people in Groningen who feel like they are gradually losing their home and life as it used to be. They protest and call for action from the government because the economic-political system leads to social tensions and situations of injustice. In both case studies the churches aim at strengthening social ties, where there is a risk that people are being played off against each other.

Second, the involvement of the church in these questions reveals ecclesial uneasiness. The church communities seem to struggle with the question of how the church can contribute to social issues. This may be a result of the secularisation processes, through which the idea developed that church and faith belonged to the private domain and should not be too visible in the public sphere. The result is that churches seem to have withdrawn to the personal life arena. Church members wonder what the church has to offer that other organisations are not already providing? The involvement of the church in issues like refugees and care requires little explanation, because through the ages churches have always shown concern for strangers, sick, and poor people. But what does the church have to do with an issue like earthquakes? What is the unique contribution of the church? The churches are searching for language that is understood both inside and outside the church. *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*, for example, faces a dilemma. On the one hand the churches want to stay close to their ecclesial calling, the language of the Bible, and church practices such as worship services, but on the other hand they are aware that this ecclesial discourse, with notions such as justice, stewardship, and mercy, is not always understood outside the church.

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<sup>27</sup> E. Sengers, *Caritas, Naastenliefde en liefdadigheid in de diaconia van de kerk*, Delft, Eburon, 2012, pp. 37-38.

Third, as mentioned before, when a common cause is found churches are able to cooperate very well, both ecumenically and regionally. In Brabant the refugee crisis and the effect on village society inspired Protestant congregations to organise the play 'As I Left My Father's House'. Prompted by a series of liveability questions which affect housing, energy supply, social relations, and personal well-being, representatives of seven churches have assembled in *Platform Kerk en Aardbeving*. The policy of decentralisation and changes in the provision of care and welfare confronts churches with the question of what position they should take in supporting people. This led to the development of diaconal platforms, where experiences are exchanged and projects are started. What is especially intriguing is that a turn to local needs leads to fruitful and inspiring regional cooperation. Regionally, churches try to build a network with interest groups and administrative organisations.

Finally, the counterpart of ecclesial uneasiness is religious illiteracy, as a result of which churches are not always in view for social partners. But gradually the church is being rediscovered by social and governmental organisations as a discussion partner. The municipalities in Brabant were pleasantly surprised that the church wanted to make the theme of refugees discussable in a time when the subject evokes tension. The social team in Slochteren was glad about the interest of the church in the changes in welfare provision and was aware that the churches have a broad social network that offers support. Also, in relation to the social consequences of the earthquakes awareness is growing that the church has some tools that are lacking in a bureaucratic, technical approach to the problems. Churches need to rediscover why and how they can contribute to concrete liveability questions. When mutual unfamiliarity is overcome both bridging social capital between churches and linking social capital with governmental organisations can be developed.

### 10.3 | Religious Village Life

The fieldwork has indicated that village churches not only fulfil functions that follow directly from their religious meaning, such as providing care for each other, spirituality, reflection, worship, and memorial, but that the church also has a role in the physical environment, as an embodiment of history and by offering a meeting place. At the same time it can be concluded that religious village life is not limited to the field of the church.<sup>28</sup> Hermelink describes a similar double view of the church. He sees liturgy, or worship, as the core business of the church. It is the explicit symbolisation of the spiritual relation with God. But the role of the church in society is broader than only liturgical, while liturgy is broader than only the Sunday service.<sup>29</sup> The observation that, on the one hand, a village church not only fulfils religious functions and that, on the other hand, religious village life also takes place outside the church, makes the village church a dynamic field. These dynamics raise various ecclesiological questions, such as what should the tasks of a church be? Where does church cease and when have we entered another social domain? This last question can be asked

<sup>28</sup> Wilhem Gräb, 'The Transformation of Religious Culture within Modern Societies: From Secularization to Postsecularism in: Arie Molendijk, Justin Beaumont, Christoph Jedan, *Exploring the Post Secular: The Religious, the Political and the Urban*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 113-130, there pp. 113-114.

<sup>29</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, p. 349



in relation to various interfaces: where does diaconal become social, when is liturgy only cultural, how to distinguish between faith formation and development of worldview?

Listening to how rural people talk about the meaning of church and religion forms a valuable starting point for rural theology.<sup>30</sup> In this section I reflect further on the position of church and religiosity. Moments of ritual, meaning making, and community building in various places are all part of the lived religion in a rural context. As pointed out in chapter 4, religious functions, such as support, community building, social criticism, ritual, dealing with contingencies, and worldview development are transferring to other domains in society.<sup>31</sup> My fieldwork has revealed how, also in a differentiated rural society, support takes place in the field of care, personal development in education, music and art in the cultural domain. On the one hand, therefore, it could be said that the church has lost relevance. On the other hand, however, the fact that various fields of practice fulfil religious functions makes exchange and interaction between church and other fields possible.

### *Intertwining Fields of Practice*

The fieldwork has brought into view how the deinstitutionalisation of religion leads to an intriguing paradox: on the one hand, there is a growing unfamiliarity with church and religion, but at the same time religious practices are transferring to other fields in society, such as art, culture, education, and care. This research analysed how the ecclesial field in the social space of a village relates to and is shaped by other fields. The *Koepelkerk* concerts are replacing Easter and All Souls Day, and celebrations in the school and the nursing home are visited instead of the worship service. Pastor Janssen says:

*I think that many people are looking for an alternative and no longer find it in the church. [...] I expect that the old form of church will disappear, because it's so unrelated to the rest of life. But I think that a lot happens between people; people come together, people talk about a book together, read the Scriptures together, and talk about it together.<sup>32</sup>*

The various services seem to be places where sacred consciousness is socially created and sustained.<sup>33</sup> They reveal a need for communal ritual, moments of reflection, sacred places, memorial, and singing to form community bonds.

When the concept of fields of practice is related to the fieldwork a paradox appears: on the one hand fields of practice overlap, where church meets the worlds of care, culture, and education. On the other hand, the relation between the field of church with other fields is the subject of discussion and the relevance of the church not always evident. In some cases, church and culture overlap almost completely, as happens in the *Koepelkerk* concerts or during the Helmster Easter Play. On other occasions the fields are placed in opposition

<sup>30</sup> Jeff Astley, 'Ordinary Theology for Rural Theology'.

<sup>31</sup> Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, *Religion und Modernität: Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1989, pp. 82-88.

<sup>32</sup> "Ik denk dat zoveel mensen dat hebben, ze zoeken iets alternatiefs en ze vinden het toch niet meer in de kerk. [...] De kerk in de oude vorm gaat verdwijnen, omdat het zo los van het leven staat. Ik denk dat er heel veel gebeurt tussen mensen. Mensen die ook samenkomen, mensen die samen een boek gespreken, die in de Schrift lezen die samen daarover praten. Dus ik denk dat er heel veel gebeurt." (Interview pastor Janssen, 14 April 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, p. 300.

to each other, as happens in the cultural use of the churches of Hellum and Noordbroek, which is strictly distinguished from religious activities.

It is interesting to see how churches adopt culture and art forms to express a theological message, such as in the Festival of the Spirit or in the play about refugees. Both the Festival of the Spirit and the play 'As I Left My Father's House' in Someren can be seen as efforts to use cultural means of expression to relate to a broader context. The relation to the broader context is both on the level of organisation and on the level of content. On an organisational level contacts are made with churches, municipalities, and schools. Both the play and the expositions are examples of churches entering the public domain with practices which are not directly linked to traditional liturgy.<sup>34</sup> An underlying aim seems to be to offer a new perspective on the church, to show that church encompasses more than only worship services. There is also a difference between the play and the festival. The play also contained a clear message of social criticism, while the Festival of the Spirit primarily served an aesthetic aim and can be seen as an 'attempt by the church to connect with new types of sacrality.'<sup>35</sup>

In other cases, the intertwining is predominantly social, while a theological motivation is almost absent. An example is Remembrance day in the church building. The principal attitude of the church community is to open the church building for use by the village community. This principle is based on the practical motivation to create support for the church, but also on ideas of hospitality and opening up the church. The practice in itself resembles a liturgical gathering, although explicit references to God or the transcendent are not made, but still, ideas about another life, another world, life as it should be, community, and freedom are explicated and even celebrated. Furthermore, questions are raised not only about the social state of affairs in the past and present, but also about contingencies in life like violence, oppression, and injustice.

There are also religious practices with which the church is not involved, like the celebrations in the schools. These practices are relevant for the research because they shed light on how people celebrate, commemorate, think about life, and, in my view, also reveal something of God, albeit sometimes in disguise.<sup>36</sup> These practices can be seen as examples of what Moltmann calls the Spirit emigrating to groups outside the church,<sup>37</sup> a phenomenon that Pete Ward calls liquid church, which makes it possible to see how 'divine life passes through the church walls and links church with the wider society.'<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Inez Schippers, *Sacred Places in the Suburbs, Casual Sacrality in the Dutch VINEX-district Leidsche Rijn*, Amsterdam, Groningen, Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies, 2015, p. 221.

<sup>35</sup> Idem, p. 90.

<sup>36</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?' in: Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2012, pp. 31,32.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life, A Universal Affirmation*, London, 1992, p. 2 in: Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2002, pp. 78-79.

<sup>38</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology*, pp. 9-10.

## 10.4 | Church between Religious and Secular Space

In chapters 7 and 9 a varied religious repertoire emerged. On the one hand there are seasonal rituals such as Christmas and Easter and other activities which return on an annual basis. On the other hand there are rituals in the growing field of memory culture. Inez Schippers remarks in relation to this a growing emphasis on history.<sup>39</sup> In the practices a combination of both kinds of rituals offered possibilities for various groups to participate and attribute their own meaning to the event. An image arises of a liquid church, which overlaps with the fields of memorial, education, history, and culture, by combining elements of religion with art and music.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is important to analyse how place, people, and practice are related to the meaning which is attributed to the event.

The practices reveal the presence of what Nancy Ammerman calls sacred consciousness. Sacred consciousness has proven a useful tool in this research for tracing religious tendencies in village life.<sup>41</sup> It has enabled me to incorporate community practices such as memorial, advent celebrations, and concerts into the research and investigate the meaning of these practices for village life. The practices stand out because of their specific character. They are different from village parties, sports events, or meetings of village associations. Based on the research data, places where sacred consciousness is socially created and sustained are places for community building, ritual, meaning making, and personal development, as well as places where people's worldviews and lifestyles are shaped and embodied: *oefenplaatsen* (training grounds) for good living / the good life. They are places where religious and secular repertoires are intertwined, thereby transcending differences in religious background and addressing issues as social exclusion and social segregation.

### *A Continuum between Religious and Secular Space*

In this study I have shown how religious or spiritual spaces are created on the borders of and outside the traditional ecclesial domain. On the one hand church communities, sometimes personified in the person of the minister, try to reach a wider audience by organising activities (mostly worship services) outside the church building. On the other hand, non-church groups, such as schools, develop their own moments for rituals and reflection. Judith Tonnaer states that many ritual repertoires have shifted to a space outside of the walls of the church buildings.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in both case studies there are examples that confirm Tonnaer's observation, such as the *Ziekentriduüm* in Brabant and the Advent services in the school in Hellum. Thus ritual repertoires are developing outside the ecclesial field of practice, but I would say that some of these repertoires actually take place or are brought back within the walls of church buildings.

By analysing where these moments take place, who participates and what meanings are attributed to the space and the performances of text and ritual, it has become clear

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<sup>39</sup> Schippers, *Sacred Places*, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, p. 298.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Tonnaer, 'Collective Memorial Rituals in a Dutch Landscape', in: Paul Post, Arie Molendijk (eds.), *Holy Ground, Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture*, Leuven, Peeters, 2010, pp. 145-175, there p. 154.

how these practices are moving on a continuum between religious and secular space, with more or less sacred consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

1. *(Special) Worship Services in the Church Building* (e.g. Children's Easter service, memorial services)
2. *Worship services organised outside the church building* (e.g. services in nursing home, Christmas service in the tent, *Ziekentriduüm*)
3. *Worship service organised for and with various groups in a church building* (e.g. Christmas services)
4. *Activity with liturgical elements in a church* (e.g. Remembrance day)
5. *Secular gathering inside the church building* (e.g. concerts, expositions, *Koepelkerk* concerts)
6. *Secular liturgical gathering outside church building* (e.g. school celebrations)

The four Christmas celebrations in Groningen also move along this continuum. They take place on the boundary between religious and secular space, where sacred and profane become intertwined. In Schildwolde the Christmas gathering is a traditional liturgy, which takes place in a tent. This secular space is thought to be more accessible and creates a neutral space, where people of various religious backgrounds can meet. On the contrary, in the religious space of the Helmster church overly explicit Christian language is avoided. The same goes for the public primary school, where the Christmas story is told and religious symbols are used, but God is not mentioned. In Overschild God was mentioned and prayed to, leaving room for local cultural heritage in songs sung in dialect and personal appropriation of the Christmas story in messages on the stars. In the Christmas walk in Noordbroek the Christmas story becomes alive in a rural context, but it is no longer placed in a religious framework.

How can this phenomenon be understood? In an analysis of the religious media event *The Passion* Mirella Klomp and Marten van der Meulen argue that 'public ritual practices with obvious Christian roots can provide a space where people's hermeneutical faculty to relate to the sacred in late modern society can be activated.'<sup>44</sup> This is exactly what is happening in Hellum where the space is offered to read a prayer as poem, or in Noordbroek where the child lies in the village mill and the shepherds actually are met in the mud. The explicit religious framework is missing, but the story becomes visible and tangible: 'people play with a Christian religious narrative that otherwise seems to be mostly irrelevant.'<sup>45</sup> This fits with Droogers theory of play in religion, in which through play people can connect to two realities simultaneously. In every village, the Christmas story plays a central role and is revived in the public space of a tent, church or village street.

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<sup>43</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, pp. 292, 300/301.

<sup>44</sup> Mirella Klomp, Marten van der Meulen, 'The Passion as Ludic Practice. Understanding Public Ritual Performances in Late Modern Society: A Netherlands Case Study', in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (32:3), 2017, pp. 387-401, there p. 388.

<sup>45</sup> Idem, p. 389.

### *Discussion about Secular and Religious Space*

The relation between religious and secular space is constantly the subject of discussion, but in these practices they become intermingled: worship services take place in a tent or a community centre and memorial services or concerts are organised in a church. If groups from various religious and secular backgrounds combine sacred and profane repertoires, rituals and practices for reflection, one may also speak of a hybridisation of liturgical practices.<sup>46</sup> A good example is the *Koepelkerk* concerts. The committee is explicitly searching for sacrality in non-religious music. By placing music which is not ecclesial in the context of meditation or of a church building, it can gain sacred meaning. In this way, the organisation seems to make an effort to make religious practices more accessible.

When people speak about the role of church and religion, the opposition between religious and secular space is often maintained. But when fields of practice become intertwined this sharp distinction becomes hazy. In the Christmas celebrations, the Remembrance Service and also in the encounters between church and culture in Groningen there is a mingling of secular and religious language, practices, and music. This development can also be seen in Brabant: poems are read as prayers, secular music is placed in a religious framework, and sacred space is created in the profane context of a community centre or a tent. Inez Schippers also signals a mixing of religious and secular rituals in contemporary Dutch society<sup>47</sup> and in that sense the Christmas services and Remembrance day can be seen as mirror images. In the Remembrance service in Hellum a couple of noticeably religious traits were adopted. At the same time, it is striking to see that when churches enter the public domain, they often do so with rituals that are not directly linked to traditional liturgy, as we saw during the Christmas service and the Festival of the Spirit in Schildwolde.<sup>48</sup>

In place, time, and performance, liturgical references are sometimes made, or avoided. On the one hand the aim of the activity and the message that people want to carry out determines the choice of place (e.g., the Mary homage in Brabant). On the other hand, a place, such as a public school, can also regulate the contents of the message, the choice of words and practices. Also the church buildings affect the form of practices: in a church building a need is felt to offer some kind of reflection. Practices of ritual and reflection determine the interior and decoration of a place. Often a point is created to which the attention is drawn: a table with a burning candle, flowers, a lectern or a statue. We also see that people often play with the light. In this way a church-like atmosphere is created in a school, tent or community hall, a space which creates emotions, raises feelings and offers the opportunity to share personal experiences, a space where there is a shared language of music and texts. There is also the aspect of participation: by singing and/or making music and giving people an active role in reading texts or performing rituals. By using these kinds of temporal, spatial, practical, and/or linguistic methods people try to create space for conversation in which people of various religious or secular backgrounds can find com-

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<sup>46</sup> Gerardo Marti, Gladys Geniel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> Inez Schippers, *Sacred Places in the Suburbs: Casual Sacrality in the Dutch VINEX-district Leidsche Rijn*, Amsterdam, Groningen, Institute for Ritual and Liturgical Studies, 2015, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Idem, pp. 220-221.

mon ground. In this way, new types of 'neutral religious space' are developed. This same tendency can be noticed in the emerging church movement which strives 'to create a new type of "neutral religious space" that is church-ish without being churchy to avoid potential religious polarisation.'<sup>49</sup>

### *Community Building in Religious Practices*

To summarize: in the case studies efforts are being made to bridge the distinction between church and non-church. This is increasingly important since people are loosening ecclesial ties because of secularisation. The marginalisation of church in society leads to what could be called a form of religious illiteracy. Knowledge of the Bible, religious traditions, and rituals are disappearing. This becomes visible in the incomprehension of teenagers in Brabant with regard to the Latin liturgy. Another sign is the tendency to hold funerals in the auditorium of a funeral parlour, instead of in the church. The interview with the teachers of the school cooperative also points to an attitude of keeping church and religion at a distance, which seems to be caused by unfamiliarity with the church.

There is a strong feeling that in the past churches have created boundaries between people. A mistrust of the church in the village community leads to a tendency to create a neutral public space where people do not feel excluded. In both the school and the nursing home a struggle seems to be going on about the place of religion in a public space. The school is not explicit in its identity as a Protestant-Catholic school, while the nursing home presents itself as a neutral home. There seems to be a fear that people might be excluded. This can result in an effort to 'safeguard the public domain against religion. Not so much freedom of, but freedom from religion.'<sup>50</sup> But what should the role of church and religion be in this 'neutral' space?

There are various ways to deal with religious diversity. There are practices that seek to allow room for various traditions to stand next to each other in their similarities and differences. The minister in Someren wants to show what the Protestant tradition entails through her participation in the nursing home services. But more importantly she hopes to overcome the uneasiness and unfamiliarity towards the church and wants to make clear that religion is not about conversion and winning souls. Thus, her involvement is about addressing social cohesion/ecumenism and religious illiteracy.

Other practices try to transcend the differences between various traditions and world-views. A neutral public space which is not 'owned' by one denomination and the wish to transcend religious differences seem to be two sides of the same coin. However, it requires an extra step from bringing various religious and secular traditions together to protecting the public space from religious expressions. The *Koepelkerk* committee explicitly wants to express religiosity in the concerts and religious meaning is ascribed to secular songs. The *Ziekentriduüm* still offers space for contemplation and reflection and stresses its ecumenical character, but also wants to create a neutral space by using a non-ecclesial place

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<sup>49</sup> Marti, *The Deconstructed Church*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Hans Schilderman, 'Religie en zorg in het publieke domein' in: Van de Donk, *Geloven in het publieke domein*, pp. 395-416, there p. 397.

and incorporating secular songs and poems into the liturgy. It seems that these songs are meant to serve the part of the public who see themselves as non-religious, but that religious meaning can also be ascribed to them. These practices reveal efforts to create a space in which people from different churches, but also people with no religious affiliation can relate to each other and maybe to God.

The practices I investigated all bear religious characteristics, through the space of a church building, the ritual repertoire which is used or because of the underlying motivations and the meanings which are attributed to them, but they are all *loosely connected* practices, with little temporal or spatial continuity. The practices in the ad-hoc groups are important for the development of bridging social capital. Whether this can also lead to an increase in binding social capital remains to be seen. They are ad-hoc groups, who have not a strong intention of forming a community. According to Hervieu-Léger this is what distinguishes religiosity from religion. 'Religion requires reference to tradition to be capable of generating social links. A community of believers needs the dual form of a tangible social group and an imaginary lineage.'<sup>51</sup> Still, the bridging social capital pays off, because the informal contacts between the various groups stimulate other initiatives. I have shown how a year after the Christmas service in Overschild, people in Hellum also tried to organise a Christmas celebration with the village.

Connectedness through place and events primarily plays a role in the interface of church with other fields – where 'outsiders' become involved with the church. As a result, connectedness through events and place are closely related to discussions about accessibility and inclusivity – the vivid reactions in Brabant to the prohibition of ecumenical services point to a belief that the church should be open to everyone. The assumption seems to be that an overly emphasised religious or ecclesial identity frightens people off. In relation to liveability, two sides of the same coin come into view: on the one hand the segregating effects and on the other hand the cohesive power of religion. It is interesting to note that the question of social cohesion and community is addressed in this way, although underlying assumptions often remain implicit, assumptions which are partly rooted in religious illiteracy or unfamiliarity and ecclesial or diaconal uneasiness. There is the assumption that an outspoken religious message will scare people off and the assumption that religion should not be too visibly present in public places, because people might feel excluded. But when possibilities are found to leave these assumptions behind, to step out of the comfort zone and organise activities with and for various groups of people, churches can contribute to building bridging social capital and an experience of inclusivity.

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<sup>51</sup> Hervieu Léger, *Religion as a Chain*, p. 166.

## 10.5 | Village Ecclesiology

Finally, what can we learn about a 'village ecclesiology'? According to Danièle Hervieu Léger secularisation has led 'to a fragmentation of religion across an array of specialized spheres and institutions.'<sup>52</sup> She states that the de-institutionalisation of religion faces traditional religious institutions with the challenge 'to give serious attention to the flexible nature of believing as it affects them.'<sup>53</sup> The flexible nature of believing means, first that in a rural context people relate to a village church in various ways. Second, it leads to the emergence of chains of connected ritual, meaning-making practices. I think it is worthwhile for village churches to take the religious practices, needs and questions in rural life seriously, even though the shift to a 'liquid' village church leads to ecclesiological questions.

First, there are what Judith Tonnaer calls *emerging rituals*, especially in the field of life rituals: 'In new ways people are seeking to connect the sacred and profane dimensions of their existence.'<sup>54</sup> The commemoration services on New Year's Eve fit in with the revival of All Souls Day and the need people feel to mark life events. Whereas earlier people went to church for baptisms, weddings and funerals, and in Catholic contexts marriage jubilees were also celebrated in church, now they have to create new ritual repertoires. The sacred is searched for in the context of commemoration, meeting others and meaning making, which explains the traces of rituality and reflection during the Remembrance service. The practices of commemoration and remembrance are both moments for collective memorial and reflection that take place in the public domain of village life.

Second, there is also an effort to transcend religious differences which have determined social life for a considerable amount of time. The tendency to create neutral public spaces can result from a reaction to this, which could make neutral public space a vehicle for social cohesion. Both people inside and outside the church have some idea of how a church should be. Notions about inclusivity and generosity were especially expressed on occasions where people might be excluded. Some of the practices we have explored can therefore be understood as efforts to transcend the sacred/secular divide.<sup>55</sup> Within the *Koepelkerk* concert committee the value of secular music is stressed. They want to open the possibility to give secular music sacred meaning through the spatial and 'liturgical' context within which it is placed. In this way traces of God can be recognized in other fields of practice, in the profane.

Third, the observation that references to God are not always made explicit reveals an ambiguity on a fundamental level. References are made to the Christian tradition, Christmas narrative, Christian notions such as inclusivity and support or in the performance of ecclesial music. Because people want to avoid exclusion, explicit commitment to the Christian tradition is avoided. This becomes most clear in the way prayer is approached in Christmas services and also the *Ziekentriduüm*. There seems to be some reluctance to address God directly, because not everyone may be able to join the prayer. This is the reason that sometimes poems or reflective texts are used instead of a prayer. This uneasiness towards

<sup>52</sup> Idem, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Idem, p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Tonnaer, 'Collective Memorial', p. 154.

<sup>55</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *Churchmorph: How Megatrends are Reshaping Christian Communities*, Grands Rapids, Baker Academic, p. 50.



explicit commitment to the Christian tradition makes the question of whether the practices can be seen as church even more urgent. How should we understand the memorial gathering in Hellum, where Christian songs are performed or the Christmas walk in Noordbroek? What meaning does the Christian heritage have in these contexts other than as part of the cultural tradition?

Here it becomes clear how liquid church and solid church begin to question each other regarding the extent to which authority lies in the tradition or in personal experience. According to Hervieu Léger, 'a peculiar feature of religious modernity is a fundamental re-working in the relationship with tradition,'<sup>56</sup> which raises the following question:

How can religious institutions, with their prime purpose of preserving and transmitting a tradition, reform their own system of authority – essential for the continuity of a line of belief – when the tradition is thought of, even by believers, not as a sacred trust, but as an ethno-cultural heritage, a fund of memory, and a reservoir of signs at the disposal of individuals?<sup>57</sup>

Hervieu Léger points to attempts to (re)assemble a chain of belief such as the revival of pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostella. Efforts are made to create a 'collective consciousness of emotional belonging,' space to express 'diversity in culture and feeling,' while avoiding references to 'institutionalized religious discourse.'<sup>58</sup> These efforts can also be recognized in the fieldwork.

### *A Rural Theology of Inclusive Community*

In Jeff Astley's view, rural theology takes shape in how rural people talk about God, church and religion.<sup>59</sup> Important underlying questions in nearly all practices discussed so far are questions about bridging social differences and social inclusion. This becomes visible in the use of inclusive language, in the hesitation to speak about God and in the efforts to be accessible. This might be a reaction to the remnants of the pillarisation of Dutch society. For decades village communities were divided along ecclesial lines, making the church a source of social segregation.<sup>60</sup> This happened in 1944 with the major schism in the *Gereformeerde* Church, which led to the *Vrijgemaakte* Church. Focus group participants remember vividly the heated arguments in their families and the rejection of each other's beliefs. People from the *Hervormde*, *Gereformeerde*, and *Vrijgemaakte* church went to different schools, clubs and shops. And even when people from different churches could happily talk during the week, they would not greet each other on Sunday morning.

As became clear in Brabant in relation to the heated ecumenical discussion, the distinctions between church communities stand at odds with the ordinary ecclesiology of many people, who see their ideal church as an inclusive community. Because of these experiences of exclusion people may want to avoid the appearance of lecturing someone else,

<sup>56</sup> Hervieu Léger, *Religion as a Chain*, p. 170.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, p. 168.

<sup>58</sup> Idem, pp. 174-175.

<sup>59</sup> Jeff Astley, 'Rural Ordinary Theology', pp. 42-51.

<sup>60</sup> Verrips, *En boven de polder*; Korrie Melis, *Naar een leefbare regio: Regionale leefbaarheid en identiteiten in Noord Groningen tijdens de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw*, Groningen, Stichting Groninger Historische Publicaties, 2013, pp. 88-92.

hence the hesitation to speak about God, especially during a Christmas celebration for people with different religious backgrounds who are searching for some common ground. People hope that by cooperating and involving people in the Christmas celebrations prejudices may be overcome, and in that respect the services seemed successful. The Christmas celebrations in Groningen are playing a vital role in bridging the differences in religious background between villagers, as are the *Koepelkerk* concerts and the *Ziekentriduum* services in Brabant. Denominational differences are addressed, which strengthens the social cohesion.

What is interesting is that the strengthening of the social cohesion is not only a by-product, but is also explicated as an aim of the events. This is also visible in the various efforts both case study congregations make to show that they want to be open, accessible and hospitable communities. The events offer the possibility to open the church doors and receive people of various backgrounds. Nevertheless, it takes time to change the perception people have of the church, as illustrated by the discussions about how the public religious practices should take shape and whether the church building is neutral enough to be accessible for everyone during a Remembrance service.

### *Sacred Consciousness*

The question arises as to where on the continuum is the turning point beyond which it is no longer possible to speak of church. The concept of 'sacred consciousness' enables us to see the presence of religion in places and situations that are also secular.<sup>61</sup> At the very least, all these practices point to the presence and a felt need for sacred consciousness. Ward sees a spiritual desire and search for meaning in many areas of life. According to Ward the liquid church is aware of this desire and search to encounter God.<sup>62</sup> Although in village society practices can be found outside the ecclesial domain, the question is to what extent the church communities are aware of these practices. Do they recognize in these practices traces of God, albeit regularly in disguise? Maybe the story of Paul in Athens who sees an altar for the unknown God is a powerful image to understand religious village life.

Places where this sacred consciousness or spiritual desire can be sustained on a regular basis are rather rare in village society. Hermelink points to the importance and value of liturgy, because of the communal experience of prayer, singing, and reflection in words or silence. In liturgical gatherings community bonds are symbolically intensified and confirmed.<sup>63</sup> Hermelink, like Klomp and Van der Meulen, refers to the liturgical space as play: in the ritual there is a playful and festive distance to daily life, which is represented and put into perspective. This space makes reflection and empowerment possible in a community setting. Although not all the practices that we have observed explicitly take place in His Name, they still have religious meaning. The practices have a different character from a gathering in the village hall. In nearly all cases there are references to the Christian heritage in music, stories or place, although a commitment to the Christian tradition is left to the individual participant. The gatherings are aimed at strengthening community bonds,

<sup>61</sup> Ammerman, *Sacred Stories*, p. 298.

<sup>62</sup> Ward, *Liquid Church*, pp. 72-75.

<sup>63</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, pp. 363-364.

by referring to overarching stories and values. In some cases, there is also an empowering effect, such as the *Koepelkerk* concerts. This means that this study uncovered alternative church places, which reveal a need for communal ritual, moments of reflection, sacred places, memorial, and singing to form community bonds.

De Haardt reveals how people in their daily life 'construct their own sacred spaces and are themselves constructed by these spaces' where they find hope, support, survival and community.<sup>64</sup> De Haardt points out in this statement how people shape space, but are also themselves shaped by the places where they live, meet, worship, and care. Also, Panelli remarks that various 'dimensions mutually shape each other and are played out in uneven spatial patterns and relations.'<sup>65</sup> The fieldwork has revealed how this works in practice – how the spatial dimension shapes the sociocultural dimension (the way people behave in churches, or the church building bringing people together). 'Sacred consciousness', which I understand as the process of meaning making, the value placed on social cohesion, seems to me to be the missing link in how spatial and sociocultural dimension are related.

Various practices of celebration and memorial take place on the interface of various fields of practice. It is precisely in these places where ecclesial and secular practices become intertwined that segregation can be overcome. By using temporal, spatial, practical, and/or linguistic methods, people try to create space for conversation in which people of various religious or secular backgrounds can find common ground. In these spaces, the opportunity is offered to share personal experiences, create a community feeling, and to become empowered. Here lies the meaning of churches for the quality of life. As Riet Bons-Storm says, 'in the activity of blessing God's vitality is conveyed [...] God Eternal is the source of creative power. [...] The person who is blessed is seen as someone who through the power of God can be restored to creative life, if (s)he admits it.'<sup>66</sup>

### *In My Name*

The question remains: what is characteristic and unique for church? What makes the church different from other groups? Answering this question also sheds light on what the church can add to our understanding of quality of life. Ward, Gibbs and Hegstad all refer to the presence of God and commitment to the life of Jesus Christ as the distinguishing feature of church practices. Matthew 18:20, which is crucial for Hermelink and Hegstad, plays a fundamental role in village church life.<sup>67</sup> 'The church differs from other societies, in so much as the collective person is Christ, and the objective spirit is the Holy Spirit.'<sup>68</sup> Both Ward and Gibbs acknowledge that within the traditional church very un-churchlike practices can be found and that outside the church, in unexpected places, new forms of church can emerge.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Maaike de Haardt, 'Making Sense of Sacred Space in the City?', in: Molendijk, *Exploring the Postsecular*, pp. 163-182, there pp. 169, 179.

<sup>65</sup> Panelli, 'Young Rural Lives', p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> Riet Bons-Storm, *Gezegend leven: Op weg naar een pastorale gemeente in een verbrokkelde wereld*, Gorinchem, Narratio, 2007, p. 115.

<sup>67</sup> Hermelink, *Praktische Theologie*, pp. 363-364.

<sup>68</sup> Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, Eugene, Pickwick Publication, 2013, p. 60.

<sup>69</sup> Gibbs, *Churchmorph*; Ward, *Liquid Church*.

This ambiguity is traceable in the practices in the case studies, both on a practical level and on a fundamental level. On the practical level the question in relation to maintenance work can be asked: is this a task of the church and how is it related to Christ? Some respondents acknowledge that maintenance work is not part of the real church; it is more a historical than a theological product. Furthermore, is the fact that a practice takes place in a church building enough to place it in the ecclesial field of practice, especially when the church is otherwise not involved in the programme, like during the memorial service on Remembrance day? On a fundamental level Hermelink's statement that belonging to Christ brings people together raises the question of what brings people together in gatherings where reference to God has become implicit or is avoided. What brings people to the Remembrance service, the Christmas gatherings, the worship service of the *Vereniging Vrijzinnig Protestanten*, Advent service, *Koepelkerk* concerts and *Ziekentriduüm*, etc.?

The conclusion must be that often the relation with Christ is absent, or is only felt by a part of the attendants. On the fourth of May and on New Year's Eve the need for memorial brings people together. In the Christmas gatherings, the community feeling, the involvement in the village and remnants of the Christian tradition form important motivations. It is telling that after the Christmas service in Hellum a church member wondered: is this still a worship service? In the *Koepelkerk* concert people are drawn by the quality of the musical programme, but also a need for reflection, maybe even also empowerment. During the *Ziekentriduüm* the services are part of the programme of socialising and relaxation. Some are interested in the minister's story; they look forward to the singing and the blessing of the Mary Homage. The services provide people a feeling of empowerment, which becomes especially tangible during the laying on of hands during the blessing.

Although the relation with God is not always made explicit, sometimes even avoided, in my view God's acting is not limited to the church, neither as an institution, nor as a faith community. Traces of God can become visible in various places and practices, where community is experienced, where thoughts and convictions are challenged and glimpses of the good life are seen, which some would label as signs of the Kingdom of God, and where people become empowered by the support they are given and attention they receive.

### *Empowerment*

Church can be a place for reflection and inspiration, which can empower people. Empowerment has to do with being and feeling blessed. Where in society can people find blessing? It is an aspect of people's lives which could be called sacred consciousness. For the well-being of both the community and the individual it is of fundamental importance that there are places where sacred consciousness can be socially created and sustained. It is the glue which binds people together, it can offer values, stories and norms that transcend differences between people, it is the fuel which inspires people to live their lives. This place can be the church, but this research has shown that there are also other places where sacred consciousness can be found.

## Reconsidering the Meaning of Village Churches

Since church has various aspects, practices, and meanings, its contribution to the quality of life is also manifold. Various contributions are also made by other parties. Maintaining the environment and providing meeting places for concerts, performances, and gatherings are also done by other organisations. Bringing people together and providing support is also organised in other contexts. What makes these functions of the church special is the motivation for providing these services. Apart from practical and also financial considerations, notions of hospitality, and love for one's neighbour play a crucial role. Caring for each other is the central aim of the church; it is not instrumental or additional. Support is an act of faith. What makes the church rather unique is its liturgical function. The various practices are connected in their rootedness in the spirit of life, the love for life. In Moltmann's view the central criterion in recognizing the spirit of life is what leads to life, what is life-giving? Therefore, people need to be empowered in their search for improvement and transformation.<sup>79</sup> By providing love, hope, peace, and justice the church can contribute to people's personal well-being. I would suggest that for community building, not only is a meeting place and sociability necessary, but also communal ritual practices, which add the dimension of sacred consciousness and make it possible to transcend daily life. These practices create and deepen relations between people and offer moments of reflection on people's way of life.

### *Traces of Transcendent*

What special contribution can a church make to the quality of life? Reflection, rituals, and support can be found outside the church and are to a certain extent secularised. But this also means that practices or reflection, ritual, and support often occur in isolation and then something can be lost. Support, which is not rooted in a view of life, in an idea of how life should be, has the risk of becoming artificial, shallow, and instrumental. The development of a worldview, which is not grounded in a community life, where ideas can be practiced, can become theoretical. Rituals of celebration and memorial offer a framework within which life events can be marked and confirmed. These rituals have a performative effect, of encouragement, inspiration, and empowerment. Without such practices life can become rather bleak. The one thing which does not seem to be found outside the church is blessing. People can also feel empowered and inspired in various ways outside the church, but the embodiment and words are often lacking. In a church, worship, support, and worldview are interrelated through faith. Practices of rituality, reflection, and social concern all circle around the mystery in life: transcendence incarnated in love, for humans, nature, and creation.

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<sup>79</sup>Ward, *Liquid Church*, p. 79.



# Appendix A. Chronological Overview of Rural Theology from the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This bibliography is partly based on the overview of literature about village churches by Peet Valstar.

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- Valstar, Peet (ed.), *Blijven geloven in de kern: Verslagbundel en werkmap naar aanleiding van een beraad van kerken in kleine plattelandsgemeenten op 29 en 30 september 2000*.
- De ecclesiologie van kleine gemeenten*, Convent van Lutherse predikanten, Ede, October 2001.
- Valstar, Peet, *Schaalvergroting in de PKN: Verslag van het kennisnetwerk gemeenteontwikkeling bijeen op 11 oktober 2004*.
- Valstar, Peet, *Kansen voor de kleine dorpskerk*, Utrecht, Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, June 2004.
- (Be)staan op eigen grond: Landbouw en pastoraat: Handreiking voor het pastoraat*, Utrecht, 2006.
- Mesman, Max, Janet van Dijk (eds.), *Klein en vitaal: Aanstekelijke verhalen van kleine gemeenten*, Utrecht, Dienstenorganisatie van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, 2011.

## Appendix B. Fieldwork

### I. Interviews

#### A. Explorative interviews

With ministers, congregation advisors

- What are the most important issues for congregations nowadays?
- How would you characterise the village?
  - o What does village life look like?
  - o What activities are organised?
  - o Which organisations and informal groups play a role in the village?
- How would you characterise the congregation?
  - o Where do churchgoers come from?
  - o How is the congregation organised?
  - o What kind of activities does the congregation organise in the village?
- How do the church and the village relate to each other?
  - o How and by whom is the church building used?
  - o Does the congregation cooperate with other churches and village organisations?
  - o Is the church involved in village activities?
- What are the differences between Groningen and Brabant?
  - o The position of Protestant churches – has church life changed in the past 20 years?
  - o Liveability questions (demographical changes, ageing, agriculture, level of services) – has village life changed in the past 20 years?
- Cooperation experiences
  - o How is the relationship with other Protestant Congregations?
  - o Does the congregation maintain ecumenical contacts?
  - o What are your experiences with the formation and organisation of a regional congregation?
  - o What are the consequences if a minister has to divide his/her time between several villages?
  - o What are the advantages and disadvantages of cooperation?
  - o How can a regional congregation be church in several villages?

Congregation advisor

- What is the motivation to maintain the local church?
- Is there attention for the question of how to be church in the village?
- Do you see new forms of church?
- Are the church buildings a problem or an opportunity?
- Is regional cooperation a solution?
- Are there specific issues with which churches in Brabant are involved?
- How do faith communities contribute to the liveability of the countryside?

## B. Fieldwork interviews

### 'Inside' interviews

#### Semi-structured interview schedule

1. What does church life consist of?  
How has church life developed over the last decades?
2. How is the church building used?
3. Does the congregation have regional contacts with other Protestant churches?
4. Does the congregation have ecumenical contacts with other denominations?
5. How is the church related to village society?
6. Is the church community involved in liveability questions?
7. What do faith and church mean in your daily life?

### 'Outside' interviews

#### Semi-structured interview schedule

1. Background of respondent and/or organisation
2. Do you have contact or do you cooperate with the Protestant congregation and/or with other churches?
3. What do you see or hear from the (Protestant) church?
4. What role does church (in a general sense) play in the village?
5. What does church mean for the personal quality of life?
6. Are there liveability questions in the village?

## II. Participant Observations

### Follow-up group interviews

#### Remembrance day committee, Hellum

1. Since when has the Remembrance service been organised?  
What was the reason for erecting the monument?  
How do you prepare the programme for Remembrance day?  
How is the school involved in the preparation for Remembrance day?  
Who lays flowers at the monument?
2. What does it mean that Remembrance day is in the church?  
Is the church community involved in the organisation of Remembrance day?  
Would it be possible for the minister to hold a speech on Remembrance day?  
Are there parallels between the Remembrance service and a church service?
3. How do the church and the village relate to each other?
4. Has village life changed in recent years?  
What kind of activities and projects are organised?  
How do you try to involve the village in Remembrance day?

#### Christmas Eve service, Overschild

1. What has stayed with you from the Christmas Eve service last year?
  - a. How did you get involved in the preparation of the Christmas Eve service?
2. Reactions from the village.
3. For half a year now the church has also been used for other activities. What do you think about that?
4. How are you involved in the church in Overschild and, if applicable, in other churches?
5. What (further) do you see of the church in Overschild?

### III. Diary project, Brabant

#### *Invitation and questions for respondents' diary project, summer 2013*

In recent years the Protestant Congregation Asten-Somerem made use of two church buildings: the church in Someren with the new community centre and the church in the centre of Asten. It was not possible financially to maintain two church buildings and last year a 'For Sale' sign appeared in front of the church in Asten. A few weeks ago the church was sold. The new owner is called 'In the Gloria' and will rent the church for marriages, funerals, expositions, lectures, and concerts. In a couple of months there will no longer be church services held in Asten. As a researcher I would like to know how you experience this period of saying good-bye.

Would you be willing keep a 'diary' in which you describe what happens around the church building, how you experience the sale and what you hear from others?

To help you get started you could try to answer some of the following questions. But you are also invited to write down anything you experience, see or hear in relation to the church building.

1. When and how did you hear about the sale of the church building and what was your first reaction? How did other church goers react?  
What do people in the village who are not church members say about the sale?
2. What do you expect to miss from the church in Asten and what not?  
Could you take a photograph of what you will miss most after the church is closed? This can be an object, a part of the building or an event. Could you describe what it means to you?
3. What memories do you have of the church in Asten? Did you experience special events in the church?
4. What do you expect of the farewell to the church? How would you like to say goodbye?  
If you could prepare the farewell service, what would you like to see, hear or do?
5. If you could choose, what would you like to take with you from the church?
6. Do you expect to visit the church more often or less after the building is closed?
7. What do you think about the new use of the church building (a business which will make the building available for marriages, funerals, expositions, lectures, and concerts)?
8. What do you think that the sale of the church building will mean for Asten?

You can send your diary fragments to:

#### IV. Format Focus groups

Focus groups church members, Brabant

1. How are you as a church member involved in the church?
2. At what moments in your life has the church played an important role?
3. What do you miss in the church?

Focus group church members, Schildwolde

1. How are you involved in the church?
2. Does faith play a role in your daily life? If so, how?
3. Is there a difference between being involved in a church or in another club?

Focus group church members, Noordbroek

1. How are you involved in the church of Noordbroek?
2. Does the church (community) play a role in your daily life? If so, how?
3. Does faith play a role in your daily life? If so, how?
4. Do you see something of the church in the village?

Focus group guides, Noordbroek

1. What kind of village is Noordbroek?
2. How are you involved in the church of Noordbroek?
3. Do you see something of the church in the village?
4. Does faith play a role in your daily life?

## V. Surveys

### Survey: Church in the Village Asten-Someren

Name (if desired) .....m/f  
 Year of birth.....  
 Place of birth.....  
 Place of residence.....  
 Former places of residence.....  
 Education.....  
 Civil status.....  
 Children (years of birth).....  
 Primary occupation.....  
 Where do you work? .....

**1a. How many hours per week, on average, do you work as a volunteer, i.e.: unpaid work for or organised by an institution or association?**

I do not work as a volunteer (continue with question 1c)

I work as a volunteer ..... hours per week, on average.

**1b. What kind of voluntary work do you do?**

Please answer in as much detail as possible.

**1c. How many hours per week, on average, do you offer free help to sick or disabled family members, acquaintances or neighbours?**

I do not offer free help to sick or disabled people.

I offer free help to sick or disabled people ..... hours per week, on average.

**2a. Are you a member of associations?**

Yes  No

**2b. If so, of which associations are you a member?**

**3. Do you feel at home in your place of residence?**

Yes  a bit  not really

**4a. How often do you attend church services at the Protestant church Asten Someren?**

Every week  A couple of times per year  
 Every fortnight  Every month  Never

**4b. How often do you go to the church for activities other than church services? (Such as Formation programme activities, meetings or concerts)**

Several times per week  
 A couple of times per year  
 Every month  
 Every week  
 Every fortnight  
 Never

**4c. Which other church activities do you go to?**

**5a. How often do you visit another church?**

Every week  A couple of times per year  
 Every fortnight  Every month  Never

**5b. Which churches do you visit?**

**5c. What appeals to you about these churches?**

**6a. How often do you use religious media?**

(Such as Hour of Power, Nederland Zingt or Het Vermoeden on television, but also internet church, www.mijnkerk.nl, and other religious websites or blogs)

Several times per week  
 A couple of times per year  
 Every month  
 Every week  
 Every fortnight  
 Never

**6b. What religious media do you use?**

**6c. What appeals to you about these religious media?**

**7. In which of the following activities.<sup>2</sup> are you interested in being involved? (multiple answers possible)**

Ecumenical church service  
 Children's church service project  
 Cleaning in the church  
 Task in church council (e.g. supporting the diaconal work)

<sup>2</sup> Activities were mentioned during the focus groups.

## Appendix B

- Alternative church service
- Church service with speaker (Dutch celebrity or personal story of churchgoer or villager)
- (Project) choir
- Discussion group for teenagers at secondary school
- Activity with primary school
- Discussion evening about.....
- Catechism for children
- Visiting a church member
- Odd jobs in the church or community centre
- Serving coffee
- Liturgical moment during the week
- Interchurch diaconal project (e.g. hospice)
- Contact person
- Webmaster
- Visiting a local social project or a welfare organisation.
- Practical support for a church member (e.g. cooking, transport or administration)
- Slow down work shop
- Project, as protestant congregation, to let your voice be heard in the villages
- Quest for more experience during Lord's Supper.
- Youth church service
- (Occasional) opening of the church for visitors.
- Moment of contemplation during the week
- Discussion group after church service
- Other .....

### 8. In what ways are you in contact with the congregation? (several answers possible)

- I attend church services
- I have regular contact, outside of church, with other churchgoers
- I read *De Brug* (the church newsletter)
- I visit the website ...times per month
- I am familiar with the formation programme
- My contact person comes round
- Other:.....

### 9a. Does faith play a role in your daily life?

- Yes     A bit     Not really

### 9b. If so, can you describe how faith plays a role in your daily life?

### 10. What, for you personally, is the most important task of a church community?

### 11a. To what extent do you agree with the statements.<sup>3</sup> below?

1 = agree completely 2 = agree 3 = neutral  
4 = disagree 5 = disagree completely

#### The Protestant church of Asten Someren

- is a congregation where I feel at home. Why yes or no?

- forms a community of people who look after one another. Where does that seem to be/not to be the case?

- is a community which offers space to all generations.

- inspires me in my faith.

- is mainly church on Sunday. Why yes or no?

- offers ample opportunity to celebrate and share faith with each other. In what way yes or no?

- stands up for ecumenical cooperation. Why yes or no?

- is meaningful in the society of Asten, Someren and surrounding villages. Can you mention examples?

### 11b. To what extent do you agree with the statements below?

- It is good that our church strives for cooperation with protestant churches in the region. Why yes or no?

- the regional formation programme has added value.

- It is interesting to read to messages from Weert (another congregation) in the Brug (the church newsletter).

### 12. Please give your suggestions, tips or any further perspectives here.

If you want to keep up to date with the research, please fill in your E-mail address here.

E-mail:

Thank you for your help!

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the propositions stem from the focus groups.



**Survey: Church in the Village Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild-Noordbroek**

Year of birth.....m/f  
Place of birth.....  
Place of residence.....since.....  
Education.....

Questions 1-5 see Survey Asten-Someren

**6a. Does faith/meaning making play a role in your daily life**

Yes  A bit  Not really

**6b. If so, can you describe in what ways faith or meaning making plays a role in your daily life?**

**7. In what ways are you in contact with the congregation?** (multiple answers possible)

- I attend church services
- I have regular contact, outside of church, with other churchgoers
- I read *De Bron/Rondom d'Olle Dodde* (church newsletters)
- I visit the website ....times per month
- I am familiar with the activities of the congregation
  - discussion groups
  - meals
  - visitation work
  - dawn walks
  - Christmas Eve service
  - New Year's Eve service
  - children's Easter Vigil
  - open air service / harvest service
  - Other:.....

**8a. What, for you personally, is the most important task of a church community?**

**8b. What do you expect of the church council?**

**9a. What (more) can the church mean for the village?**

**9b. With what other organisations could the congregation seek contact or work together?**

**10a. Are you a member of the *Hervormde* church Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild?**

Yes (continue with question 11)  No

**10b. If not, are you a member of another church?**

Yes, namely.....  No

**If you are not a member of the *Hervormde* church Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild you can skip question 11.**

**11a. To what extent do you agree with the statements below?**

- The congregation forms a community of people who look after one another and others. Where does that seem to be/not to be the case?
- The congregation is an open and approachable faith community. In what way yes or no?
- It is good that the congregation organises church services in every village. Why yes or no?
- The congregation is meaningful in the society of Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild and Noordbroek. Can you mention examples?
- It is important that the *Hervormde* church in Schildwolde/Hellum/Overschild/Noordbroek continues to exist. Why yes or no?
- The congregation is open to cooperation with other denominations. In what way yes or no?
- The congregation should strive to work together with neighbouring protestant churches.

**12. Please give your suggestions, tips or any further perspectives here.**

**If you want to keep up to date with the research, please fill in your E-mail address or other contact details here.**

**E-mail:**

**Thank you for your help!**

**Survey: Church in the Village Reformed Church Liberated in Schildwolde**

Below only the questions which deviate from those in the survey of Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild-Noordbroek are mentioned.

**2c. To what extent is your involvement in society inspired by your faith?**

**4a. How often do you attend a church service at the Reformed Church Liberated in Schildwolde?**

- Every week       A couple of times per year
- Every fortnight    Every month       Never

**4b. How often do you go to the church for activities other than church services? (Such as Formation programme, meetings or concerts?)**

- Several times per week
- A couple of times per year
- Every month
- Every week
- Every fortnight
- Never

**4c. What activities other than church services do you go to the church for? (Such as concerts, choirs, club, meetings, receptions).**

**7. In what ways are you in contact with the Reformed Church Liberated Schildwolde?** (multiple answers possible)

- I attend church services
- I have regular contact, outside of church, with other churchgoers
- I read the church newsletter
- I visit the website ....times per month
- I listen to the church services via internet or church radio
- I am familiar with the activities of the congregation
  - Bible study/association
  - Courses
  - Senior afternoons
  - Work groups
  - Christmas services
  - Visitation work
  - Singing and music evenings
  - District or circle meetings
  - Other .....

**10.** The statements below are related to the Reformed Church Liberated in Schildwolde.

**To what extent do you agree with the statements below?**

- The congregation forms a community of people who look after one another and others. Where does that seem to be/not to be the case?
- The congregation is an open and approachable faith community. In what way yes or no?
- The congregation is meaningful in the society of Schildwolde. Can you mention examples?
- The congregation is open to working with other denominations. Why yes or no?

The questions and statements below are about what you see of the *Hervormde* church Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild.

**11a. How would you describe the *Hervormde* church?**

**11b. What do you see or hear from the *Hervormde* church?**

**11c. Do you visit activities of the *Hervormde* church?**

- Church services       Evensong
- Christmas               New Years'
- Eve service               Eve service
- Discussion groups       Harvest service
- Cemetery maintenance    Meals
- Other

**To what extent do you agree with the statements below?**

- d. The *Hervormde* church is meaningful in the societies of Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild and Noordbroek. Can you mention examples?
- e. It is important that the *Hervormde* church in Schildwolde/Hellum/Overschild/Noordbroek continues to exist. Why yes or no?
- f. The congregation is open to cooperation with other denominations. In what way yes or no?

**12. Please give your suggestions, tips or any further perspectives here.**

**Thank you for your help**

## Appendix C. Survey Results

### Brabant

The survey was returned by 141 people. 78 respondents live in Someren, 32 in Asten, 8 in another village and 23 did not fill in the questionnaire.

### Groningen

In total 187 surveys were returned, of which 71 came from the Reformed Church Liberated. From the remaining 116, 56 respondents were not a member of the Reformed church SOHN and 5 were registered in another church.

69 respondents live in Schildwolde and Overschild, 51 in Hellum and Siddeburen, 44, mainly Reformed Liberated respondents live in Slochteren and 23 in Noordbroek, 7 respondents live elsewhere.

Important to keep in mind that in Groningen 38 % of the respondents is from the Reformed Church Liberated and 30% has no church affiliation.

### A. How many hours per week, on average, do you work as a volunteer, i.e.: unpaid work for or organised by an institution or association?

In Groningen does 2/3 of the respondents volunteer work, in Brabant just above half of the respondents. The average hours per week lies in Groningen on 6,8 and in Brabant on 5,8.

1. Volunteerwork Brabant

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	75	53,2	58,1	58,1
	No	54	38,3	41,9	100,0
	Total	129	91,5	100,0	
Missing	\$systemis	12	8,5		
Total		141	100,0		

2. Volunteerwork Groningen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	124	66,3	72,5	72,5
	No	47	25,1	27,5	100,0
	Total	171	91,4	100,0	
Missing	System	16	8,6		
Total		187	100,0		

3. Hours per week Brabant

N	Valid	62
	Missing	79
Mean		5,863
Minimum		,5
Maximum		26,0

4. Hours per week Groningen

N	Valid	105
	Missing	82
Mean		6,875
Minimum		,1
Maximum		168,0

## Appendix C

### B. How many hours per week, on average, do you offer free help to sick or disabled family members, acquaintances or neighbours?

In Brabant offers 30,5% of the respondents free help, versus 36,4 % in Groningen. But in Brabant the respondents provide slightly more hours free help (4,1) than in Groningen (3,2)

#### 1. Free help to sick or disabled family members, acquaintances or neighbours in Brabant

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	43	30,5	38,4	38,4
	No	69	48,9	61,6	100,0
	Total	112	79,4	100,0	
Missing	\$systemis	29	20,6		
Total		141	100,0		

#### 2. Free help to sick or disabled family members, acquaintances or neighbours in Groningen

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	68	36,4	48,6	48,6
	No	72	38,5	51,4	100,0
	Total	140	74,9	100,0	
Missing	System	47	25,1		
Total		187	100,0		

#### 3. Hours per week Brabant

N	Valid	38
	Missing	100
Mean		4,105
Minimum		,5
Maximum		50,0

#### 4. Hours per week Groningen

N	Valid	60
	Missing	127
Mean		3,242
Minimum		,5
Maximum		15,0

## Survey results

### C. Church attendance

#### 1. Visiting church services Brabant

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Weekly	21	14,9	15,3	15,3
Twice per week	24	17,0	17,5	32,8
Monthly	19	13,5	13,9	46,7
A couple of times per year	38	27,0	27,7	74,5
Never	35	24,8	25,5	100,0
Total	137	97,2	100,0	
Missing	4	2,8		
Total	141	100,0		

#### 2. Visiting church activities Brabant

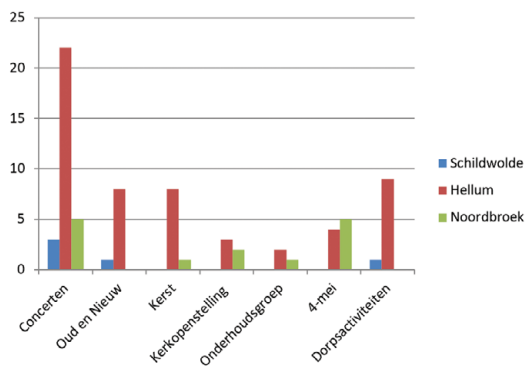
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Weekly	1	,7	,8	,8
Twice per week	2	1,4	1,6	2,3
Monthly	15	10,6	11,7	14,1
A couple of times per year	49	34,8	38,3	52,3
Never	61	43,3	47,7	100,0
Total	128	90,8	100,0	
Missing	13	9,2		
Total	141	100,0		

#### 3. Visiting church services Groningen

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Weekly	16	8,6	8,6	8,6
Twice per week	81	43,3	43,3	51,9
Monthly	5	2,7	2,7	54,5
Monthly	10	5,3	5,3	59,9
A couple of times per year	31	16,6	16,6	76,5
Never	44	23,5	23,5	100,0
Total	187	100,0	100,0	

#### 4. Visiting church activities Groningen

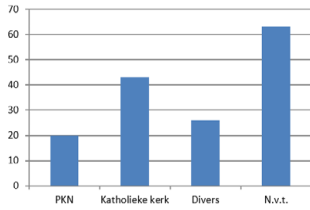
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
A few times per week	21	11,2	11,2	11,2
Weekly	4	2,1	2,1	13,4
Weekly	16	8,6	8,6	21,9
Twice per week	30	16,0	16,0	38,0
Monthly	14	7,5	7,5	45,5
A couple times per year	43	23,0	23,0	68,4
Never	59	31,6	31,6	100,0
Total	187	100,0	100,0	



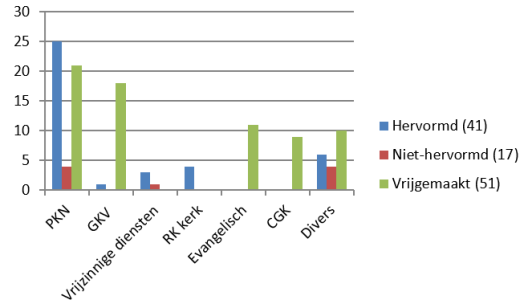
#### 5. Visits village church for non-church activities

## Appendix C

### D. How often do you visit another church?

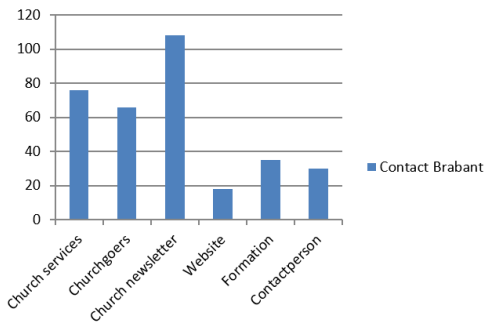


1. Visits to other churches by respondents Brabant

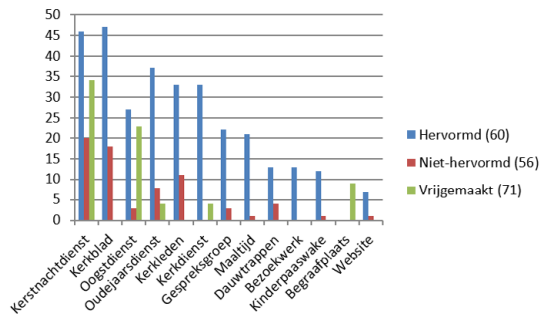


2. Visit to other churches by respondents Groningen

### E. In what ways are you in contact with the congregation?

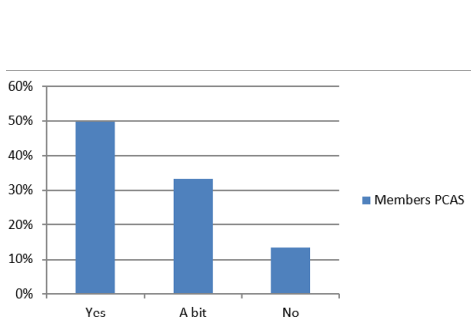


1. Contact respondents with Protestant Church Brabant

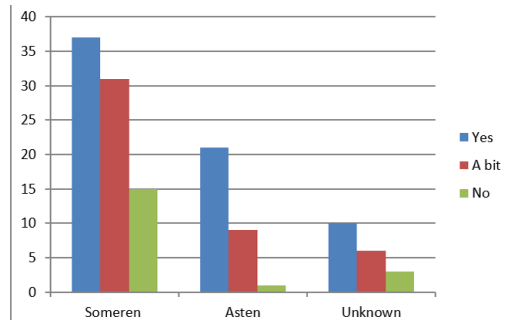


2. Contact respondents with Protestant Church Groningen

### F. Does faith play a role in your daily life?

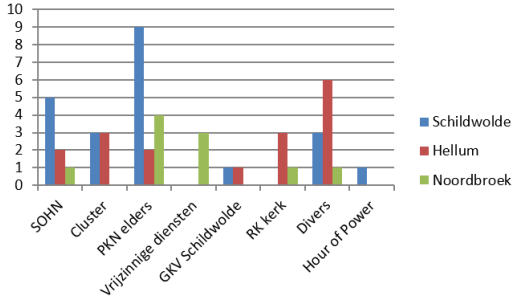


1. Role of faith in Brabant (N=136)

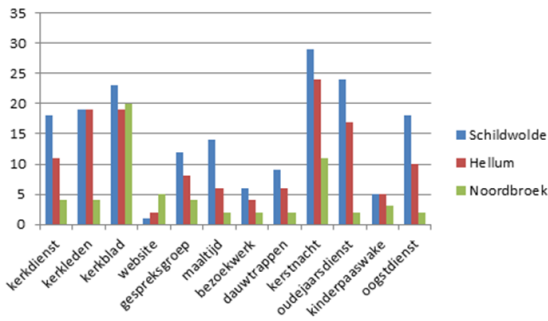


2. Role of faith per village Brabant (N=136)

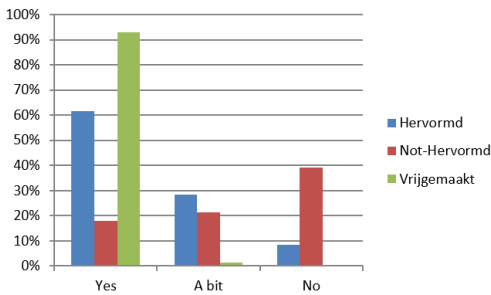
## Survey results



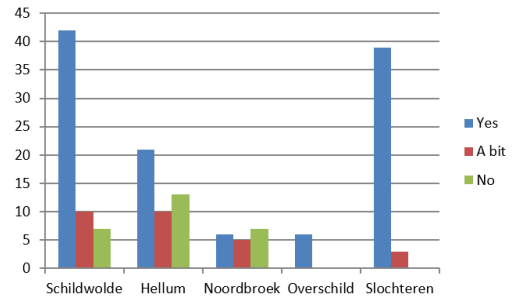
3. Visit other churches per village



3. Contact respondents with Protestant Congregation Groningen per village

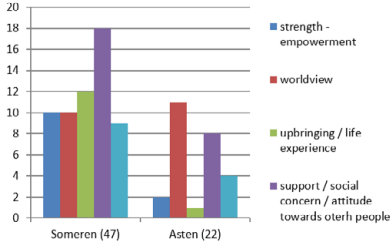


3. Role of faith in Groningen (N=131)

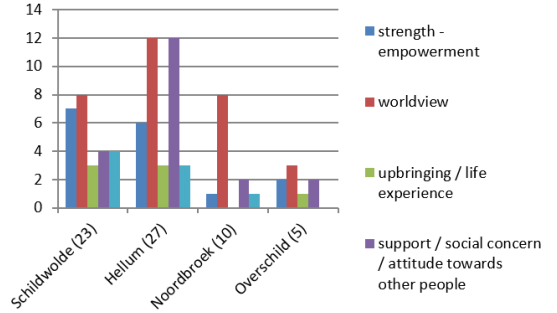


4. Role of faith per village Groningen (N=170)

**G. If so, can you describe how faith plays a role in your daily life?**

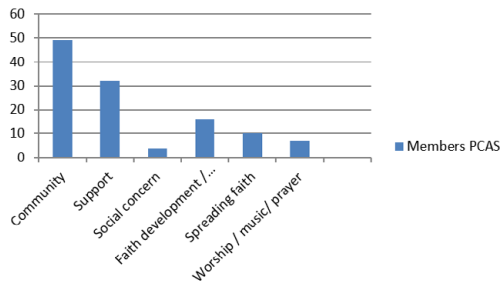


1. Role of Faith in Daily life Brabant (N=69)

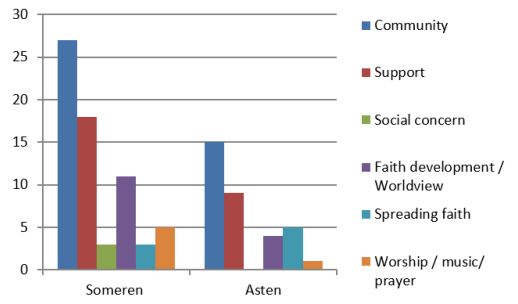


2. Role of Faith in Daily life Groningen N= 65

**H. What, for you personally, is the most important task of a church?**



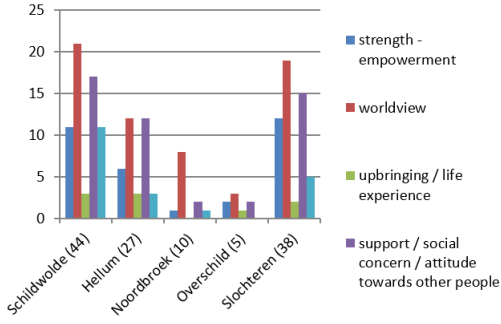
1. Views on Task of the Church in Brabant (N=78)



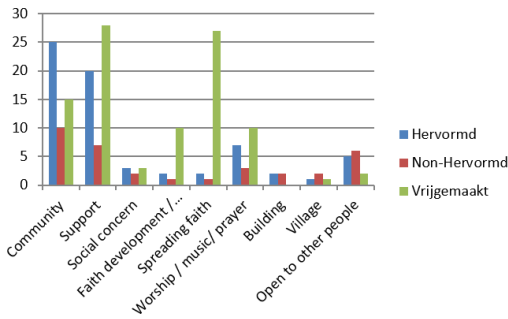
2. Views on Task of the Church in Brabant per village (N=67)



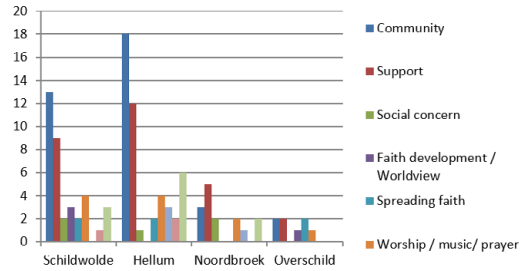
## Survey results



### 3. Role of Faith in Daily life Groningen including Reformed Liberated Respondent (N=86)



### 3. Views on Task of the Church in Groningen (N=131)



### 4. Views on Task of the Church in Groningen per village (N=131)

## Appendix C

### I. Statements

#### 1. The Protestant church in .... forms a community of people who look after one another

##### a. Asten Someren

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	13	9,4	11,8	11,8
2	42	30,4	38,2	50,0
3	41	29,7	37,3	87,3
4	9	6,5	8,2	95,5
5 - Totally disagree	5	3,6	4,5	100,0
Total	110	79,7	100,0	
Missing \$systemis	28	20,3		
Total	138	100,0		

##### b. Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild- Noordbroek

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	12	6,4	29,3	29,3
2	14	7,5	34,1	63,4
3	14	7,5	34,1	97,6
4	1	,5	2,4	100,0
5- Totally disagree				
Total	41	21,9	100,0	
Missing System	146	78,1		
Total	187	100,0		

## Survey results

### 2. The Protestant church of ... is meaningful in village society of

#### a. Asten, Someren and surrounding villages

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	11	8,0	10,5	10,5
2	31	22,5	29,5	40,0
3	47	34,1	44,8	84,8
4	9	6,5	8,6	93,3
5 - Totally disagree	7	5,1	6,7	100,0
Total	105	76,1	100,0	
Missing \$systemis	33	23,9		
Total	138	100,0		

#### b. Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild- Noordbroek

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	12	6,4	30,8	30,8
2	12	6,4	30,8	61,5
3	11	5,9	28,2	89,7
4	3	1,6	7,7	97,4
5 - Totally disagree	1	,5	2,6	100,0
Total	39	20,9	100,0	
Missing System	148	79,1		
Total	187	100,0		

#### c. Reformed Church Liberated on SOHN

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	11	15,5	15,5	15,5
2	1	1,4	1,4	16,9
3	27	38,0	38,0	54,9
I do not know	21	29,6	29,6	84,5
Total	11	15,5	15,5	100,0
Total	71	100,0	100,0	

## Appendix C

### 3. The Protestant church in .... is open to cooperation with other denominations

#### a. Asten Someren

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	35	25,4	32,1	32,1
2	39	28,3	35,8	67,9
Valid 3	24	17,4	22,0	89,9
4	4	2,9	3,7	93,6
5 - Totally disagree	7	5,1	6,4	100,0
Total	109	79,0	100,0	
Missing \$systemis	29	21,0		
Total	138	100,0		

#### b. Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild en Noordbroek.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	12	6,4	32,4	32,4
2	11	5,9	29,7	62,2
Valid 3	10	5,3	27,0	89,2
4	3	1,6	8,1	97,3
5 - Totally disagree	1	,5	2,7	100,0
Total	37	19,8	100,0	
Missing System	150	80,2		
Total	187	100,0		

#### c. Reformed Church Liberated on SOHN

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	12	16,9	16,9	16,9
2	3	4,2	4,2	21,1
Valid 3 - Neutral	24	33,8	33,8	54,9
Weet ik niet	22	31,0	31,0	85,9
Total	10	14,1	14,1	100,0
Total	71	100,0	100,0	

## Survey results

### 4. The Protestant church in .... should strive to work together with neighbouring protestant churches.

#### a. Asten Someren

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	24	17,4	22,2	22,2
2	48	34,8	44,4	66,7
Valid 3	24	17,4	22,2	88,9
4	7	5,1	6,5	95,4
5 - Totally disagree	5	3,6	4,6	100,0
Total	108	78,3	100,0	
Missing \$sysmis	30	21,7		
Total	138	100,0		

#### b. Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild-Noordbroek

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	22	11,8	57,9	57,9
2	7	3,7	18,4	76,3
Valid 3 - Neutral	7	3,7	18,4	94,7
4	1	,5	2,6	97,4
5 - Totally disagree	1	,5	2,6	100,0
Total	38	20,3	100,0	
Missing System	149	79,7		
Total	187	100,0		

## Appendix C

### 5. The Protestant Church in Asten- Someren ....

a. is a congregation where I feel at home.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	24	17,4	20,5	20,5
2	38	27,5	32,5	53,0
3	35	25,4	29,9	82,9
4	10	7,2	8,5	91,5
5 - Totally disagree	10	7,2	8,5	100,0
Total	117	84,8	100,0	
Missing \$sysmis	21	15,2		
Total	138	100,0		

b. inspires me in my faith.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	14	10,1	12,8	12,8
2	29	21,0	26,6	39,4
3	47	34,1	43,1	82,6
4	7	5,1	6,4	89,0
5 - Totally disagree	12	8,7	11,0	100,0
Total	109	79,0	100,0	
Missing \$sysmis	29	21,0		
Total	138	100,0		

c. is a community which offers space to all generations.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	14	10,1	12,8	12,8
2	37	26,8	33,9	46,8
3	38	27,5	34,9	81,7
4	12	8,7	11,0	92,7
5 - Totally disagree	8	5,8	7,3	100,0
Total	109	79,0	100,0	
Missing \$sysmis	29	21,0		
Total	138	100,0		

d. is mainly church on Sunday

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1 - Totally agree	10	7,2	9,6	9,6
2	28	20,3	26,9	36,5
3	36	26,1	34,6	71,2
4	19	13,8	18,3	89,4
5 - Totally disagree	11	8,0	10,6	100,0
Total	104	75,4	100,0	
Missing \$sysmis	34	24,6		
Total	138	100,0		

## Survey results

e. offers ample opportunity to celebrate and share faith with each other

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	15	10,9	14,9	14,9
2	39	28,3	38,6	53,5
Valid 3	37	26,8	36,6	90,1
4	3	2,2	3,0	93,1
5 - Totally disagree	7	5,1	6,9	100,0
Total	101	73,2	100,0	
Missing \$systemis	37	26,8		
Total	138	100,0		

f. an open and approachable faith community

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	13	7,0	34,2	34,2
2	13	7,0	34,2	68,4
Valid 3 - Neutral	6	3,2	15,8	84,2
4	3	1,6	7,9	92,1
5- Totally disagree	3	1,6	7,9	100,0
Total	38	20,3	100,0	
Missing System	149	79,7		
Total	187	100,0		

## Appendix C

### 6. The *Hervormde* Church in Schildwolde, Overschild, Hellum and Noordbroek....

a. It is good that the congregation organises church services in every village.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	12	6,4	30,8	30,8
2	9	4,8	23,1	53,8
Valid 3	12	6,4	30,8	84,6
4	2	1,1	5,1	89,7
5 - Totally disagree	4	2,1	10,3	100,0
Total	39	20,9	100,0	
Missing System	148	79,1		
Total	187	100,0		

b. It is important that the *Hervormde* church in Schildwolde/Hellum/Overschild/Noordbroek continues to exist

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	22	11,8	52,4	52,4
2	10	5,3	23,8	76,2
Valid 3	7	3,7	16,7	92,9
4	3	1,6	7,1	100,0
5- Totally disagree	42	22,5	100,0	
Total	145	77,5		
Missing System	187	100,0		
Total	187	100,0		

c. Reformed Liberated on SOHN

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - Totally agree	9	12,7	12,7	12,7
2	13	18,3	18,3	31,0
Valid 3 - Neutral	34	47,9	47,9	78,9
4 Disagree	12	16,9	16,9	95,8
Weet ik niet	1	1,4	1,4	97,2
Total	2	2,8	2,8	100,0
Total	71	100,0	100,0	



# Appendix D. Illustrations

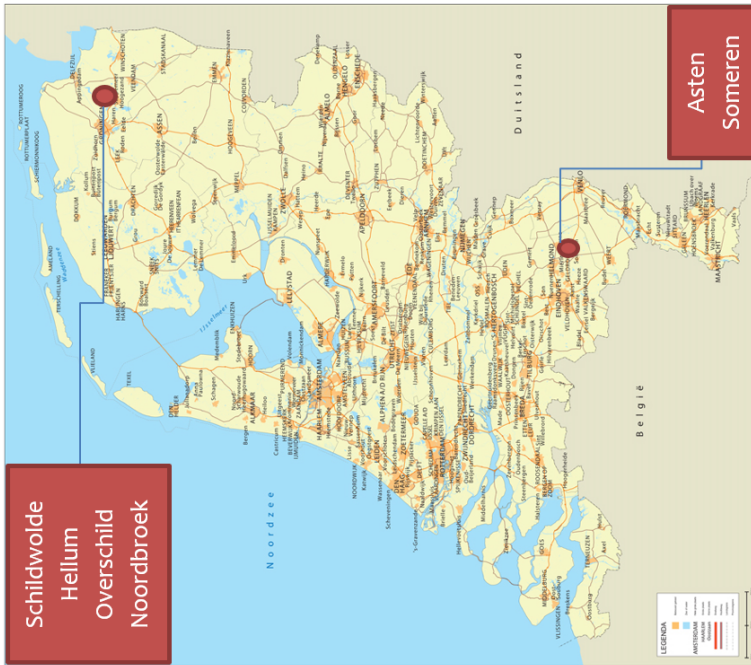


FIGURE 1 | Map the Netherlands

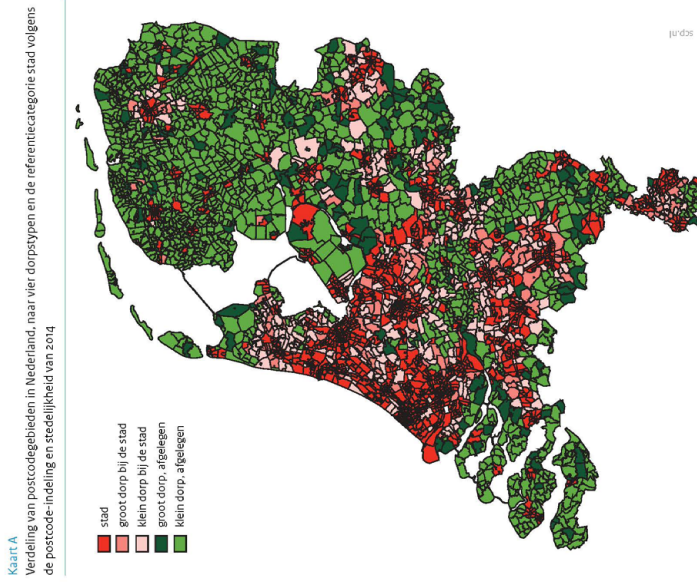
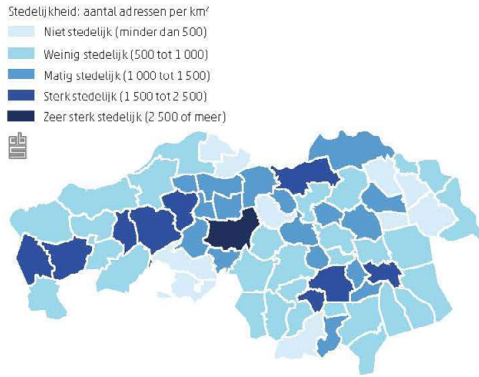


FIGURE 2 | Map urbanisation in the Netherlands 2009

## Appendix D

### 12.6.1 Mate van stedelijkheid in Noord-Brabant, 2015



### 12.6.2 Landbouwgrond naar grondgebruik, 2015\*

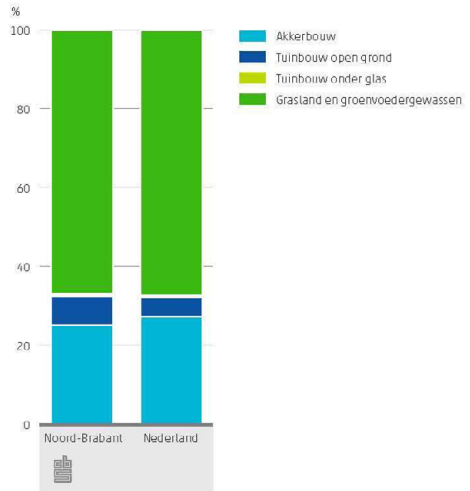
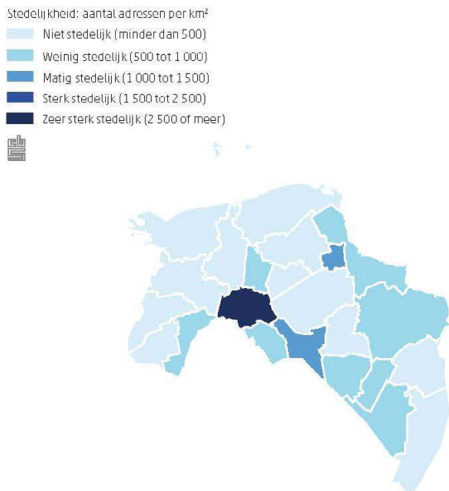


FIGURE 3 | Urbanisation and use of agricultural land in Brabant

### 2.6.1 Mate van stedelijkheid in Groningen, 2015



### 2.6.2 Landbouwgrond naar grondgebruik, 2015\*

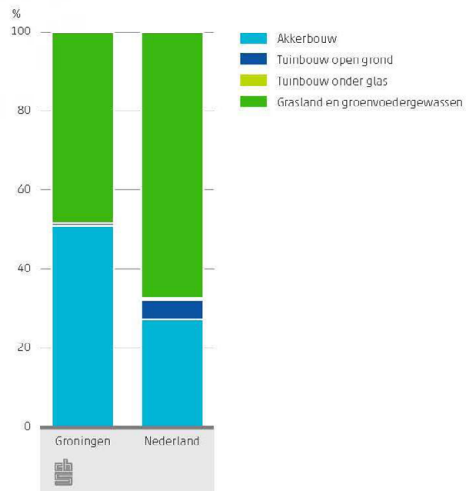
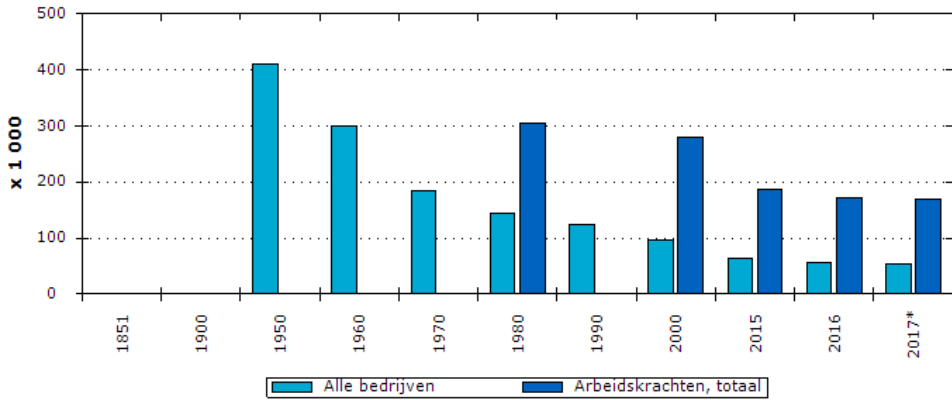


FIGURE 4 | Urbanisation and use of agricultural land in Groningen

Illustrations

Landbouw; vanaf 1851



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FIGURE 5 | Development of farms and work force from 1851

Ouderen (65 jaar en ouder) 2013  
per gemeente

Percentage 65-plussers  
ten opzichte van de totale bevolking

- 8 - 16
- 16 - 18
- 18 - 20
- 20 - 22
- 22 - 30

— provincies

Bron: CBS-StatLine

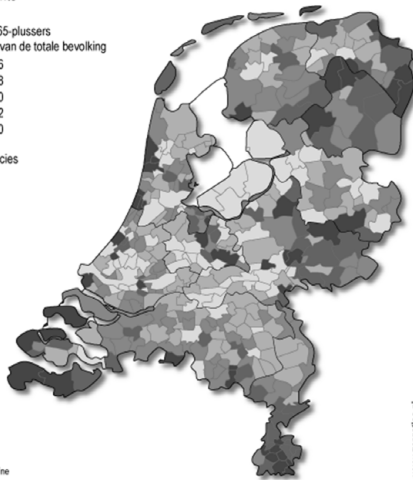
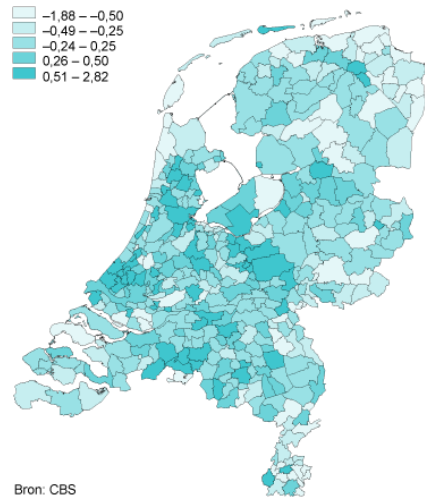


FIGURE 6 | Map Ageing per municipality 2013

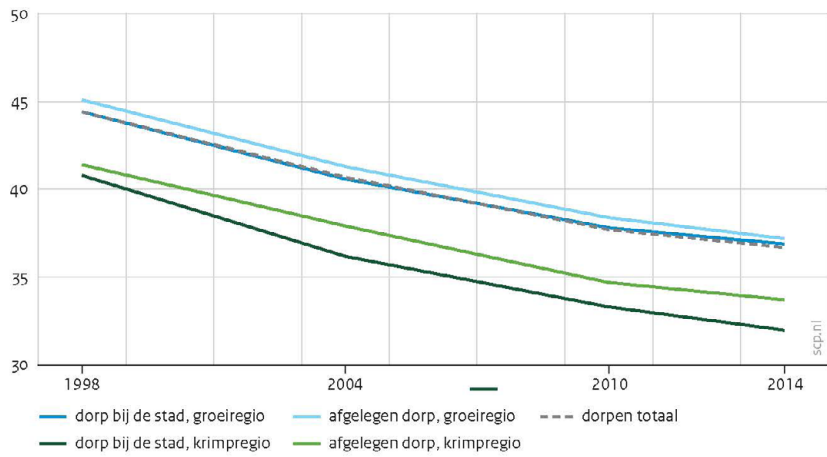


Bron: CBS

FIGURE 7 | Map Relative demographical growth per municipality 2013

## Appendix D

Ontwikkeling in het aandeel 0-34-jarigen in kleine dorpen naar nabijheid van de stad en type regio, 1998-2014 (in procenten)



Bron: CBS (GBA-maatwerk '98-'14) SCP-bewerking

FIGURE 8 | Development 0-34 year olds in various kinds of villages

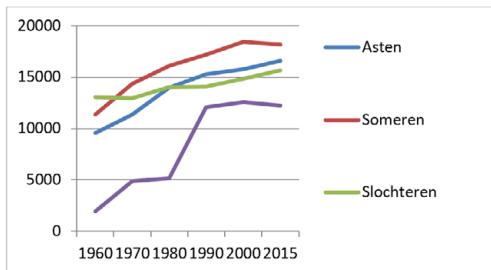


FIGURE 9 | Population development in case study municipalities (CBS)

### 1.8.3 Kerkelijkheid, 2014

Percentage van de bevolking van 15 jaar of ouder

- Minder dan 35%
- 35% tot 45%
- 45% tot 55%
- 55% tot 65%
- 65% of meer

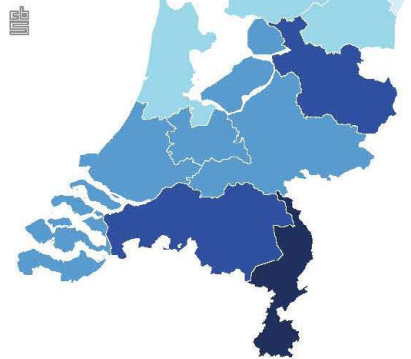
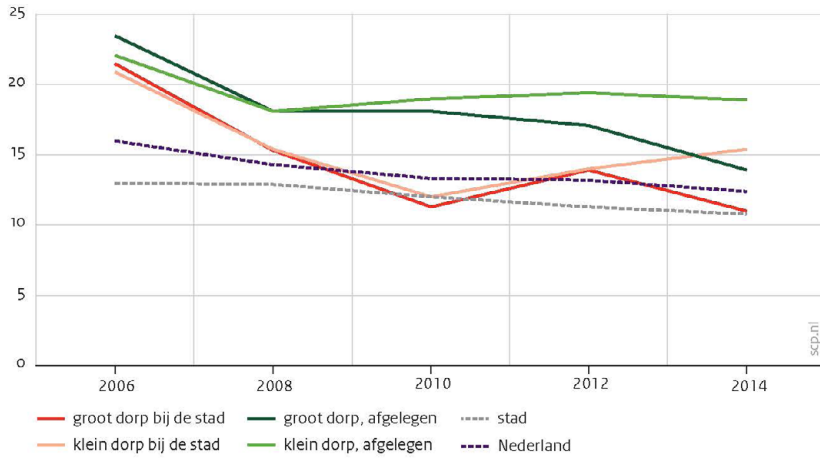


FIGURE 10 | Devotion

## Illustrations

Trends in het aandeel bewoners dat regelmatig<sup>a</sup> een gebedshuis<sup>b</sup> bezoekt, naar dorpsstypen, bevolking van 18 jaar en ouder, 2006-2014 (in procenten)<sup>c</sup>



- a De figuur geeft een bezoekfrequentie weer van minstens eenmaal per maand.  
 b De vraag: 'Hoe vaak bent u gedurende het afgelopen jaar naar de kerk geweest?' werd aangepast voor hindoes/moslims/joden door te vragen naar tempel/moskee/synagoge in plaats van naar kerk.  
 c Significante trends tussen 2006-2008 en 2012-2014: grote dorpen bij de stad (t-toets  $p < 0,05$ ). Significante verschillen met kleine afgelegen dorpen (2012-2014); stad en dorpen bij de stad (t-toets  $p < 0,05$ ).

Bron: scp (cv'06-'14)

FIGURE 11 | Percentage of inhabitants which visit a prayer house regularly - depending on kind of village

### 12.8.3 Maandelijks bezoek aan religieuze dienst in Noord-Brabant, 2010/2014

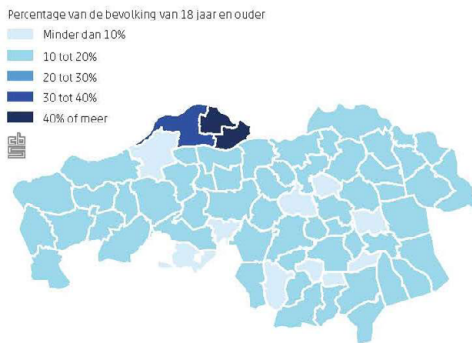


FIGURE 12 | Monthly visit to religious service Brabant

### 2.8.3 Maandelijks bezoek aan religieuze dienst in Groningen, 2010/2014

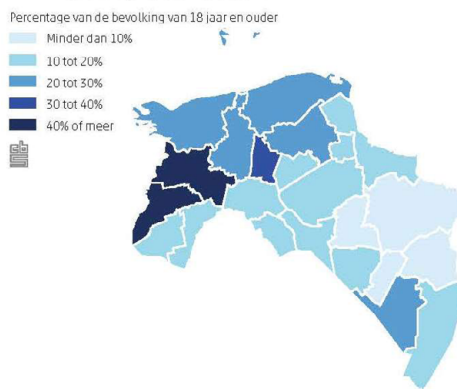


FIGURE 13 | Monthly visit to religious service Groningen

## Appendix D

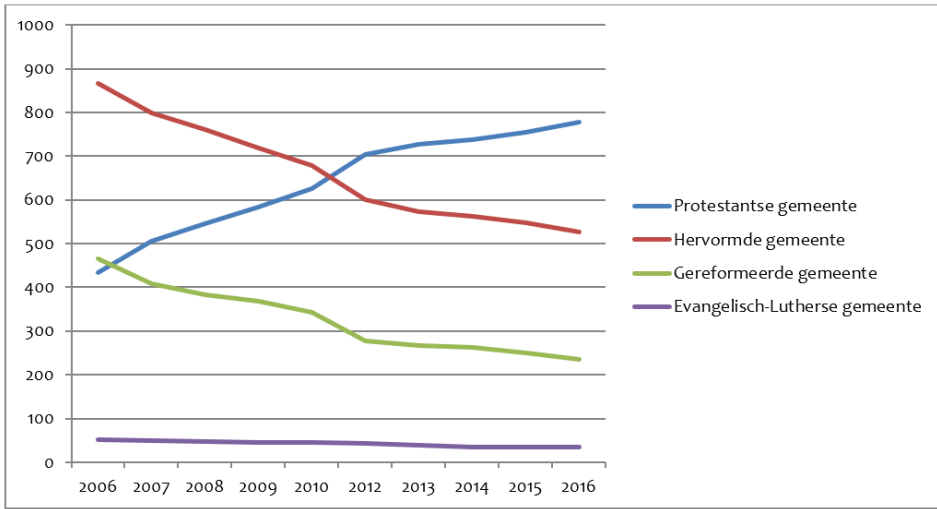


FIGURE 14 | Number of congregations Protestant Church in the Netherlands

## List of Illustrations

### Chapter 1

Family farm Oldenzijl, private collection.

Saint Nicholas Church Oldenzijl, Antje ten Harkel-Meijer, juli 2011.

### Chapter 6

1. Front page of church newsletter *De Brug* until August 2013.
2. Front page of church newsletter *De Brug* since August 2013.
3. Place-name sign Asten, *Het Contact*, <https://www.hetcontact.nl/evenementen/midzomeravond-asten-met-rats>.
4. Exterior Protestant church Asten, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
5. Interior Protestant church Asten, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
6. Meeting hall community centre, Protestant church Asten, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
7. Exterior Protestant church Someren, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
8. Interior Protestant church Someren, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
9. Meeting hall community centre, Protestant church Someren, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
10. Youth room Plexat, Protestant church Someren, Jacobine Gelderloos, 10 October 2012.
11. Closing church Asten, 18 August 2013, <https://www.ed.nl/asten/bijbel-na-188-jaar-dicht-in-protestantse-kerk-asten-ad1a55d8e/>.

### Chapter 7

1. *Koepelkerk* in Lierop, <http://www.vriendenvandekoepelkerk.nl/>.
2. *Passion* Lierop, Rob Fritsen, 19 March 2016 (<https://siris.nl/fotoalbums/22184661/passie-in-koepelkerk-in-lierop/foto/22169336>).
3. Church Someren-Heide, Hein van Bakel, 25 March 2014 <http://www.peelbelangonline.nl/nieuws/kerken-someren-heide-en-someren-noord-mogelijk-dicht>.
4. *Sint Jozef kapel*, Someren-Heide, Wim van de Broek, 15 September 2013. <https://www.rkfranciscus.nl/?p=news&id=313>.
5. Mariahulde *Ziekentriduüm*, Jacobine Gelderloos, 4 September 2014.
6. Statue of Mary in the garden of the nursing home in Someren, Jacobine Gelderloos, 14 April 2015.
7. Performance *As I left my Fathers House* in *Pauluskerk* Someren: Rob Fritsen, 29 February 2016, <https://siris.nl/fotoalbums/20494868/voorstelling-as-i-left-my-fathers-house-in-de-pauluskerk/foto/20490267>.
8. *Koepelkerk* concert, Adrie Mennen.
9. *Koepelkerk* concert, Adrie Mennen, 3 November 2017.
10. Ceiling *Koepelkerk* with Christmas decoration, 23 December 2014, <https://siris.nl/artikel/3028204/voorbereidingen-voor-de-kerst>.

### Chapter 8

1. Church and *Juffer* tower Schildwolde, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
2. Church Hellingum, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
3. Church Noordbroek, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
4. Church Overschild, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
5. Interior *Hervormde* Church Schildwolde, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
6. Interior *Hervormde* Church during Children's Easter Vigil, <https://www.woldkerken.nl/activiteiten/activiteiten-voor-kinderen/kinderpaaswake/>

## Appendix D

7. Church Noordbroek Interior, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
8. Grave Drums exhibition Noordbroek, Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, <https://twitter.com/hashtag/voorjaarsexcursie>
9. Interior Overschild, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.

### Chapter 9

1. Christmas service in Schildwolde, Jacobine Gelderloos, 24 December 2014.
2. Advent celebration school Hellum, Jacobine Gelderloos, 14 December 2014.
3. Christmas celebration Hellum, Jacobine Gelderloos, 24 December
4. Nativity scene Christmas walk Noordbroek, Jacobine Gelderloos, 20 December 2014.
5. Monument Hellum, Jacobine Gelderloos, 28 June 2018.
6. Paper installation Ina Fekken, Feest van de Geest, Schildwolde, 2016, <http://www.inafekken.nl/>.
7. Soupconcert, *Van alles met Fier*, Overschild, 12 April 2015, <https://vanallesmetfier.weebly.com/wat-is-geweest.html>.
8. Collection foodbank Hellum, December 2014, <https://www.woldkerken.nl/organisatie/diaconie/activiteiten-2014/actie-voor-de-voedselbank-december-2014/>.
9. Logo Zorgmaatjes Menterwolde, *Folder Zorgmaatjes Menterwolde*, © Zorgmaatjes Oegstgeest.
10. Gas molecule central reservation A7 near Hoogezaand, JVL.Holland, 9 April 2011.
11. Sign '*Hier begon de ellende*' in field opposite gas molecule, Kees van de Veen, Hollandse Hoogte, 25 January 2014.
12. Logo Platform *Kerk en Aardbeving*, Jitse van der Wal.

### Appendix

1. 'Kaart van Nederland', <http://wereldkaartonline.nl/kaart-van-nederland/>, accessed 13 November 2017.
2. 'Map urbanisation in the Netherlands 2009', *Dorpsleven tussen stad en land*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, p. 21.
3. 'Mate van stedelijkheid in Noord-Brabant en Landbouwgrond naar grondgebruik', *Factsheet Brabant*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, April 2016.
4. 'Mate van stedelijkheid in Noord-Brabant en Landbouwgrond naar grondgebruik', *Factsheet Groningen*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, April 2016.
5. 'Landbouw; vanaf 1851, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017  
[http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=71904NED&D1=0,12&D2=0,49,99,109,119,129,139,149,\(I-2\),\(I-1\),I&HDR=G1&STB=T&CHARTTYPE=1&VW=G](http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=71904NED&D1=0,12&D2=0,49,99,109,119,129,139,149,(I-2),(I-1),I&HDR=G1&STB=T&CHARTTYPE=1&VW=G)
6. Vergrijzing per gemeente, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013.
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## Nederlandse samenvatting

### *Van betekenis in de marge, kerken en leefbaarheid op het Nederlandse platteland*

Dit onderzoek richt zich op dorpskerken. Centraal staat de vraag welke rol kerken spelen met betrekking tot leefbaarheid op het platteland. De afgelopen 50 jaar is zowel het plattelandsleven als het kerkelijk leven veranderd. Dit etnografisch ecclesiologisch onderzoek brengt in kaart welke rol kerken spelen in het dorpsleven. Het uitgangspunt zijn twee protestantse gemeenten, een in Asten-Someren in het zuidoosten van de provincie Noord-Brabant en een in het midden van Groningen: Schildwolde-Hellum-Overschild en Noordbroek. Waar Noord-Brabant een overwegend katholieke provincie is, is Groningen de meest seculiere provincie van Nederland met een geschiedenis van kerkscheuringen. Dat betekent dat er contextuele verschillen zijn. Protestantse kerken in Brabant zijn met name in grotere dorpen te vinden, terwijl er in Groningen tal van samenwerkingsverbanden zijn tussen dorpskerkgemeenschappen. Wanneer een kerkelijke gemeente uit meerdere dorpen bestaat, wordt de vraag hoe als kerk van betekenis te zijn in alle dorpen urgent. Dit onderzoek brengt de verbanden tussen kerkelijk leven en dorpsleven in beeld en probeert de betekenis van de aanwezigheid van een kerkgemeenschap, ruimte voor bezinning en ritueel en omzien naar elkaar te duiden. Dit biedt aanknopingspunten voor kerken om kerk in en voor het dorp te zijn.

### **Hoofdstuk 1**

In het eerste hoofdstuk worden de veranderingen die de aanleiding vormen voor dit onderzoek verkend. Tegenwoordig neemt de kerk niet meer zo'n centrale positie in als een paar decennia geleden. Kerkgemeenschappen krimpen en het kerkelijk leven op het platteland wordt al enige tijd gekenmerkt door processen van samenwerking en regionalisering. Ondertussen verandert de samenstelling van de plattelandsbevolking door vergrijzing, ontgroening en de komst van import. Daardoor komt in sommige gebieden de leefbaarheid onder druk te staan. Omdat platteland en leefbaarheid vaak in één adem genoemd worden, leek het goed om het begrip leefbaarheid als uitgangspunt te nemen. Het blijkt een vruchtbaar begrip om de context waarin dorpskerken zich bevinden in beeld te krijgen. Dit onderzoek voorziet in een lacune, omdat enerzijds praktisch-theologisch en godsdienstsociologisch onderzoek zich met name heeft gericht op kerken in een urbane context. Anderzijds valt op dat in leefbaarheidsonderzoek en -plannen weinig oog is voor de rol en betekenis van kerkgemeenschappen op het platteland.

Het onderzoek speelt zich af op het kruisvlak van rurale theologie, sociale geografie en godsdienstsociologie. De theoloog Jeff Astley onderscheidt twee vormen van rurale theologie: teneerstetheologiseren over rurale thema's en leefbaarheidsvraagstukken hoe de omgeving het leven van mensen bepaalt. Ten tweede aandacht voor hoe mensen op het platteland spreken over God, kerk en geloof: hun *ordinary theology*. Sociale geografie richt zich op de veranderingen op het platteland, zoals bevolkingsontwikkeling, duurzaamheid

en toenemende mobiliteit. Sociaal-geografische thema's blijken behulpzaam te zijn voor de reflectie op de betekenis van rurale kerk en theologie. Een godsdienstsociologisch perspectief brengt in beeld hoe secularisatie en de de-institutionalisering van religie ertoe leiden dat religie zich verplaatst naar andere domeinen van de samenleving als kunst, cultuur en herdenking en ook de grenzen van kerk-zijn fluide worden. In dit etnografisch onderzoek draait het om observatie van het kerkelijke leven, waarin de praktisch-theologische vraag wanneer al of wanneer nog sprake is van kerk, steeds weer opduikt.

## Hoofdstuk 2

In hoofdstuk 2 wordt beschreven hoe de onderzoeksdata zijn verzameld en geanalyseerd. In dit geval gaat het om etnografisch onderzoek in twee protestantse gemeenten die bereid waren als case study te fungeren. Een case study onderzoek is zeer geschikt om in kaart te brengen hoe maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen het dagelijks leven in een specifieke context vormen. Doordat de onderzoeker gedurende langere tijd ontwikkelingen volgt, is het mogelijk om de kwalitatieve processen achter de kwantitatieve trends waar te nemen. Van groot belang is om de context van een case study, in dit geval protestantse gemeenten, in ogenschouw te nemen. Door te kijken naar het gebruik van kerkgebouwen, samenwerkingspartners en de participatie van kerkgemeenschappen in dorpsactiviteiten en regionale netwerken wordt inzicht verkregen in de rol en betekenis van de kerk in een dorpsgemeenschap.

De data heb ik verzameld door middel van interviews, participerende observaties, focusgroepsgesprekken en enquêtes. Er zijn grofweg drie (overlappende) fases aan te wijzen in het veldwerk. In beide case studies begon ik met een verkenning van het kerkelijk leven door middel van participerende observaties bij kerkdiensten, vergaderingen en bijeenkomsten en probeerde ik relaties met de omgeving in beeld te krijgen. In de tweede fase vonden focusgroepsgesprekken en interviews plaats met gemeenteleden en 'buitenstaanders' en heb ik enquêtes verspreid. In de derde fase vond een aantal vervolggesprekken plaats met groepen en individuen in en rondom de kerk. Zo kon ik ook in beeld krijgen wat mensen buiten de kerkgemeenschap merkten van de kerk. Daarnaast was het mogelijk om bevindingen en interpretaties aan respondenten voor te leggen.

In een etnografisch onderzoek is de onderzoeker ook onderzoeksinstrument, dat roept verschillende vragen op. Zoals hoe de onderzoeker zichzelf en het onderzoek introduceert op het moment dat het veld betreden wordt. Enerzijds moeten mensen weten dat er onderzoek plaatsvindt, anderzijds is het van belang om mensen in hun gewone doen te observeren. Daarnaast is de vraag welke houding je als onderzoeker aanneemt, in welke mate en op welke manier kun je participeren als onderzoeker? Welke keuzes worden gemaakt tijdens het veldwerk als het gaat om welke informatie wel en niet relevant is? Daarin waren de concepten leefbaarheid, welzijn en dorpskerk belangrijke lenzen. Daarnaast verandert door de aanwezigheid van de onderzoeker ook iets in het veld. Er vinden gesprekken plaats die anders niet plaats zouden vinden, er kunnen processen in

gang worden gezet, waardoor kerken zich meer bewust worden van hun aanwezigheid of afwezigheid in het dorpsleven en andersom kunnen dorpsbewoners zich realiseren dat er ook nog zoets als een dorpskerk is.

### Hoofdstuk 3

Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op de eerste deelvraag hoe de leefbaarheid en kwaliteit van leven (*quality of life*) in Noord-Brabant en Groningen beschouwd worden. De veranderingen op het platteland hebben vragen opgeroepen over leefbaarheid en kwaliteit van leven in dorpen. De geleidelijke ontwikkelingen die Geert Mak beschrijft in *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*, worden door sociaal geograaf Frans Thissen aangeduid als een verschuiving van een autonoom dorp waar mensen woonden, werkten en hun sociale leven hadden, naar een woondorp, van waaruit mensen naar andere plekken reizen. Dat betekent ook dat het leven gefragmenteerd wordt. In dit hoofdstuk staat het sociaal geografische perspectief centraal. Ruth Panelli laat zien hoe het plattelandsleven wordt gevormd door verschillende dimensies: ruimtelijk, sociaal-economisch, sociaal-cultureel en politiek. Zo moeten plattelandsbewoners door bevolkingskrimp, toegenomen mobiliteit, schaalvergroting en (de)centralisatie voortdurend schakelen tussen lokaal en regionaal niveau, wat vragen oproept over toegankelijkheid, zichtbaarheid en wat het platteland leefbaar maakt.

Er zijn verschillende definities van en opvattingen over leefbaarheid. Het begrip wordt vaak gebruikt in relatie tot de fysieke en sociale omgeving. De manier waarop mensen leefbaarheid ervaren beïnvloedt hun persoonlijk welzijn. Mensen bezien hun omgeving op verschillende manieren, wat leidt tot verschillende en soms tegenstrijdige opvattingen van een leefbaar platteland. Een al te zeer sociaal-economische opvatting van leefbaarheid, waarbij leefbaarheid bepaald wordt door voorzieningen staat ter discussie. Volgens Frans Thissen zijn voorzieningen niet een voorwaarde, maar een product van leefbaarheid. Leefbaarheid ontstaat wanneer mensen een betrokkenheid voelen bij hun woonomgeving, er ontmoetingsplekken zijn en sociale interactie plaats kan vinden. Op die manier kunnen gemeenschapsinitiatieven ontstaan, waaronder voorzieningen. Een analyse van regionale kranten uit Groningen en Brabant brengt in beeld dat er veel aandacht is voor de ruimtelijke kwaliteit van de leefomgeving en het voorzieningenniveau, maar dat daaronder vragen liggen over sociale cohesie en gemeenschapsvorming om naar elkaar om te zien. De fysieke en de sociale leefomgeving blijken nauw verweven te zijn.

Het begrip leefbaarheid is niet alleen behulpzaam om de plattelandscontext van dorpskerken te schetsen, maar biedt ook een interessant perspectief om de rol van de dorpskerk als ontmoetingsplek en als gemeenschap in beeld te krijgen, waar verschillende voorzieningen geboden worden. Toch blijkt dat het begrip 'leefbaarheid' tekort schiet om de aard van kerkelijke en religieuze praktijken en de betekenis daarvan voor persoonlijk welzijn te bevatten. Daarom heb ik besloten om het Engelse begrip *quality of life* te gebruiken, wat zowel betrekking heeft op leefbaarheid als op persoonlijk welzijn. Of zoals de geograaf Rogerson het noemt: de materiële en persoonlijke leefarena. Het eerste

bestaat uit de sociale, fysieke en economische omgeving waarin mensen wonen, het tweede uit persoonlijk eigenschappen en de manier waarop mensen hun leefomgeving beoordelen. In de koppeling tussen deze beide leefarena's spelen wereldbeeld, zin- en betekenisgeving een belangrijke rol. Mensen vormen en worden gevormd door hun fysieke en sociale leefomgeving. Die wederkerigheid is van fundamenteel belang als het gaat om religie, omdat geloof zowel een wereldbeeld als een motivatie tot handelen biedt.

#### Hoofdstuk 4

Hoofdstuk 4 is geschreven vanuit een godsdienstsociologisch perspectief. Het brengt in beeld hoe met name in de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw processen van secularisatie, differentiatie en de-institutionalisering de positie van de kerk in de samenleving hebben veranderd. Het hoofdstuk richt zich op de tweede deelvraag hoe deze processen vormend zijn voor hoe mensen de rol van religie in de samenleving zien en wat ze verwachten van de kerk.

Het gebruik van het kerkgebouw weerspiegelt de positie van de kerk in de samenleving. Tot in de negentiende eeuw vervulde de kerk verschillende publieke functies op het gebied van begravenissen, zorg, onderwijs en openbare orde. Dit veranderde geleidelijk na de scheiding van kerk en staat en later door de ontkerkelijking. Ook de differentiatie van de samenleving speelde een rol: onderwijs, werk en cultuur ontwikkelden zich tot zelfstandige domeinen. Aanvankelijk waren deze domeinen nog verbonden met de zuilen in de samenleving. In de verzorgingsstaat werd de staat verantwoordelijk voor sociale zekerheid, onderwijs en zorg. Dit heeft ertoe geleid dat het niet altijd meer duidelijk is wat kerk te maken heeft met zorg, onderwijs, huisvesting en werkgelegenheid. Dat maakt ook dat niet direct voor de hand ligt dat kerken iets te zeggen hebben over leefbaarheid, wat leidt tot kerkelijke verlegenheid. Aan de andere kant leidt een groeiende onbekendheid met kerk, geloof en religie tot religieus analfabetisme.

Geleidelijk aan lijkt de wal het schip te keren. In de participatiesamenleving lijkt een herwaardering te zijn van sociaal-maatschappelijk werk dat door de kerken geïnitieerd, georganiseerd en geïnspireerd wordt. Daarnaast wordt religie weer zichtbaarder in het publieke domein. Er zijn vormen van *civil religion* tijdens voetbalwedstrijden en de Nationale Herdenking op 4 mei. Er zijn ook momenten dat er zich ad hoc gemeenschappen vormen voor ritueel en bezinning, zoals tijdens de *Passion*. Godsdienstsocioloog Nancy Ammerman gebruikt het begrip *sacred consciousness* (besef van het heilige) om religieuze tendensen aan te wijzen op plekken die ook seculier zijn. Bourdieus concept *fields of practice* helpt vervolgens om inzichtelijk te maken hoe religie raakt aan de werelden van herdenken, erfgoed, zorg en onderwijs. De opkomst van religieuze repertoires in het publieke domein roept vragen op over hoe het sacrale en het profane zich tot elkaar verhouden aan het begin van de eenentwintigste eeuw. Enerzijds worden kerkgebouwen gesloten omdat ze overbodig zijn geworden, krijgen kerken een nieuwe bestemming of worden ze gesloopt. Anderzijds worden profane plekken gesacraliseerd door herdenkingen, rituelen en betekenisgeving. Zo komen veranderende ideeën over de rol van kerk en religie in de samenleving in beeld.



## Hoofdstuk 5

Hoofdstuk 5 is gericht op de vraag hoe rurale theologie zich heeft ontwikkeld in het Verenigd Koninkrijk en in Nederland. Deze discipline onderzoekt de karakteristieken van dorpskerken en de vragen die daar spelen. De uitdaging om de kerkelijke organisatie draaiende te houden vraagt veel van de beschikbare menskracht en middelen, wat ook verschillende ecclesiologische vragen met zich meebrengt als wat is al kerk en wanneer is een kerk verdwenen?

Ik beschrijf David Walkers *fourfold model of belonging* (vormen van verbinding) en verken hoe het zich verhoudt tot de theorie van Frans Thissen over de leefbaarheid op het platteland (hoofdstuk 3). In de eerste plaats kan verbondenheid met plaats en het belang van ontmoetingsplekken in verband worden gebracht met het kerkgebouw en met andere plekken waar de kerk zichtbaar wordt. In de tweede plaats kan verbondenheid met mensen en het concept van sociaal kapitaal in relatie gebracht worden met de (in)formele samenwerking tussen kerken en andere organisaties. Als het gaat om verbondenheid met activiteiten en evenementen komen gemeenschapsinitiatieven in beeld, die georganiseerd worden door de kerk of waarin de kerk met anderen betrokken is. De verschillende manieren van verbondenheid kunnen tot spanningen leiden. Tegelijkertijd ontstaat door de verschillende manieren van verbondenheid ook de mogelijkheid om verschillende groepen met elkaar in contact te brengen en het *bridging* en *linking* sociaal kapitaal in de dorpen te vergroten.

Vervolgens worden de ontwikkelingen van de afgelopen decennia rond dorpskerken in de Nederlandse context beschreven. Sinds 1960 zijn verschillende studies verschenen over toekomstmogelijkheden voor krimpende dorpskerken. Een terugkerende vraag is of dorpskerken zouden moeten samenwerken op regionaal niveau of dat kerken zich moeten richten op de lokale context. Door middel van regionale samenwerking kan een grotere groep van mensen elkaar inspireren en het kerkelijk leven gaande houden, maar het risico bestaat dat het ten koste gaat van de lokale betrokkenheid en zichtbaarheid in het dorp, waardoor de kerk minder toegankelijk wordt. Hiermee verbonden is de vraag hoe kerken zich willen en kunnen verhouden tot de moderne plattelandssamenleving.

Ik bepleit een fundamentele perspectiefwisseling, waarin de ontwikkelingen op het platteland en de leefbaarheidsvragen als uitgangspunt worden genomen, waardoor vragen over organisatie en overleven naar de achtergrond verdwijnen. Wil een kerkgemeenschap de dorpsgemeenschap dienen, dan moet kerkelijke verlegenheid overwonnen worden. Een kerk met oog voor kwetsbare plattelandsbewoners ziet boeren die met dilemma's zitten, mensen die niet zo mobiel zijn, mensen die zich eenzaam voelen. Pim van der Kerk stelt dat de opdracht om het Koninkrijk van God te realiseren in beeld brengt welke maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen de kwaliteit van leven onder druk zetten.

Het hoofdstuk mondt uit in de vraag hoe lokale protestantse kerken zich verhouden tot de leefbaarheid van het platteland. Daarvoor heb ik kerkbladen van de twee case study gemeenten geanalyseerd. Hoewel de termen *leefbaarheid* en *kwaliteit van leven* als zodanig niet vaak genoemd worden, komen wel verschillende aspecten van leefbaarheid in beeld. Ten eerste komt naar voren hoe de fysieke omgeving en sociale ontmoetingen met elkaar samenhangen. Ten tweede is in kerkbladen aandacht voor de levensvragen waar mensen in hun persoonlijke leefarena mee te maken hebben en de steun die kerkgemeenschappen daarin kunnen bieden. Ten slotte passeren beelden en idealen van het goede leven de revue.

## Hoofdstuk 6

Hoofdstuk 6 beschrijft in detail het kerkelijk leven in Asten-Someren. Het hoofdstuk begint met een situatieschets van waar de kerken zich bevinden. Vervolgens beschrijf ik hoe de protestantse gemeenschappen in Asten en Someren zich hebben ontwikkeld. De kerkgemeenschap heeft in de Brabantse context altijd een minderheidspositie gehad. De krimp van de kerk is goed voelbaar in de Protestantse gemeente. Al decennialang wordt de predikant gedeeld. In 2005 fuseerden de kerken van Asten en Someren en vinden de diensten afwisselend plaats in beide dorpen. Met de verkoop van het kerkgebouw in Asten in 2013 is daar een eind aan gekomen. Een terugkerende onderwerp voor de kerkenraad is het vinden van vrijwilligers om de organisatie draaiende te houden. Daarnaast wordt gekeken welke mogelijkheden er zijn om met andere Protestantse gemeenten in de regio samen te werken. De predikant is bezorgd dat de eigen toekomst meer zorgen baart dan de taak die een kerk heeft naar buiten toe.

Twee theorieën worden gebruikt om het kerkelijk leven nader te analyseren. Ten eerste gebruik ik Jeff Astley's concept *ordinary theology* om in beeld te krijgen hoe de verwachtingen en ervaringen van mensen ten aanzien van de kerk de kerkgemeenschap en hun persoonlijk welzijn bepalen. Het gaat dan om de betekenis van kerkdiensten, omzien naar elkaar en persoonlijke ontwikkeling van wereldbeeld en levenshouding: leren, vieren en dienen. Kerkleden vragen zich af hoe ze een gemeenschap kunnen vormen waar mensen van verschillende achtergronden zich welkom voelen. Er is een zekere kerkelijke verlegenheid waarneembaar en het risico bestaat dat het diaconale werk zich vooral richt op de ouderen binnen de gemeente. Dat roept vragen op als: hoe kun je op een goede manier naar elkaar omzien? Hoe vind je een balans tussen bemoeizucht en sociale controle aan de ene kant en schijnbare onverschilligheid aan de andere kant? Hoe kan de kerkgemeenschap zichtbaarder worden in het dorpsleven? De nadruk op overleven versterkt de interne gerichtheid, waardoor de aandacht voor de rol van de kerk in de dorpen vermindert.

Ten tweede pas ik Walkers model van vormen van verbondenheid toe op de situatie in Asten-Someren. Door de jaren heen is de kerkgemeenschap toegankelijker geworden voor nieuwkomers. Mensen zijn op verschillende manieren met de kerk verbonden, wat ruimte biedt aan diversiteit en als verrijkend wordt ervaren. Tegelijkertijd ontstaan er spanningen

tussen mensen die nauw betrokken zijn bij de kerkgemeenschap en mensen die niet zo actief zijn. Toch blijkt uit de focusgroeps gesprekken dat het feit dat mensen niet vaak in de kerk komen niet wil zeggen dat mensen zich niet betrokken voelen. Het blijkt dat mensen ook met meerdere kerkgemeenschappen tegelijk verbonden kunnen zijn. Daarnaast speelt de factor tijd een rol en blijkt dat kerkelijke betrokkenheid door de jaren heen fluctueert en dat verschillende vormen van verbinding elkaar kunnen afwisselen.

Het hoofdstuk wordt afgesloten met een beschrijving van de kerksluiting in Asten in de zomer van 2013. Het verlies van een ontmoetingsplaats leidt tot verlies van gemeenschap. Het afscheid gaat gepaard met gevoelens van verlies, die tijdens de afscheidsdienst benoemd worden. Het afscheid brengt met zich mee dat voor sommigen de afstand tot de kerk vergroot wordt. Tegelijkertijd is het voor de Protestantse gemeente Asten-Someren als geheel ook een gemeenschapsvormend proces geweest omdat de ervaring van verlies gedeeld wordt. Daarnaast roept de kerksluiting vragen op over de zichtbaarheid van de kerk in het dorp.

### Hoofdstuk 7

In hoofdstuk 7 vindt een perspectiefwisseling plaats en wordt gekeken hoe de kerk een rol speelt in het Brabants dorpsleven. Ik begin met een nadere verkenning van de context, waardoor verschillende samenwerkingspartners van de Protestantse gemeente in beeld komen. Vervolgens wordt een aantal voorbeelden beschreven van praktijken waarin besef van het heilige (*sacred consciousness*) aanwijsbaar is. In dit hoofdstuk worden raakvlakken verkend van kerk met zorg, onderwijs en cultuur.

De afgelopen decennia is de katholieke kerk van het centrum van het Brabantse dorpsleven verschoven naar de marge. Eerder speelde de kerk op diverse domeinen van de samenleving een rol via geestelijken die aan verenigingen en instellingen verbonden waren. Gevolg van de marginalisering is een groeiende onbekendheid met kerk en de christelijke traditie, wat terug te zien is in de verlegenheid ten aanzien van de katholieke identiteit van scholen en verenigingen. Een ander gevolg is een parochiële herindeling, waardoor verschillende dorpskerken in grotere parochies samengevoegd worden. Gevreesd wordt dat dit de sociale cohesie in dorpsgemeenschappen verzwakt. Daarnaast worden kerkgebouwen gesloten, maar het is interessant dat er alternatieve kerkplekken ontstaan in de vorm van een kapel.

De afgelopen decennia zijn de oecumenische contacten ook gegroeid. De protestantse en katholieke kerk vormden gescheiden werelden, maar tegenwoordige bezoeken protestanten en katholieken over en weer elkaars kerken. Er vinden oecumenische gespreksgroepen en vieringen plaats. Dit laatste gaat echter niet zonder slag of stoot. In 2012 leidde een verbod op oecumenische vieringen in Lierop en tijdens het Somerse Ziekentriduüm tot verhitte discussies. Door de oecumenische contacten met parochies, koren en het Ziekentriduüm, wint de protestantse gemeente aan zichtbaarheid in het dorpsleven.

De betrokkenheid van kerken bij zorg en welzijnswerk is niet altijd even vanzelfsprekend. Toch zijn de kerkelijke wortels van veel zorg- en welzijnswerk ook in Asten-Someren goed aanwijsbaar. Zoals het Ziekentriduüm, een driedaags festival voor oudere en chronisch zieke mensen, dat in 1962 begon als een initiatief vanuit de katholieke kerk. Hoewel de invloed van de kerk is verminderd, wil het Ziekentriduüm ruimte blijven bieden aan spirituele reflectie. Het verzorgingshuis presenteert zich als een neutraal huis, maar opvallend genoeg zijn de Kerst- en Paasviering katholiek. Sinds enkele jaren zijn de vieringen oecumenisch en wordt de predikant gevraagd om mee voor te gaan. Hierdoor worden gemeenschapsbanden in het verzorgingshuis versterkt. Het welzijnswerk heeft heel weinig contact met de kerken.

Ten derde komt de school als plek voor religiositeit in beeld. De protestantse school in Someren is enkele jaren geleden gefuseerd met een katholieke school. Op de nieuwe school is de aanwezigheid van de predikant minder vanzelfsprekend. De traditie om de week met de klassen te openen en te sluiten en Kerst en Pasen als school te vieren zijn wel in stand gebleven. Toch bespeuren de geïnterviewde leraren wel de nodige schroom ten aanzien van bidden en praten over God en bijbelverhalen, zowel bij collega's als bij ouders. Tegelijkertijd hebben de vieringen met Kerst en Pasen voor sommige mensen de kerkdiensten vervangen.

Ten slotte is er de uitwisseling van ideeën en praktijken tussen kerk en cultuur. Enerzijds gebruikt de kerk culturele uitingen om een thema als vluchtelingen te adresseren. Wat opvalt is dat regionale kerkelijke samenwerking lokaal kerk-zijn versterkt, doordat er een aanleiding ontstaat om contacten aan te halen met lokale kerken en niet-kerkelijke organisaties. Anderzijds wordt kerkmuziek uitgevoerd in de culturele context van de Koepelkerkconcerten. De concerten komen voort uit een behoefte de kerk in Lierop in stand te houden, niet alleen het gebouw, maar ook de religieuze functie als spiritueel centrum en ontmoetingsplek voor de dorpsgemeenschap. Er is ruimte voor muziek, samenzang en meditatie, waardoor de vraag opkomt of het gaat om een concert of een liturgie.

Op deze manier wordt in de praktijk zichtbaar hoe als gevolg van de deïstitutionalisering van religie religieuze praktijken zich verplaatsen naar andere maatschappelijke terreinen. Dit roept discussies op over de rol van kerk en religie in het publieke domein. Enerzijds is men bang voor religieuze uitingen in publieke, neutrale ruimten. Anderzijds worden alternatieve momenten voor ritueel en reflectie omarmd en wordt *sacred consciousness* gecreëerd en gevoed. Religieuze en seculiere repertoires raken verweven, waardoor mensen van verschillende culturele en religieuze achtergrond samengebracht worden.

### Hoofdstuk 8

Hoofdstuk 8 beschrijft het kerkelijk leven in Schildwolde, Hellum, Overschild en Noordbroek, die samen de Woldkerken vormen. De samenwerking begon in de jaren '60 tussen de hervormde kerken van Schildwolde en Hellum. In de jaren '90 is Overschild aangehaakt en in 2012 zocht de hervormde kerk van Noordbroek contact. Een Samen-op-Weg proces tussen de hervormde en gereformeerde kerk van Schildwolde is afgebroken rond 1990. Een verkenning van de context brengt de karakteristieken van de verschillende dorpen in beeld, van Overschild tussen de weilanden tot Noordbroek tussen de graan- en

aardappelvelden. Van Schildwolde met een grote vrijgemaakte kerk tot Hellingum waar het dorpsleven zich grotendeels afspeelt rond de kerk, de school en het dorpshuis.

Wederom gebruik ik Walkers model van vormen van verbinding om de relatie tussen kerk en dorpsgemeenschappen in de verschillende dorpen in kaart te brengen. Het kerkelijk leven en het dorpsleven zijn in Groningen meer met elkaar verweven dan in Brabant. Hoewel de kerk geen centrale positie inneemt, biedt het nog steeds verschillende voorzieningen aan de dorpsgemeenschap rondom rouwen en herdenken en het bieden van een ontmoetingsplek. Reizend van Schildwolde, via Hellingum en Noordbroek naar Overschild kan de indruk ontstaan dat we vier stadia van een verdwijnende dorpskerk zien. In Schildwolde is een kerkgebouw, worden vieringen gehouden en de meeste kerkelijke activiteiten vinden plaats in de leerkamer. Daarnaast zijn er verschillende dorpsactiviteiten waar de kerk aan mee doet, terwijl de samenwerking met de vrijgemaakte kerk ook groeit. In Hellingum ontbreken doordeeweekse kerkelijke activiteiten, er zijn wel kerkdiensten, maar vooral het gebouw is belangrijk om ingebed te blijven in het dorpsleven via de onderhoudswerkzaamheden en activiteiten in de kerk. Er wordt samengewerkt met de culturele commissie de Helmster Klokkeluiders. In Noordbroek is de situatie vergelijkbaar met Hellingum, maar zijn de mensen die verbonden zijn met de kerk, minder sterk verbonden met elkaar. Het kerkelijk leven bestaat uit kerkdiensten, pastoraal werk en vespers in het verzorgingshuis. Het kerkgebouw wordt door gidsen opengesteld voor rondleidingen en andere activiteiten. Maar het culturele leven is zichtbaarder in het dorp dan het kerkelijke leven. In 2016 is de kerk overgedragen aan de Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken. In Overschild lijkt de kerk praktisch verdwenen. De kerk is ook hier overgedragen aan de Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, er zijn zelden kerkdiensten of andere activiteiten. Er woont een handjevol kerkleden in het dorp. Op zondagmorgen vliegen dorpsbewoners uit naar alle windstreken om naar kerken in de omgeving te gaan. Maar tijdens een kerstnachtsdienst wordt de gelegenheid gegrepen om in het eigen dorp naar de kerk te kunnen.

De Woldkerken functioneren binnen verschillende regionale netwerken. Ten eerste vormen de vier kerken zelf een netwerk, waarin verschillende kerkelijke gemeenten een gemeenschap moeten zien te vormen. Ook speelt de kerk een rol in het in stand houden van gemeenschapsbanden met kerkleden die in een ander dorp in een verzorgingshuis wonen. Ten tweede zijn er contacten in clusterverband met de kerken in Slochteren en Kolham. Er vinden vergaderingen plaats, gezamenlijke kerkdiensten en gespreksavonden. Hierin ontstaan spanningen tussen lokaal en regionaal kerk-zijn. Mensen zien zich geconfronteerd met het dilemma om kerkelijk leven te centraliseren en/of kerkplekken in alle dorpen in stand te houden. Dit roept vragen op over toegankelijkheid en zichtbaarheid. Ten slotte kunnen mensen met meerdere kerkgemeenschappen tegelijk verbonden zijn. Zo zijn er via kerkgangers informele contacten met de Vereniging Vrijzinnig Protestantisme in Scheemda en Winschoten, met de Nieuwe Kerk in Groningen en de kerken in Siddeburen. In sommige gevallen kunnen de kerkplekken zo klein worden dat de vraag onvermijdelijk wordt: is dit nog kerk?

## Hoofdstuk 9

In hoofdstuk 9 vindt wederom een perspectiefwisseling plaats en kijken we weer hoe verschillende praktijkvelden elkaar over en weer beïnvloeden en ontdekken we religieuze praktijken in, op de rand van en buiten het kerkelijk domein. Hoe beïnvloeden dit soort praktijken de leefbaarheid in Groningen? Allereerst kijken we naar inter- en buitenkerkelijke contacten die ontstaan rondom de kerstnachtdiensten in de vier dorpen. In Schildwolde en Overschild zijn het oecumenische vieringen, in Hellum en Noordbroek worden vooral contacten aangehaald met niet-kerkelijke organisaties. Dat is ook niet heel verrassend, omdat in Hellum en Noordbroek alleen maar een Hervormde kerk is en in Schildwolde en Overschild meerdere kerken zijn (geweest). In alle dorpen wordt er naar gestreefd inclusief en toegankelijk te zijn en de banden in de dorpsgemeenschap te versterken. Maar de manier waarop dat vorm krijgt en uitgedragen wordt, verschilt per context.

Ten tweede verkennen we het veld van herdenkingscultuur. De kerken onderhouden de begraafplaats, herdenken op oudejaarsavond dorpsbewoners die overleden zijn in het afgelopen jaar en bieden gelegenheid voor de herdenking van de Tweede Wereldoorlog op 4 mei. Op de oudejaarsdienst en de 4 mei herdenking komen mensen uit het hele dorp af en het bevestigt de band die mensen voelen met het dorp, zowel in heden als verleden. Opvallend is dat de 4 mei herdenking in Hellum verschillende religieuze trekken heeft.

Ten derde wordt beschreven hoe kerk en cultuur met elkaar in verbinding staan door kunstprojecten, concerten, theatervoorstellingen en rondleidingen. Soms liggen kerk en cultuur in elkaars verlengde, maar ze kunnen ook tegenover elkaar geplaatst worden of beschouwd worden als gescheiden werelden. Wanneer het initiatief voor een Feest van de Geest vanuit de kerk komt, wordt de activiteit expliciet in een religieus kader geplaatst. Terwijl bij activiteiten van een culturele commissie of een theatergroep religieuze associaties eerder worden vermeden. Het is opvallend dat als mensen spreken over kerk en religie er een scherp onderscheid gemaakt wordt tussen het religieuze en het seculiere, maar in de praktijk blijkt het onderscheid moeilijk te maken.

Ten vierde kijken we naar de relatie tussen zorg, welzijn en de kerk. De gemeente organiseert vieringen in verzorgingshuizen en bezoekwerk. Daarnaast participeren de Woldkerken in diaconale netwerken, waar zorg- en welzijnsthema's worden verkend als armoede en de gevolgen van de participatiesamenleving. Het lijken pogingen te zijn om de kerkelijke verlegenheid te overwinnen. Het besef lijkt te groeien dat niet alleen mensen ver weg, maar ook mensen in de buurt ondersteuning nodig hebben. Het is interessant dat een gedeelde zorg mensen van verschillende kerkelijke achtergrond in een regio bij elkaar kan brengen en vervolgens ook weer in contact met andere organisaties.

Ten slotte volgen we de ontwikkelingen van Platform Kerk en Aardbeving. Het is een boeiende zoektocht van kerken om te ontdekken hoe ze van betekenis kunnen zijn. Het idee dat kerken iets met aardbevingen te maken hebben, werd zowel binnen als buiten de kerk met de nodige scepsis ontvangen. De aardbevingen als gevolg van de gaswinning veroorzaken in Groningen steeds meer schade, zowel materieel als immaterieel. In 2014 is

het interkerkelijke Platform Kerk en Aardbeving ontstaan, waar zeven kerkgenootschappen bij betrokken zijn. Het Platform heeft contact gezocht met diverse organisaties om informatie in te winnen en betrokkenheid te tonen. Er worden themadiensten gehouden, er wordt gewerkt aan pleitbezorging en er wordt gezocht naar wat de pastorale, diaconale en profetische taak van de kerk in deze context is.

### Hoofdstuk 10

In het concluderende hoofdstuk worden de observaties van het veldwerk verbonden aan verschillende theoretische inzichten om de hoofdvraag te beantwoorden: welke rol spelen Protestantse kerken in het dorpsleven en in hoeverre dragen kerken bij aan de leefbaarheid van het platteland? De marginalisering van de kerk in de Nederlandse samenleving roept vragen op over de rol en relevantie van de kerk in de eenentwintigste eeuw. De concepten 'leefbaarheid' en 'kwaliteit van leven' zijn niet alleen behulpzaam om de rol van de kerk in kaart te brengen, maar ook om een perspectiefwisseling op gang te brengen. Een perspectiefwisseling in de Nederlandse rurale theologie waarin de aandacht verschuift van de kerk als organisatie, naar de plattelandscontext waarin kerkgemeenschappen kerk zijn.

De drieslag plek, mensen en activiteiten brengt in beeld hoe kerken zichtbaar en van betekenis kunnen zijn in het dorpsleven. Daarnaast biedt Walkers model van verbondenheid zicht op hoe betrokkenheid bij de kerk zich ontwikkelt door de tijd heen en hoe de *solid* dorpskerk al een *liquid* netwerk is, dat zowel op lokaal als regionaal niveau functioneert. Op beide niveau's kan ook nog een onderscheid gemaakt worden tussen kerkelijke en niet-kerkelijke samenwerkingspartners, waardoor een soort matrix ontstaat. Bovendien blijkt dat regionaal kerk-zijn vooral functioneert via verbondenheid met mensen en activiteiten, terwijl voor lokaal kerk-zijn de verbondenheid met plaatsen en jaarlijks terugkerende evenementen van belang zijn. Regionale samenwerking tussen kerken heeft het risico dat de blik naar binnen wordt gericht. Maar als samenwerking niet zozeer voortkomt uit overlevingsdrang, maar uit een gedeelde zorg of verlangen, die niet meteen het eigen voortbestaan aangaat, heeft het meer kans van slagen.

Kerk en leefbaarheid kunnen op verschillende manieren op elkaar betrokken worden. Ten eerste wordt het kerkelijk leven gevormd door ontwikkelingen op het platteland als vergrijzing, bevolkingskrimp en toenemende mobiliteit. Ten tweede kan de vraag gesteld worden hoe kerken bijdragen aan verschillende aspecten van leefbaarheid als woonomgeving, sociale omgeving en voorzieningen. Maar een dergelijke analyse voldoet niet om de betekenis van het kerkelijk leven te doorgronden, omdat het de kerk beperkt tot sociaal-geografische termen. Ten derde kunnen kerkgemeenschappen zich de vraag stellen hoe ze zich dienen te verhouden tot leefbaarheidsvraagstukken die dorpsbewoners raken in hun persoonlijk leven. Op die manier kan ook kerkelijke verlegenheid overwonnen worden en de noden van verschillende leeftijdsgroepen in beeld komen. Zeker als kerken ook het leefbaarheidsbegrip ter discussie stellen en de vraag oproepen of het voldoende recht doet aan hoe mensen zin en betekenis in hun leven vinden.

De deïstitutionalisering van religie leidt tot een intrigerende paradox. Enerzijds is er een groeiende onbekendheid met kerk en religie, anderzijds verplaatsen religieuze praktijken zich naar andere domeinen in de samenleving als kunst, cultuur, onderwijs en zorg. Dat betekent ook dat het religieuze dorpsleven zich niet beperkt tot het kerkelijk domein en dat er raakvlakken ontstaan tussen kerk en andere *fields of practice*. Hier ontstaan plekken waar besef van het heilige (*sacred consciousness*) in gemeenschapsverband wordt gecreëerd en in stand gehouden. Doordat bij deze gelegenheden mensen van verschillende religieuze achtergrond met elkaar in contact worden gebracht, wordt *bridging* sociaal kapitaal gecreëerd. Tegelijkertijd doen zich hier discussies voor over toegankelijkheid en inclusiviteit. Op de kruisvlakken tussen kerk en andere praktijkvelden als onderwijs en cultuur wordt duidelijk welke positie kerk en religie innemen in de samenleving en de betekenis van ritueel en reflectie voor leefbaarheid en welzijn.

Rurale theologie moet als uitgangspunt nemen hoe mensen op het platteland praten over de betekenis van kerk en geloof en waar zij sporen van God zien. Dat betekent voor dorpskerken dat het de moeite waard is om religieuze praktijken, behoeften en vragen in de plattelandscontext serieus te nemen, waardoor een *liquid* kerk in beeld komt. Het kerkelijke dorpsleven kent tal van verschijningsvormen: van kerkdiensten tot concerten, van vieringen op scholen tot diaconale platforms en van kerstkuiers tot kinderpaaswakes. Een kerk biedt ruimte aan een geloofsgemeenschap en aan voorbijgangers en is een plek om te vieren, te dienen en te leren. En dat gebeurt niet alleen binnen de muren van het kerkgebouw. Overal waar een christelijke levensovertuiging mensen aanspoort en motiveert om anderen te ondersteunen, om protest aan te tekenen tegen misstanden, om te vieren, te herdenken en te bezinnen, kunnen sporen van God ontdekt worden.



## Index

### A

- Accessibility 23, 33, 34, 57, 60, 62, 64, 69, 74, 115, 139, 141, 157, 158, 170, 171, 181, 194, 207, 208, 213, 217, 219, 224, 235, 236, 238, 242-244, 246, 249, 274, 281, 286, 291, 298, 299, 301, 303, 304
- Advent 44, 45, 135, 138, 159, 233, 238, 239, 276, 297, 306
- Ageing 19, 23, 29, 34, 53, 57, 59, 69, 74, 83, 106, 119, 125, 229, 260, 288
- Agriculture 17, 19, 29, 55, 57, 58, 74, 83, 99, 106, 107, 119, 197, 288, 292
- All Souls Day 89, 186, 295, 302
- Ammerman, Nancy T. 24, 30, 53, 55, 90, 91, 280, 291, 295, 297, 298, 304
- Apathy 104, 108
- Art 27, 32, 65, 87, 89, 90, 122, 144, 161, 185, 234, 250, 251, 295-297
- Ascension day 50, 109, 125, 196, 205, 210, 216, 250
- Astley, Jeff 21, 25, 28, 32, 109, 117, 127, 280, 292, 295, 303
- Attribution of meaning 24, 28, 44, 48, 57, 62, 74, 75, 88-90, 98, 117, 124, 154, 162, 185, 225, 241, 242, 253, 257, 291, 297, 301
- Autonomy 55, 60, 61, 63, 66, 67, 71, 101, 114, 176

### B

- Baptism 96, 143, 164, 210, 211, 246, 289, 302
- Basal sacred 241
- Beekman, Wim 102, 227, 228
- Belonging, model of 21, 28, 34, 48, 95, 144, 375
- Bible 43, 95, 128, 131, 136, 138, 148, 149, 179, 180, 181, 202-204, 209, 222, 223, 228, 235, 241, 255, 256, 266, 287, 293, 300
- Blessing 130, 137, 166, 172-175, 238, 241, 255, 305-307
- Bock, Bettina 60, 63, 66, 67, 289
- Bons-Storm, Riet 267, 285, 305
- Bonum Tenete 154-158, 162-164, 168, 174, 177, 180, 182, 283
- Boomars, Lianne 56
- Bourdieu, P. 30, 87
- Brouwer, Rein 18, 20, 25, 28, 84, 90, 99, 100, 309, 311, 355, 358
- Browning, Don 32

### C

- Care 18, 23, 28, 32, 35, 42, 45, 47, 60, 63, 66-69, 77, 79-80, 82-89, 91, 93, 98, 101, 103-104, 106-107, 110-112, 119, 128, 130-134, 154, 170, 174, 177, 178, 181, 188-189, 194, 196-197, 199, 217, 223, 228, 233, 258, 260-261, 265, 268-269, 274, 276-277, 280-281, 287-291, 293-295, 305
- cooperation 119
- Carnival 150, 159, 162
- Case study research 37-39
- Catechism 78, 136-138, 142, 148, 158, 163, 177, 203, 212, 224, 286
- Centralisation 60, 102
- Change of perspective 28, 34, 35, 93, 104, 105, 108, 115, 154, 258, 279-281, 286, 288
- Christmas 28, 35, 43, 45, 96, 111, 133, 135, 163, 174, 178, 180, 199, 203, 209, 210, 219, 229, 230, 233-245, 252, 255, 297, 298, 302, 306
- celebration 163, 175, 179, 210, 234, 240, 241, 243-245, 249, 276, 298, 299, 301, 304
- service 45, 96, 110, 180, 199, 201, 219, 234-238, 240, 242, 243, 245, 253, 255, 256, 259, 276, 283, 290, 298, 299, 301, 302, 306
- walk 44, 45, 213, 215, 216, 242-244, 255, 290, 298, 303
- Church
- affiliation 17, 80, 81, 178, 217, 256, 274
- attendance 78, 80, 81, 141, 142, 155, 163, 223
- building 24, 27, 29, 32, 37, 40, 43, 44, 47, 48, 50, 68, 69, 78, 81, 87-91, 96, 101, 103-105, 107, 109, 117, 118, 121, 122, 124, 143, 147-150, 153, 160, 165, 169, 178-184, 186, 188, 192-194, 197-200, 203, 205, 208, 210-214, 216-219, 224, 228-230, 233, 234, 243-257, 281-285, 287, 289, 290, 296-301, 304-306
- community 20, 22, 27, 33, 44, 45, 48, 52, 70, 97, 103, 104, 108-111, 117, 123-125, 127, 128, 130, 131, 133-136, 139-144, 147, 148, 151, 193, 199, 201, 203, 205, 208-210, 212-218, 220-222, 225, 228-230, 240, 242, 243, 245, 246, 250, 251, 254-259, 281, 282, 287, 290, 296

## Index

- involvement 42, 84, 125, 141, 283  
life 220, 24, 27, 28, 30-33, 54, 57, 60, 70, 80, 88, 94, 97-100, 117, 118, 125, 127, 128, 131, 133, 137, 141, 143, 145, 149, 153, 154, 159  
membership 22, 23, 37, 77, 80, 81, 82, 95, 209  
network 30, 39, 45, 53, 108, 125, 191, 209, 219, 220, 225, 228, 266, 267, 286, 287  
newsletter 35, 40-43, 45-47, 51, 52, 70, 93, 108-114, 117, 139, 146, 147, 182, 193, 203, 209, 212, 222, 223, 255, 261, 270, 271, 280, 287, 291  
place 30, 88, 161, 227, 305  
schism 16, 32, 68, 282, 290, 303  
warden 78, 206, 212, 217, 274  
Citizen engagement 66, 84, 97  
Civil  
  religion 90, 91, 249  
  sacred 90  
  society 20, 59, 77, 78, 83, 86, 97  
Cluster 198, 219-221, 223-225, 250, 251, 287  
Coding 7, 40, 46, 48  
Collective ritual 90, 277  
Community  
  building 20, 30, 74, 97, 189, 220, 281, 286, 292, 295, 297, 300, 307  
  feeling 63, 69, 129, 289, 305, 306  
  initiative 19, 66, 109, 129, 196, 199, 201, 206, 215, 243  
  life 19, 102, 104, 141, 291, 307  
  spirit 127, 219, 227, 236, 237, 240, 241, 286  
Compassion 96, 113, 171, 185, 187  
Concert 42, 44, 50, 51, 110, 154, 164, 171, 182-185, 187, 188, 207, 208, 210, 219, 241, 250, 256, 257, 283, 302, 306  
Conflict 95, 127, 147, 163  
Congregational studies 22, 31  
Connectedness 140, 143, 246, 275, 281, 285, 286, 287, 301  
Contextual 18, 20, 21, 22, 28, 32, 33, 34, 61, 100, 104, 115, 267, 281  
Contingency 20, 26, 74, 111, 115, 188, 291, 292, 295, 296  
Cooperation 24, 33, 37, 40, 41, 43-46, 48, 61, 69, 86, 97, 103, 115, 178, 267, 272, 273, 281, 286, 287  
  of churches 19, 24, 26, 33, 34, 38, 42, 61, 99, 110, 115, 118, 125, 126, 133, 134, 151, 164, 166, 169, 195, 202, 221, 222, 224, 229, 256, 258, 260, 261, 267, 281, 285-287, 294  
  of municipalities 63, 125  
  process 81, 100-103, 118  
  village 61, 66, 103, 119, 126, 154, 176, 178, 179, 192, 201, 216, 234, 244, 253, 282, 283, 285-287, 289  
Coping 50, 73, 114, 172, 184, 188, 203, 256, 263, 274  
Cultural day 44, 210, 214-216, 249, 255, 258, 290  
Culture 24, 28, 31, 35, 47, 83, 94, 96, 97, 126, 154, 181, 188, 189, 233, 234, 250, 252-257, 276, 279, 280, 294-97, 299, 303
- ## D
- Davie, Grace 96, 258, 285  
Death 110, 130, 131, 159, 185, 242, 280, 293  
Decentralisation 60, 83, 258, 260, 294  
De-churching 25  
Deinstitutionalisation of religion 29, 34, 91, 154, 161, 162, 181, 189, 279, 295  
Dekker, Gerard 79, 82, 84, 85  
Dekker, Paul 97  
Demographic 29, 57, 59, 74, 99, 288  
Denominational 79, 200, 201, 202, 205, 286, 287, 304  
Denscombe, Martyn 38-40, 47, 49, 53  
Depillarisation 77, 80, 82, 83, 86  
Diaconal  
  network 234, 258, 260, 261, 293  
  platform 45, 261, 294  
  uneasiness 130, 134, 258, 277, 284, 301  
  work 18, 42, 86, 102, 125, 126, 133, 134, 153, 221, 258, 284, 293  
Differentiation 23, 34, 77, 80, 91, 104, 279, 295  
Diversity 32, 56, 140, 141, 153, 180, 186, 205, 289, 292, 300, 303  
*Doorbraakgedachte* 79
- ## E
- Ecclesial  
  field (of practice) / domain 27, 28, 82, 91, 98, 180, 233, 245, 257, 280, 295, 297, 304, 306  
  uneasiness 83, 85, 86, 91, 98, 104, 151, 288, 291, 293, 294  
Ecological 58, 62, 72, 267  
Ecumenic 27, 41-43, 46, 79, 88, 94, 97, 102, 126, 137, 139, 151, 154, 155, 164-69, 175, 185, 188, 201, 202, 234, 235, 245, 250, 258, 261, 262

## Index

Emerging rituals 302  
Employment 15, 25, 57, 62-65, 73, 91, 104, 120, 235, 263, 292  
Empowerment 136, 138, 148, 153, 173, 187, 284, 285, 304, 306, 307  
Ethical 22, 49, 73, 107, 137, 270, 271, 273, 275  
Exclusion 95, 98, 111, 112, 115, 139, 147, 157, 167, 182, 189, 297, 302, 303

## F

Faith  
    community 68, 97, 98, 104, 109, 127, 147, 159, 213, 235, 257, 285, 290, 306  
    development 127, 128, 136, 137, 164  
Festival of the Spirit 215, 216, 250, 251, 296, 299  
Fiddes, Paul 53, 296  
Fields of practice 27, 28, 30, 35, 87, 89, 91, 154, 188, 233, 258, 295, 297, 299, 302, 305, 306  
First communion 163, 164, 177, 178  
Flyvbjerg, Bent 38, 39  
Food bank 111, 134, 135, 194, 235, 259, 261  
Formation 81, 101, 137, 224, 295  
Frames of meaning 137, 186, 188, 250, 292  
Funeral 96, 124, 131, 143, 148, 150, 153, 157, 163, 164, 174, 178, 198, 205, 210, 214, 215, 217, 245, 289, 300, 302

## G

Ganzevoort, Ruard R. 87  
Gardenier, Jan Dirk 19, 55, 56, 61-64, 70  
Gibbs, Eddie 302, 305  
Gibson, Tim 94, 95, 99, 106, 107  
Good Friday 181, 183, 184, 186, 188, 252  
Good life 28, 62, 71, 74, 106, 109, 112, 172, 173, 297, 306  
Groot, J.P. 62, 95, 99  
Guest, Matthew 22, 31

## H

Haardt, Maaike de 305  
Hart, Joep de 84, 90, 97  
Harvest festival 192, 229, 249, 282, 283  
Health 26, 48, 58, 68, 70, 72, 73, 83, 84, 86, 90, 110-112, 172, 206, 269, 285, 293  
Hegstad, Harald 27, 71, 305  
Heritage day 44, 53, 163, 255, 349  
Hermelink, Jan 27, 28, 31, 138, 146, 280, 285, 294, 304-306  
Hervieu Léger, Danièle 105, 280, 292, 301-303

Hoekstra, Trinus 86, 107, 267  
Hopewell, James 31  
Hospitality 31, 103, 109, 110, 122, 139, 164, 194, 213, 240, 282, 296, 304, 307  
House church 102  
Housing 25, 29, 59, 62, 79, 83, 88, 89, 91, 107, 119, 156, 194, 196, 263, 265, 273, 292, 294  
Houtepen, Anton 85

## I

Implicit religiosity 96  
Incarnational 100, 108, 235  
Inclusion 30, 46, 95, 98, 127, 139, 151, 157, 166, 173, 183, 243, 248, 303  
Interdenominational 142, 162, 163, 167, 183  
Intertwining 30, 128, 170, 173, 250, 277, 295, 296  
Isolation 67, 97, 100, 175, 307

## J

Jager-Vreugdenhil, Marja 85  
Jenkins, Kathleen 38, 39, 46  
Jesus 27, 128, 140, 210, 211, 235, 237-239, 247, 305

## K

Kerk, Pim van de 18, 99, 100, 105, 106, 108, 235  
Kingdom of God 106, 108, 112, 306  
Kloksmeer 205, 215, 246  
Klomp, Mirella 29, 89, 80, 98, 304  
Knibbe, Kim 81, 89  
Kuyper, Abraham 68  
Kwaliteit van leven 26, 70, 72, 73, 108

## L

Landscape 24, 33, 57, 58, 74, 196, 206, 211, 254, 268, 289, 297  
Langrish, Michael, L. 18, 96, 97, 99, 106, 291  
Lay leadership 283  
Leefbaarheid 19, 20, 23, 55, 56, 59-62, 64, 66-68, 70, 71, 82, 84, 108, 264, 289, 303  
Life attitude 136, 151, 237, 291, 292  
Liquid church 27, 30, 32, 181, 285, 296, 297, 302-305, 307  
Living environment 25, 56, 62, 64, 67, 71, 73, 74, 94, 111, 113, 178, 217, 225, 273, 276, 288, 291, 292  
Localisation 67, 102  
Loneliness 67, 69, 84, 95, 110, 111, 132, 134, 165, 166, 172, 173, 176, 189, 260, 261  
Loor, H.D. de 18, 32, 99, 104

**M**

- Maatschappij van Welstand 11, 20, 21, 33, 139  
 Mak, Geert 19, 55  
 Maltzahn, Andreas 104  
 Marginal church 18, 20, 23, 29, 34, 68, 77, 86, 88,  
 91, 151, 155, 156-158, 174, 177, 199, 212,  
 217, 233, 276, 279, 280, 282, 292, 300  
 Marriage 90, 91, 96, 110, 122, 125, 137, 142, 143,  
 150, 153, 162-164, 167, 205, 212, 289, 302  
 Martineau, Jeremy 94, 96, 289-291  
 Mary Homage 42, 162, 166, 169-174, 299, 306  
 Material 26, 73, 105, 114, 115, 129, 204, 291, 292  
 Matthew 18:20 27, 124, 167, 305  
 Meal 41, 42, 44, 51, 88, 118, 119, 132, 133, 135,  
 139, 176, 199, 203-205, 223  
 Meaning making 20, 30, 38, 37, 186, 292, 295,  
 297, 302, 305  
 Media 43, 77, 89, 111, 136, 164, 188, 251, 266,  
 271, 272, 298  
 Melis, Korrie 19, 20, 55-57, 60-63, 68, 72, 82, 147,  
 288, 303  
 Merino, S.M. 114  
 Meulen, Marten van der 20, 29, 88, 89, 298, 304  
 Miller McLemore, Bonnie 30, 32, 38,  
 Ministry 21, 22, 94, 99, 100, 105, 109, 292  
 Minority 32, 33, 62, 80, 120, 121, 151, 155, 163,  
 282  
 Missional 21, 49, 128, 139, 185, 245  
 Mobility 17, 19, 20, 23, 25, 28, 34, 47, 48, 55, 57,  
 64, 66, 67, 73, 95, 104, 224, 288,  
 Moltmann, Jürgen 27, 93, 296, 307  
 Motivation 22, 28, 40, 66, 75, 79, 90, 96, 98, 102,  
 106, 130, 134, 138, 169, 183, 185, 221, 254,  
 268, 269, 282, 287, 296, 301, 306, 307  
 Mourning 125, 126, 130, 131, 148, 161, 176, 206,  
 212, 293

**N**

- Neutrality 23, 25, 31, 81, 83, 85, 154, 157, 163,  
 170, 175, 210, 234, 235, 247, 249, 275, 298,  
 300, 302, 304.

**O**

- Ordinary  
 ecclesiology 18, 31, 32, 45, 127, 234, 284, 303  
 theology 21, 25, 28, 32, 94, 109, 117, 127, 133,  
 292, 295, 303  
 Open church / community 90, 139, 140, 251  
 Osmer, Richard 31

**P**

- Panelli, Ruth 26, 56, 57, 75, 289, 305  
 Participation society 45, 77, 81, 83, 91, 105, 260  
 Passion 29, 89-91, 160, 180, 183, 298  
 Pentecost 216, 250, 257  
 Personal  
 development 50, 68, 109, 112, 151, 176, 295,  
 297  
 life arena 26, 73, 75, 105, 108, 114, 127, 130,  
 204, 261, 280, 291-293  
 well-being 20, 22, 62, 70, 71, 74, 75, 110-115,  
 117, 127, 137, 188, 273, 291, 294, 307  
 Physical (living) environment 20, 29, 47, 48, 57,  
 58, 60, 62, 64, 65, 67, 70, 74, 94, 109, 111,  
 115, 119, 201, 206, 210, 215, 217, 261, 276,  
 289, 291, 294  
 Pillarisation 53, 77, 79, 91, 125, 157, 285, 290, 303  
 Place attachment 19, 193, 206, 229, 249, 285  
 Ploeger, A.K. 99, 100, 107  
 Ploeger-Grotegoed, J.J. 99, 100, 107  
 Poor relief 18, 78, 79, 82, 261, 279  
 Population decline 19, 23, 60, 288  
 Post, Paul 24, 27, 29, 89, 297  
 Poverty 47, 72, 79, 84, 85, 105, 107, 111, 112, 130,  
 135, 136, 169, 176, 259, 260, 267, 291  
 Practical theology 20, 25, 31, 46, 87, 88, 148, 263,  
 264, 273-275, 281  
 Prayer day 224, 256, 267, 269, 291  
 Private sphere 20, 24, 188, 293  
 Profane 77, 89-91, 170, 235, 250, 298, 299, 302  
 Prophetic 82, 269, 276, 288  
 Public domain / sphere 23, 29, 77, 79, 81, 84-87,  
 89, 91, 154, 155, 177, 249, 255, 280, 282,  
 293, 296, 299, 300, 302  
 Public ritual 29, 89, 111, 201, 245, 266, 298,  
 Putnam, R. D. 29, 97

**R**

- Reconciliation 95, 105, 108, 185, 268  
 Refugee 43, 47, 111, 113, 153, 154, 181, 182, 260,  
 285, 290, 293, 294, 296  
 Regional  
 church 100, 107, 191, 225, 275, 286, 287  
 congregation 17, 81, 101  
 cooperation 26, 61, 115, 125, 253, 267, 281,  
 294  
 Regionalisation 19, 33, 67, 68, 81, 96, 99, 102, 103,  
 125, 283, 286, 288

## Religious

- affiliation 25, 83, 157, 188, 301
- education 78, 126, 137, 156, 158, 164, 177-180, 182, 220, 238, 247
- illiteracy 85, 86, 91, 98, 180, 291, 294, 300, 301
- repertoires 75, 77, 86, 87, 89, 162, 297
- space 298-300
- Resilience 67, 73, 104
- Roeland, Johan 87
- Roest, Henk de 22, 27, 28, 30, 32, 41, 43, 53, 81, 84, 88, 101, 106, 146-149, 161, 259, 281, 284
- Rogerson, R.J. 26, 34, 72, 73, 75, 291
- Russell, Anthony 94, 95, 98
- Rural
  - ecclesiology 29, 93, 94, 97, 115

**S**

- Sacrality 23, 27, 83, 88, 89, 296, 299
- Sacred
  - consciousness 30, 90, 91, 154, 161, 162, 180, 186, 188, 189, 233, 239, 250, 257, 292, 295, 297, 298, 304-307
  - place 27, 29, 83, 88-91, 162, 295-297, 299, 305
  - space 88, 89, 174, 299, 305
- Safety 20, 25, 63, 64, 71, 73, 78, 111-113, 128, 172, 181, 182, 187, 217, 238, 251, 262-264, 279, 289, 300
- Samen op Weg* process 16, 17, 33, 79, 88, 101, 102, 117, 192, 223
- Schippers, Inez 27, 83, 88-90, 296, 297, 299
- Schippers, Kor 26, 105, 106, 108
- Schlegel, Thomas 94, 105, 108
- Separation church and state 23, 77, 78, 121
- Secular space 30, 170, 173, 189, 277, 297-299
- Secularisation 23, 29, 34, 68, 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 91, 162, 167, 173, 279, 293, 300, 302
- Sinninghe Damsté, W.A. 18
- Social capital (theory) 22, 25, 29, 48, 49, 72, 84, 93, 94, 97, 98, 197, 199, 281, 290
  - bonding 29, 97, 98, 130, 203, 204, 290, 301
  - bridging 29, 97, 98, 110, 115, 162, 169, 182, 201, 202, 209, 216, 222, 253, 284, 28-291, 294, 301
  - linking 29, 97, 98, 182, 258, 284, 290, 291, 294

## Social

- cohesion 26, 48, 56, 64, 65, 67-69, 74, 83, 93, 97, 100, 110, 159, 160, 162, 182, 185, 186, 194, 210, 235, 243, 261, 271, 273, 289, 300-302, 304, 305
  - criticism 72, 85, 86, 295, 296
  - geography 18, 19, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31, 55, 56, 63, 64, 70, 288
  - infrastructure 18, 56, 67
  - innovation 60, 66, 67
  - (living) environment 17, 20, 25, 46, 62, 63, 65, 67, 70, 72-75, 96, 108, 112, 126, 142, 179, 204, 264, 288, 289, 291
  - network 19, 48, 68, 97, 111, 19, 134, 142, 260, 274, 276, 294
  - security 60, 62, 72, 82, 85, 91, 291
  - segregation 22, 48, 79, 82, 115, 147, 169, 290, 297, 303-305
  - team 44, 196, 261, 285, 294
  - Sociocultural 56, 57, 60, 63, 74, 82, 88, 289, 305
  - Socio-economic 56, 57, 68, 71, 74, 104, 106, 111
  - Sociology of religion 18, 20, 23, 25, 26, 29, 31
  - Solidarity 60, 71, 79, 86, 90, 113, 122, 124, 127, 138, 172, 173, 205, 264, 266, 267, 271, 272, 284
  - Spirituality 24, 30, 37, 73, 80, 84, 86, 90, 105, 110, 114, 138, 144, 145, 156, 165, 166, 173, 174, 183, 187, 249-251, 291, 294, 297, 304
  - Stewardship 71, 284, 293
  - Suffering 71, 73, 113, 114, 184, 203, 247, 269, 292
  - Sunday school 34, 44, 100, 106, 109, 146, 195, 202, 203, 209, 211, 212, 218, 220, 221, 235, 236, 244, 286, 287
  - Survival mode / attitude 50, 71, 106, 124-126, 151, 153, 267, 279, 281, 287, 305
  - Sustainability 21, 25, 29, 37, 62, 63, 65, 71-74, 94, 103, 105, 112, 269, 271, 273, 284, 290
  - Swinton, John 31
  - Symbols 25, 28, 128, 129, 132, 134, 142, 160, 164, 168, 172, 178, 186, 252, 255, 294, 298, 304
- T**
- Thanksgiving day 43, 137, 178
  - Theatre 156, 160, 174, 181, 182, 198, 214, 219, 234, 250, 256, 257
  - Thissen, Frans 19, 20, 29, 34, 48, 55, 56, 61, 64, 67, 69, 70, 74, 96, 243, 267
  - Tonnaer, Judith 297, 302

## Index

Tourism 29, 58, 65, 95, 106, 120, 217, 289, 290  
Transcendence 28, 90, 96, 296, 307

### U

Uncertainty 104, 110, 114, 130, 172, 204, 237,  
265, 268  
Unemployment 83, 110, 111, 293  
Urbanisation 342

### V

Values 356, 359, 366  
Vereniging Vrijzinnig Protestanten (VVP) 349,  
379  
Vicarious religion 96, 258, 285  
Village  
  church 102  
  church life 24, 31, 54, 94, 305  
  ecclesial year 45, 284  
  ecclesiology 280, 302  
  events 41, 44, 53, 96, 143, 151, 159, 188, 205,  
  245, 256, 282, 283, 285, 287  
  hall 44, 47, 64, 104, 120, 195, 197, 198, 199,  
  206, 207, 210, 219, 229, 238, 240, 244,  
  254, 256, 282, 283, 304  
  history 96, 193, 206, 210, 249, 250, 252  
  identity 94, 109, 120, 182, 194, 289  
Visibility 22, 27, 29, 33, 34, 42, 47, 53, 56, 60, 64,  
66, 79, 71, 74, 78, 81, 86-89, 96, 99, 102, 103,  
111, 112, 115, 117, 130, 131, 135, 136, 141,  
143, 151, 153-155, 163, 166, 170, 173, 179,  
181, 183, 187, 188, 197, 199, 202, 206, 209,  
213, 218, 219, 229, 233, 234, 245, 251, 252,  
255, 261, 264, 271, 272, 280-283, 285-287,  
290, 292, 293, 298, 300, 301, 303-306  
Vrijmaking 32,  
Vulnerability 18, 67, 106, 112, 172, 176, 237, 238,  
261

### W

Waal, Hans de 133,  
Walker, David 21, 28, 34, 48, 56, 93, 95-98, 115,  
117, 141, 142, 144, 145, 191, 230, 233, 280,  
281, 285  
Walti, Christian 138  
Ward, Pete 25, 27, 30, 31, 38, 40, 53, 280, 285,  
296, 304, 305, 307  
Welfare state 77, 82, 83, 85, 86, 91

Well-being 48, 62, 70-75, 110-115, 117, 127, 137,  
153, 188, 204, 237, 261, 273, 291, 294, 307  
Wigg-Stevenson, Nathalie 30, 86, 87  
Wmo (Social Support Act) 83-85, 135  
Worldview 26, 37, 38, 47, 48, 63, 71-75, 80, 85, 90,  
99, 106, 108, 114, 128, 134, 136, 137, 146,  
151, 178, 203, 284, 288, 295, 297, 300, 307

### Y

Youth work 79, 83, 102, 118, 156, 170, 176, 224,  
236

## Curriculum vitae

Jacobine Gelderloos was born in The Hague, the Netherlands on 8 December 1985. She attended the Bornego College in Heerenveen, completing her education at gymnasium level within the track Culture and Society in 2004. From 2004 to 2012 Jacobine studied Theology at the University of Groningen, completing her BA degree in 2008 and her Research MA degree Religion and Culture in 2012. During her graduate studies she specialised in the field of church buildings and liturgy. She also completed a minor Western Music at the University of Amsterdam in 2009. From 2010 to 2012 Jacobine worked as theological advisor for the ecumenical community at the Pepergasthuiskerk in Groningen. In 2012 she began her doctoral research on churches in the Dutch countryside at the Protestant Theological University. She has reworked her dissertation into a publication for the general public in Dutch: *Sporen van God in het dorp, nieuwe perspectieven voor kerken op het platteland* (Zoetermeer: Boekcentrum, 2018). Currently Jacobine works for the Protestants Dienstencentrum in Utrecht as project manager *Dorpskerkenbeweging* (Village Church Movement).

