

Captivated by time?

A qualitative exploratory study into the experiences of church leaving millennials, and those of their parents, with religious socialisation within the family, church and school.



Anja Moesker

*This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Geert Moesker, and to my grandchildren:
Anne Mette, Christian, Laure, Pieter, Johanna, Simon, and Tommy.*

*My father, Geert Moesker, would have liked to study theology. Unfortunately, this was not possible
because he had to provide for his family due to his disabled father.*

Dear Dad, I never knew you, but I know about your dream. That dream never came true.
I am glad that, through this dissertation, I have been able to come closer to fulfilling your dream.
Although you would never have imagined this as the father of four daughters, it has come to pass.
May it be a blessing in the transmission of faith through the generations, of which you are the
progenitor.

Dear grandchildren, Grandma Anja dedicates this thesis to you in the hope that you too may know the
Heavenly Father, whom Grandpa Piet and I have known in our lives. Grandpa Piet and I pray every
day that you may carry the core value of love in your lives, just as your parents do.

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Preface

Captivated by time?

A qualitative exploratory study into the experiences of church leaving millennials, and those of their parents, with religious socialisation within the family, church and school.

The phrase ‘Captivated by time?’ often came to my mind as a possible title for this dissertation during the years I spent researching millennials leaving the church. Several church members with whom I discussed church disaffiliation stated, ‘It’s the times we live in! They (the millennials) no longer want to commit to the church and have so many choices to make, that they no longer (want to) attend church.’ Another person responded: ‘They are too indifferent and only think about themselves.’ The first comment expresses a sense of resignation, the second a judgement.

These comments, although I disagree with them, are not unfounded. The times we live in contribute to people leaving the church. Nowadays, it is more difficult to believe in God, partly because faith has become an option. In the past, the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was normal to believe and attend church (Taylor, 2007), but no longer. Yet I kept feeling resistance with reference to *Zeitgeist*. Is the answer that simple? Looking at the times we live in, it is true that young people have more choices than their parents did and have become more individualistic. Is that a decline? Are we determined by the times we live in? Are we chained and shackled by them? Is it inevitable that when you live in a time when faith is less common, you have to leave the church? And is it true that millennials only think of themselves?

During this research, I have come to see that, despite the times we live in, it is not determined that we make the choices belonging to that particular time. In other words, we are not bound by that time. And it is too easy to attribute the cause of leaving the church to the times. To me, this comes across as: ‘Well, that’s just the way it is and there’s nothing we can do about it.’ The society you belong to creates ‘the times,’ and church members are part of it. You can partially withdraw from that culture, for example, by establishing pillars. And that happened frequently in the last century in churches and political parties. Yet, despite the pillars, church disaffiliation accelerated in the 1960s of the previous century, gained momentum and dragged many along with it. Withdrawal was not the answer.

Nevertheless, ‘Captivated by time’ as a possible title for this thesis remained stuck in my mind because of the layered nature of the concept. It can mean that you are stuck in time and determined by it, but also that you become fascinated by it and see the possibilities that our time offers. And, for me, the latter happened.

‘For everything that happens, there is a time, a time for everything under heaven.’
Ecclesiastes 3:1.

I also detected a fascination with time in Ecclesiastes. He gives many examples, to which I would like to add one: there is a time to raise children and a time to let them go. As parents and churches, you only receive one time to intentionally pass on the faith, namely, the time of your children's youth. After that comes a time to let go. The message of Ecclesiastes is that the time we are given is the time that God has determined for us. The time in which we now live offers ample opportunities to spread the gospel, and I see that as a mission. In this time, we are allowed to think for ourselves and make our own choices, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is within us. The baby boomers among us (of whom I am one) no longer have to live up to all kinds of expectations because 'it has always been that way' or 'because that is how it should be.' Within the freedom that Christ gives us, which is timeless, decisions can be made, and choices can be made that bring us all, parents and children alike, closer to Him. I am fascinated by this time and do not long for the old days. In this, too, I echo Ecclesiastes:

'And do not ask yourself why things were better in the past than they are now. It shows little wisdom to ask that question.' Ecclesiastes 7:10.

Ecclesiastes states that it shows little wisdom to long for the old days as if everything was better then. It is not wise to long for times gone by, because they will not return. Ecclesiastes does not say, however, that it is wise to embrace the new era without question. Every era has particular values and norms that are characteristic of that time. In every age in which God's children live, it is important to do what God asks of us. It is therefore important to know, understand and use the era in which you live, to understand it and to use it to live as a child of God according to His Word. I see our time as given to us with the great responsibility of passing on the faith in a way that is appropriate for these times, with its many challenges and distractions for young and older people alike. I hope that this research will provide a small contribution to meeting this responsibility.

1. Church disaffiliation

1.1 Introduction

'In the church, among friends or family, church disaffiliation is either hushed up or shushed with the comment: "I'm sure it will be fine." Two reactions that don't get me anywhere...' (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011)

This quote by a member of the congregation, cited by De Graaf & De Ruyter (2011), proves that the topic of church disaffiliation is a 'difficult' one within congregations. Many churchgoing parents in the Netherlands have children who no longer attend church, despite their upbringing within a church family and a church community. Yet it is seldom talked about within church congregations. As a member of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK), I noticed that little attention was paid to church disaffiliates and their parents. There seems to be a taboo on the subject (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011; Kuiper, 2018). People within church congregations would rather talk about growth than shrinkage and failing religious socialisation. So I decided to research this to make it a possible subject of discussion within congregations. The Netherlands Reformed Churches (Liberated) (GKv) are included in this research because the NGK and GKv have common roots and have since merged in 2023.

There is reason to investigate this because the national figures of decline in membership numbers don't lie: almost all churches in the Netherlands are losing members, according to quantitative surveys conducted nationwide. Yet the 'why' of church disaffiliation has not been a subject of academic study within these churches, nor in this target group, the millennials. This study focuses on the 'why' of church disaffiliation within the GKv and the NGK, two conservative Reformed church communities in the Netherlands. This characterisation has been chosen, even though these churches could equally be described as more (GKv) or less (NGK) orthodox (Stoffels, 1995). The term orthodox can be associated with many religious denominations, and can be confusing within the Anglo-Saxon language area, which is why I choose to use the term 'conservative' instead of orthodox. Conservative Reformed indicates that these churches have remained very close to the ideas of the Reformation, such as the Bible being almost literally God's Word, and God being a personal God, and to the customs and traditions that have traditionally existed within these churches.

This introductory chapter first clarifies some commonly used terms. This is followed by a brief introduction on church disaffiliation worldwide, after which some Dutch studies are discussed, including two within the GKv. The resulting problem definition and research question are explained, followed by an explanation of why this particular research group and these two denominations were chosen. After positioning the research within the field of practical theology, we conclude with the relevance of this research and the design of the thesis.

1.2 Theoretical exploration and conceptualisation of commonly used terms and concepts

In this section, I describe some commonly used terms and concepts that play a crucial role in this thesis: defining the concepts of church disaffiliation, religious socialisation and belief. This is followed by a characterisation of the time in which parents and millennials grew up, modern and postmodern times.

1.2.1 Church disaffiliation

No suitable definition of *church disaffiliation* has been found in the literature so far. Van de Kamp (2011) describes it as a process of alienation from the church (which may or may not go hand in hand with alienation from God), with the outcome that a church member terminates their church membership without joining another denomination. He assumes that church membership is (formally) terminated, but the question is whether this is so in all cases. In the report 'My Church?' (Schaeffer, 2018, p. 2) church alienation is described as 'the process whereby church members shift more or less "silently" to the sidelines of church life and participate less and less.' There is no mention here of whether or not church membership is cancelled.

What I mean in this study by *church disaffiliation* is: to leave the church congregation to which one belongs (formally or informally), manifesting itself in no longer attending church services, with the involvement in the church congregation declining from less to none. The study focuses on millennials who grew up in the GKv or NGK, leaving this denomination between the ages of (approximately) 20 and 40, without joining another church congregation, home group or small group. Two points emerge from this. First, church disaffiliates may still be members of a church. Several quantitative surveys assume that church disaffiliates are no longer formally members of a church, meaning that the percentage of church disaffiliates is probably higher than revealed by these surveys because several do not cancel their membership. Secondly, this does not mean that church disaffiliates have left God, too. Yet there is a relationship: if someone does believe, leaves the church and refrains from seeking affiliation with another faith community, then this is likely to be a first step towards faith abandonment (De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018; Dekker & Stoffels, 2011).

1.2.2 Religious socialisation

We can see church disaffiliation as a failure of religious socialisation: parents, church and, in some cases, schools, failed to guide the child towards a relationship with the church community and, in many cases, with God as well.

Religious socialisation (RS) is a term used by many but clearly conceptualised by few (Andree, 1989). To arrive at a working definition of this concept, an exploration from the sociology of religion, pedagogy and psychology must take place. The originally sociological term 'socialisation' is defined by Dekker and Stoffels (2011, p.47) as '*the process by which a child, in its interaction with others, develops into a self-aware person who has internalised*

the culture of its society and can move within it.' RS is embedded throughout socialisation and can then be described as *'the appropriation of the religion dominant in (part of) the society in which the child grows up.'* It provides children/young adults with a worldview and a repertoire of actions that enable them to deal with the problems they encounter on their path in life. Primary socialisation takes place in the family, secondary in other socialising contexts, such as church, school and society. In Dekker and Stoffels' description, the influence of parents on this process does not emerge clearly.

It does in the terminology of religious pedagogy and religious psychology, where the term RS is used as a synonym for religious development, religious education or spiritual development. The religious pedagogue Andree (1989) considered this equation unclear and distinguished between RS on the one hand, and religious education and faith education by parents on the other, placing the responsibility of the whole process on the parents. She defined RS as *'the process of faith transmission, for which an educator is responsible'* (p. 139-141 [translation by author]). According to her, this RS covers religious education and faith education, both of which have their own socialisation processes. She understands *religious education* to be *'raising to an attitude of trust and surrender to everything that comes our way in life'* (p. 140). *Faith education* is *'the initiation into religious traditions, the introduction to the teachings and rites contained in these traditions'* (p. 140 [translation by author]).

Among religious psychologists such as Sherkat, Bebiroglu, and Boyatzis, there is a shift in conceptualisation from rather general (Sherkat, 2003), to a description originating from the parent (Bebiroglu et al., 2015) or the child (Boyatzis, 2005). Sherkat (2003, p. 152) describes RS as *'the process through which people come to hold religious preferences.'* These preferences or understandings concern the meaning and purpose of life, similar to Andree's faith education. This process occurs primarily through parents and secondarily through other 'socialisation agents'. Bebiroglu et al. (2015, p. 556) emphasise the role of parents and define religious socialisation as *'a process by which parents exchange their knowledge, behaviours, values, customs, norms and beliefs about religion with their children.'* This definition includes both faith education (behaviour, values, beliefs) and religious education (knowledge, customs, norms) from Andree. Boyatzis (2005, p. 125) starts from the child and distinguishes between religious and spiritual development regarding socialisation. Religious development is: *'the child's growth within an organised community that has shared narratives, practices, teachings, rituals, and symbols in order to bring people closer to the sacred and to enhance one's relationship to community,'* and spiritual development is *'the search [of the child] for and relationship with whatever one takes to be a holy or sacred transcendent entity.'* Boyatzis' religious development coincides with Andree's religious education, and Andree's faith education coincides with Boyatzis' spiritual education.

30 years after Andree's observations, there is still a lack of uniformity in conceptualisation. The above is summarised in Table 1.1.

In this thesis, we agree with Bebiroglu and Sherkat's conceptualisation of the role of parents and other educators and Boyatzis' emphasis on relationship-building with the 'sacred' and 'community'. The latter is the desire of many church-going Christian parents and

church congregations. Andree’s (1989) definitions were not used in this study because they are not widely accepted, as she published in the Dutch language.

The working definition for RS can be formulated as follows, namely as ‘*the process by which educators transfer their knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs about their own religion to the children (Bebiroglu/Sherkat) and which aims to ensure that the children internalise this and establish a trusting relationship with God and fellow believers within an organised community (Boyatzis).*’ This working definition allows for different understandings of RS, and is functional for various religious beliefs within Christianity. This enables comparability of results between different religious movements.

Table 1.1. *Conceptualisation of religious socialisation by different authors*

Author	Conceptualisation	
Andree (1989)	Religious socialisation The <i>process</i> of faith transmission, for which a parent/educator is responsible	
	Religious education ‘Raising to an attitude of <i>trust and surrender</i> to everything that comes our way in life’	Faith education ‘The <i>initiation</i> into [a specific] <i>religious tradition</i> , the introduction to the teachings and rites contained in this tradition’
Sherkat (2003)	Religious socialisation ‘The <i>process</i> through which people come to hold religious preferences’	
Bebiroglu et al. (2015)	Religious socialisation ‘A process by which <i>parents</i> exchange their behaviours, values, beliefs, knowledge, customs and norms about religion with their children’	
Boyatzis (2005)	Spiritual development ‘The <i>search</i> [of the <i>child</i>] for and relationship with whatever one takes to be a holy or sacred transcendent entity’	Religious development ‘The <i>child’s</i> growth within an organised community that has shared narratives, practices, teachings, rituals and symbols to bring people closer to the sacred and to enhance one’s relationship to community’

1.2.3 Belief and Faith

The working definition suggests that the goal of RS is for the children of believing parents to believe in God and connect with the church community. The question is what is meant by ‘believing’. The first part of the working definition defines the content of faith as a construct of *knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs*. This is what educators wish to

impart: that which can be transmitted and known from the Bible and associated behaviour as interpreted by the faith community. For this, the educator is firstly responsible. The second part of the working definition defines the goal of the RS, which is for the child to internalise what has been transmitted and enter into a relationship with God and the church. Entering into a relationship with fellow believers is not, as such, part of the concept of believing, but can be seen as an influencing factor for believing.

Internalising and entering into a relationship with God requires a commitment on the part of the child, namely, in addition to *knowing* the content of faith, *wanting* it himself and *feeling* it himself. Immink (2003, p.31) identifies knowing, wanting and feeling as three functions of the human mind involved in believing. On this basis, believing can be described as 1) a knowing of God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, 2) wanting to be involved with God based on this knowing and 3) experiencing God in the encounter with Him. In the English language, this difference between the content (knowing) and internalising (wanting and experiencing) is represented by two different words for believing, namely belief and faith. Belief refers to that which is to be learned and known. Faith reflects a commitment to and trust of God, where the person is engaged in a relationship with Him.

These two dimensions (belief and faith) in the concept of belief are distinguishable but not separable. Paloutzian (2005, 335) describes belief as a meaning-making system that integrates cognitive, affective, motivational and behavioural elements. He cites Fowler (1981), who describes faith as follows: *'Faith, classical understood, is not a separate dimension of life, a compartmentalised speciality. Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions. An integral part of one's character or personality.'*

Based on the above, this study identifies two dimensions in faith/belief: a cognitive dimension, learning and knowing, and an affective dimension, experiencing faith in God and a relationship with Him.

1.2.4 Modern and Postmodern times and the churches' response

There is much theoretical debate about the concepts of modern and postmodern, which will not be addressed within the scope of this study. What is meant by these times in this dissertation is described here because it affects the RS of millennials.

What is known as the *modern era* begins in the late 17th century and extends to the 1960s. It involved a transition from a predominantly agrarian to a more industrial society. Modernisation caused society to become more democratic and industrial, the economy grew, and social and demographic mobility increased. Thinking was characterised by belief in progress, science, rationality and trust in the human capacity to understand and improve the world (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011, pp. 101-102). This modernisation was seen by churches and social organisations as a threat to their own ideas (Stoffels, 1995), and so they mobilised to safeguard these ideas. In the Netherlands, this manifested itself in the pillarisation of society. Pillarisation can be defined as the process of 'organising society by cooperation of people with common philosophies of life, this to protect the individuality of the conviction

and defend group interests' (Stoffels, 1995, p 58 [translation by author]). At the beginning of the 20th century, four pillars could be identified in the Netherlands: the Catholic, Liberal, Social Democratic and Protestant pillars. These could be mutually divided into sub-pillars. The Protestant pillar, in particular, consisted of a Dutch Reformed, Reformed and Orthodox Reformed sub-pillar. The pillars regulated the public and private lives of adherents. Within a (sub-)pillar, a culture emerged in which there was agreement on almost all matters of the worldview (Stoffels, 1995, p. 58). The socialisation of children was directed towards them connecting with the ideas of the pillar.

The postmodern era refers to the period from the late 20th century to the present. Continuing modernisation after the Second World War raised the level of prosperity and education. A cultural shift occurred in the mid-1960s (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011). The emphasis shifted to individual freedom and people's subjective experiences (Dekker, 2016), and the pillars with their fixed values, norms and beliefs no longer fitted in with this. Nothing was taken for granted anymore, and everything was questioned.

With the transition from the modern to the postmodern era, church disaffiliation increased. As individuals gained more individual freedom, the possibility of leaving the church became an actual option. This could lead to two reactions from the churches: adapt or resist (Dekker, 1992, p. 39). In the Netherlands for instance, large church communities as the Roman Catholic Church (RKK) and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), adapted to a greater or lesser extent, and smaller churches such as the GKv resisted by strengthening their pillar.

The adaptation strategy of the GKN, the denomination from which the GKv emerged in 1944, was evidenced by changes in thinking about the Bible, changes in doctrine and becoming more mindful of the human factor in the origins of the Bible (Dekker, 1992, p. 120). The GKN's strategy did not work: doctrinal adjustments did not prevent young people from leaving the church, as shown in 1.3.2. The GKv's chosen strategy was to resist. Adapting the doctrine was not an option for these churches, as they were convinced, they professed true doctrine (Spoelstra, 2016). Therefore, they resisted by strengthening and guarding the pillar (Dekker, 1992, p. 39). This may have delayed the membership decline by about 30 years compared to the GKN. Regarding the NGK, it can be said that they occupied an intermediate position. This intermediate position can be observed following the causes of the schism between GKv and NGK as described in 1.3.2, namely a broader thinking about the Bible and the confessional scriptures, more connection with the GKN and a more open attitude towards society. This showed, on the one hand, an opposition to the GKv's strategy of strengthening their own pillar; on the other hand, it can be said that they did not fully subscribe to the GKN's adjustments. The church members who left the GKv founded their own denomination, the NGK, and did not opt to join the GKN. This strategy delayed the church's membership decline by about 50 years compared to the GKN.

While the pillarisation of social groups and the churches was a reaction to the modern era, the de-pillarisation (despite the strategies deployed by the churches) was a reaction to the postmodern era. Contact between the pillars intensified, and they began to

crumble. Organisations previously accessible only to members of the pillar were cautiously opened up. The result for the churches was an increase in church disaffiliation.

1.3 Church disaffiliation in the Western world and in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is not alone in the problem of church membership decline; globally, church disaffiliation occurs throughout the Western world, such as in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), France, Ireland, Portugal, and Austria (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018). Millennials, in particular, are closing the church door behind them. I will first briefly address the situation in the Western world, to then discuss the state of church disaffiliation in the Netherlands.

1.3.1 The Western world

An important characteristic of the Western world, as opposed to the non-Western world, was the modernisation of society, as described in 1.2.4. This occurred earlier in the West than in non-Western countries. Modernisation denotes the transition from a traditional, agrarian class society to a modern, industrial class society (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011, pp. 99-111; Hellemans, 2007, p. 101). The effects of modernisation in the Western world are seen as significant for the declining church membership numbers and faith abandonment. In the US, church disaffiliation is experiencing a steady increase, especially among millennials. Multiple studies point in this direction. Dyck (2010, p. 17) reported, based on a survey by Rainer Research, that 70% of millennials in the US have left the church before reaching the age of 22 and based on a survey by the Barna group that 80% of those who grew up in the church have left the church by the age of 29, many of whom also bade their faith farewell. Church disaffiliation also affects the UK. Crockett and Voas (2006) argue that for decades, each birth cohort in the UK has been attending church less and has been less religious than the previous. Müller et al (2025, p. 287) conclude, based on a longitudinal study in several Western countries (including Finland, Hungary, Italy and Canada), that from 1948 to 2003, the church attendance of all birth cohorts decreases for all religions, and the number of respondents indicating that they are not religious increases by birth cohort.

Church disaffiliation appears to be a phenomenon occurring in Western modern society as opposed to the non-Western world. In Africa, parts of Latin America and Asia, the number of Christians is growing, and sociologists expect this growth to continue for years to come (De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, pp. 22, 23) even though modernisation is also occurring in the non-Western world. Other factors may be at play here, such as the culture within those countries, which is more focused on the collective than on the individual.

Regarding the US and the UK, a reversal in declining church affiliation appears to be in evidence from 2024 onwards. The Pew Research Centre's Religious Landscape Study 2023-2024 (Smith et al, 2025) shows that in the US, there is a levelling off in the decline of church affiliation. The authors of this report are cautious in their conclusions because the methodology of this latest study differs slightly from their prior studies in 2007 and 2014,

making comparison difficult (Smith et al, 2025, p. 338). In the UK, there is talk of a Quiet Revival (McAleer & Barward-Symmons, 2025, pp. 15-17). The researchers conclude that church attendance has been growing since 2018. This growth is strongest (33%) among young people aged 18-34. Although the diversity in ethnic background of churchgoers has also grown, this does not explain the overall growth in church attendance. The trend in church disaffiliation appears to be broken compared to previous years.

1.3.2 Church disaffiliation in the Netherlands

As mentioned above, churches in the Netherlands are also faced with church disaffiliation. Many quantitative studies prove this. They show *that* church disaffiliation is a problem in the Netherlands, but it is not clear *why* church members leave the church. This is where qualitative studies can provide more clarity. We now discuss some quantitative studies to illustrate the problem, followed by three qualitative studies to investigate possible causes for this problem.

Quantitative research on church disaffiliation

In the Netherlands, several research institutions have studied church disaffiliation. The research conducted is mainly quantitative. The following studies are briefly discussed here: the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS, 2018) study 'Wie is religieus en wie niet?' (Schmeets, 2018), supplemented by CBS data from 2025, the KRO and Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam studies '*God in Nederland*' (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016), supplemented by the follow-up study by Kregting, van Lieburg & Vermeer (2025). Finally, the study 'Christenen in Nederland' by the Social Cultural Planning Office (SCP) by De Hart and Van Houwelingen (2018). These data are then compared with figures from the GKv and NGK based on research by Dekker (2013) and yearbooks from the churches concerned.

The CBS presented the study 'Wie is religieus en wie niet?' in October 2018, which showed that less than half of the Dutch population was a member of a church and that there was a decline in attendance of religious services (Schmeets, 2018). In the late 1990s, 66% of Dutch people aged fifteen and older reported being members of a church community, a decline of over 16% in about 20 years. In 2024, CBS observed that the decline in church membership stagnated: 42% of Dutch people were still members of a church denomination in 2023, compared to 44% in 2024 (CBS Statline, 5-05-2025).

In the long-term and large-scale research '*God in Nederland*' by the Katholieke Radio Omroep (KRO, the Catholic radio broadcasting company), Bernts and Berghuijs (2016, p. 23) showed that this trend in declining church membership and church attendance, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, accelerated in the 1960s, during the so-called de-pillarisation of society. Young people, in particular, left the church. In 2016, they wrote that 80% of young people born between 1986 and 2001 were unaffiliated with a church, and 59% of church members never attended a church service. The follow-up study '*God in Nederland*', ten years after the former and now in collaboration with the Vrije Universiteit (VU), did not recognise the stagnation observed by CBS in 2025 (Kregting, Van Lieburg & Vermeer, 2025). They argued that secularisation continued: in 2015, 25% of Dutch people were still members

of a Christian church, and in 2024, this was 18 %. However, they did mention that this decline mainly concerns the RKK and the PKN [Catholic and Protestant churches]; the small orthodox churches remained stable, according to them. The difference in figures between these two surveys (CBS and 'God in Nederland') can be explained by the fact that CBS assumes 'being a member of a church movement' in its questionnaire, thus including churches other than Christian ones, and reports the difference during two years. The KRO/VU survey assumes 'being a member of a Christian church' and covers ten years. This is likely to be recognised in a possible follow-up survey in 2035, provided the stagnation in declining membership continues.

The study '*Christenen in Nederland*' stated that church attrition was also starting to become visible among older church members, so much so that one could speak of a catch-up movement among the older section of the population (De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 44). These were, specifically, the late members of the baby boom generation (1941-1955) and the early members of the lost generation (1956-1970), some of whom grew up in the 1960s when tradition and authority came under attack, obviously also within the churches. Likewise, they concluded that religiosity in the Netherlands, which is more present than ecclesiality, is declining at a rate hardly inferior to the decline in ecclesiality (De Hart and Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 97). Church abandonment thus seems to be related to leaving God.

Regarding the smaller Protestant churches, two observations can be made based on the above studies. First, although the phenomenon of 'church disaffiliation' in the Netherlands mainly affected the RKK and PKN, and to a lesser extent the smaller Protestant churches such as the GKv and the NGK (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2017, p. 22; De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 43), this does not mean that these churches were immune. The high birth rate within these churches, compared to the larger Protestant churches, masked the phenomenon (De Boer, 2009; Bernts & Berghuijs, 2017, p. 22; De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 43; Dekker, 2013; Schmeets, 2018). Second, the age distribution within church disaffiliation is not always clear, and the composition of the category of small Protestant churches varies. As a result, it is not quite clear to small Protestant churches, including the GKv and NGK, what the size and age distribution of church disaffiliation within their denomination is.

In relation to the GKv, Dekker's study '*De doorgaande revolutie*' (2013, p. 33) offers more clarity regarding the extent of church disaffiliation. Dekker conducted comparative research of the similarities and differences in the process of change, including church disaffiliation, between the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) and the GKv. The GKN merged with the Dutch Reformed Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2004, and these three churches now form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN). Dekker's conclusion regarding church attrition was that with a delay of ± 30 years, the GKv followed the same pattern of declining membership as the GKN. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1, which is partly derived from Dekker's cited book. The Praktijkcentrum of the GKv has also added the data of the NGK to Dekker's table (Wijma, 22-11-2018). The membership is indexed for the GKN from 1950 (bottom axis) and for the GKv and NGK from 1980 (top axis).

This indexation enables comparison. Figure 1.1 shows that the decline in membership numbers within the GKv becomes visible from 2002 and shows the same pattern as the GKN.

Within the NGK, a decline in membership numbers is not visible. The membership increased steadily over the period from 1967 to 2018, as shown in Table 1.2, which lists the membership of the GKv and the NGK between 1970 and 2025. Growth does not mean that church disaffiliation is not occurring; it can mask church disaffiliation, as De Boer (2009) demonstrated. Based on church data, as published in the NGK's annual information booklets, he calculated that, from 1984 to 2008, 5307 members left the church without joining another denomination. The age distribution within this group is not clear. If Dekker (2013, p. 33) is right in his conclusion that the GKv follows the same pattern as the GKN, then the assumption is justified that the church disaffiliation within the GKv mainly concerns young people. This also applies to the NGK: from Figure 1.1, this church community appears to be following the same pattern as the GKv. However, it is not possible to continue following the trend in the GKv and NGK separately, since these churches have reunited, merging in 2023 to form the new NGK.

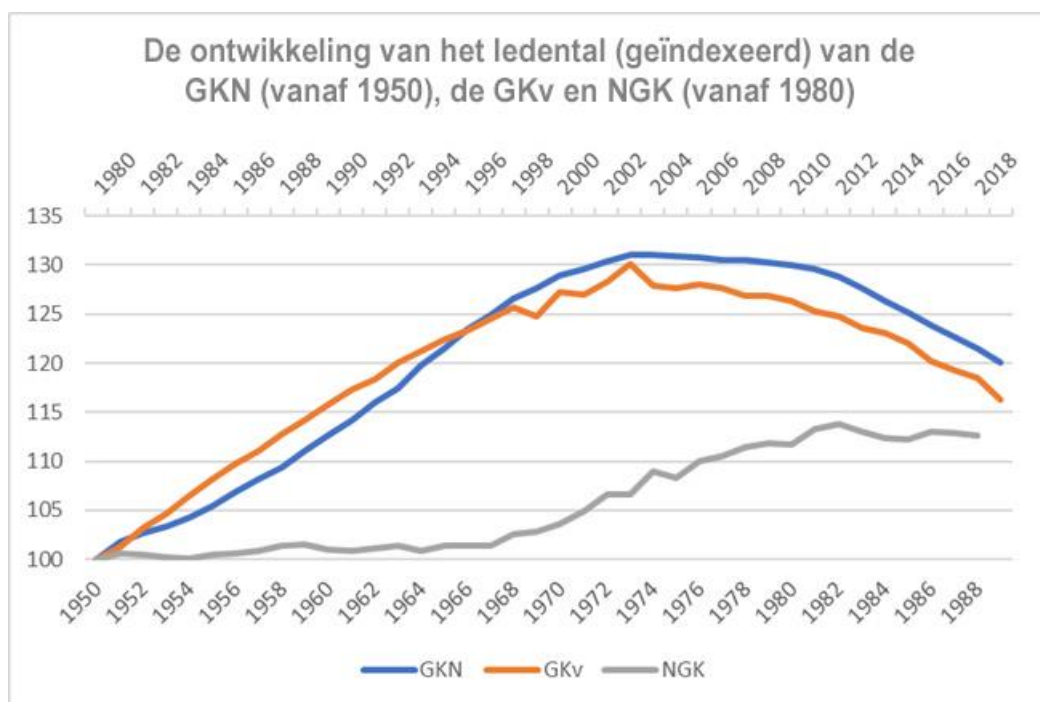


Figure 1.1. Membership development in GKN, GKv and NGK. *Praktijkcentrum GKv, Wijma, 2019.*

In the 2025 yearbook of this newly merged NGK, the conclusion of Kregting et al. (2025) that the small Protestant churches remained stable is not confirmed with respect to GKv, NGK and the new NGK. In this yearbook, Wijma (2025, p. 201) concluded that the membership of the merged church continues to shrink, with both baptised and professed members leaving, most of them with destination unknown. The latter category, destination unknown, falls under the definition of church disaffiliation described in 1.2.1. Table 1.2. shows that the merger has not broken the trend in church disaffiliation.

Table 1.2. Membership development in the GKv and NGK.

Church community	1970	2003	2018		2023*	2024	2025
GKv	84.899	126.949	114.905		138.379	133.708	130.842
NGK	27.284	31.215	33.000				

*Merger year: origination of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (new NGK)

While church disaffiliation within the GKv and NGK can be characterised as a ‘fact’ based on numbers, ‘why’ it occurs does not become clear as a result. Knowing the ‘why’ is precisely what parents, churches and church-bound schools need to know in order to attempt to reverse this trend. Qualitative studies may offer more clarity on this.

Qualitative research on church disaffiliation

Figures tell a one-sided story: an answer to the ‘why’ question requires qualitative research. Different answers can probably be given to this question as each church leaver has their own story and life biography. Yet, qualitative research can allow church disaffiliates’ stories to be heard and, within these stories, potentially identify factors that influence church disaffiliation.

Three studies were found, which allowed the story of church disaffiliates to be heard, namely by Packard and Ferguson (2019) ‘Being Done: Why People Leave the Church, But Not Their Faith’, the study by Van der Ploeg (1985) among adolescents ‘Het Lege Testament’ and the report *Mijn Kerk?!* by Schaeffer (2018) on church disaffiliation among all age groups within the GKv.

Before using the empirical data from these studies in this research, the following should be noted. Firstly, regarding the studies in *time*. Van der Ploeg’s (1985) research is dated, but in view of the fact that this research took place among young people from the GKN and the fact, as mentioned above, that church disaffiliation within the GKv became visible approximately 30 years later and follows the same pattern as within the GKN, it can be used when interpreting the results of this research. The reaction of the Dutch churches to this research is also briefly recalled. Schaeffer’s (2018) report is the only study within the GKv of recent date, but it has the disadvantage of being very small-scale, 10 respondents, including one or two millennials. It is therefore used for illustration and inspiration. Secondly, regarding the studies in *place*. Packard and Ferguson’s research was conducted in the US, and the situation there cannot be readily compared to the Netherlands; the ecclesiastic landscape of the two countries is too different (Vos & Paas, 2013). It can be used because it concerns ‘church disaffiliation’ as defined in this study, and it particularly names factors concerning the church as an institution, which is recognisable in the Netherlands (Stoffels, 2010).

Packard and Ferguson’s (2019) qualitative research in the US revealed several reasons why people leave the church. First mentioned was the bureaucratic organisational model of churches with little room for innovation and personal input. Second, an

organisational culture in which rules are important, and there is little room for questions. Respondents did not feel seen for who they were and were restricted in taking initiatives. Likewise, a lot of 'power' was experienced in leadership. This is appropriate for a bureaucratic organisational structure. There was, as one respondent noted, a culture similar to business: 'I spent my whole career designing systems in the for-profit world, and when I heard people in my church using the same language and concepts as my bosses and colleagues, that just raised a huge red flag' (p. 504). This respondent felt this was not appropriate for a church community. This survey was conducted among 100 respondents, who left their church but did not lose their faith, who were called Dones. Packard and Ferguson concluded that these 'Dones' experienced the institution of the church as problematic. They left the church, but continued to live from the Christian tradition. Due to the bureaucratic organisational culture, they experienced that they were not being seen for who they were, and that their gifts, which they were eager to use to serve the community, were not utilised. The value of this study is that it shows that the organisational form and culture of the church affect the way people feel at home within the church community.

Van der Ploeg (1985), in his study 'Het Lege Testament', which can be characterised as qualitative and exploratory, conducted among sixteen young people in the Netherlands, concluded firstly that church disaffiliates were generally indifferent to faith. Second, he identified a trend that while parents could argue the 'what' of faith, they had no answers to the questions 'why do we believe' and 'what does it mean to us'. In other words, in his view, they were passing on an 'empty legacy' to their children. He argued that church disaffiliation was not only a youth problem but also a problem among older members. The first conclusion that young people were indifferent to faith is refuted by Stoffels (2010) based on a literature review of seventy years of research on young people and religion in the Netherlands. Several studies demonstrate that while young people are interested in spirituality and meaning, they have little affiliation with the institution of the church. This is in line with De Hart and Van Houwelingen (2018), who observe a trend among young people of remaining religious or spiritual seekers even after leaving the church. The second conclusion, the older members' problem, seems to be confirmed by De Hart and Van Houwelingen (2018, p. 44), who identify a trend of church disaffiliation among the older members themselves and also point to failing RS as a cause of church disaffiliation. This can be interpreted to mean that, because parents themselves had doubts about the church, they had difficulty passing on the faith. The 'what' of the faith was transmitted, but that was not enough for them to remain involved in the church community for a lifetime. The value of Van der Ploeg's research can be seen in its 'wake-up call'. All of the Protestant Netherlands spoke about it: the issue was on the church agenda (Stoffels, 2010).

Schaeffer's (2018) '*Mijn Kerk?!*' report concerns ten church disaffiliates among all age groups within these churches. The study revealed the social climate within the church community to be experienced as oppressive: everyone was expected to think alike, and deviation was not appreciated. For example, if a public confirmation was not made at a certain age, this was considered a disgrace. Intriguing was the comment by a church

disaffiliate that membership should not have to be a condition for participating in church activities. This demonstrates a desire to belong, without formally committing to the church community. The value of this report lies in putting this phenomenon on the agenda within the GKv.

1.3.3 Problem definition

Church disaffiliation is of all times and places, but it has accelerated since the 1960s. Based on the above, it can be said that this acceleration also affects the GKv and NGK, but that the *why of church disaffiliation* is not yet clear. It is important to seek clarification on this point. For parents, their child or children's church disaffiliation is a problem: they feel that they have not been able to keep their baptismal promise, and the primary RS has not achieved its goal. For churches, the problem is that the goal of secondary RS has not been achieved, meaning that the future of the church for generations to come is at stake. It is therefore important for both parents and churches to learn about the influence of parents, church and school, in other words, *what factors influence RS and possible church disaffiliation*. This knowledge is necessary to anticipate these factors in the upbringing (by both parents and churches) and in church policies towards RS. Those millennials who remained in the church are the educators of the next Generation Z. Although the characteristics of Generation Z are not yet entirely clear, these millennials can learn from the factors that influenced their own generation's church disaffiliation. Furthermore, millennials are starting to replace the older generation in leadership positions in the church and society. Millennials are more aware of the core values of the present age than anyone. They are of great importance for churches to shape RS in line with the times they live in *now*.

1.3.4 Research question

Based on the above problem definition, the following research question is central to this study: *Why do millennials from the GKv and the NGK leave the church they grew up in without joining another church, group or community, according to their parents and themselves?*

Through four sub-questions, an attempt is made to answer this research question:

1. *How do parents from two conservative Reformed church communities in the Netherlands experience their children's church disaffiliation, and what do they perceive as influencing factors?*
2. *How do millennials, who grew up in a conservative Reformed church community and left this church, experience the role of their parents concerning their religious socialisation?*
3. *What is, according to millennials who have left the church, the influence of their parents on the God-image they develop and their ability to establish a relationship with God and the church?*

4. *How do millennials who grew up in and left a conservative Reformed church community perceive the influence of church and education on their religious socialisation?*

Two sub-studies (research) answer these sub-questions, and thus the central research question. Please bear in mind that in qualitative exploratory research the research design is flexible. This means with regard to the sub questions: they were reformulated based on the data. The guiding role of data and theory in this research will be explained in chapter 2.

The first sub-study is a survey among parents to explore the phenomenon through focus groups and to share their experiences. For ethical reasons, the parents are also involved in the study. This, too, is explained in Chapter 2. Parents were asked what they see as factors contributing to the church disaffiliation of their child(ren). They were also asked how they had experienced this act of disaffiliation themselves and how it affected them. The second sub-study took place among millennials. Through open-ended interviews, the 'why' of church disaffiliation was discussed with them. What moved them to take this step?

In the section now following, the question will be answered as to why this target group and these denominations were chosen.

1.4 Justification of the choice of target group and denominations

This section explains the choice of a study on church disaffiliation among millennials and their parents (the baby boomers) and from the GKv and NGK denominations. To clarify this, the core values of these two generations are explored. Then the genesis of the GKv and NGK is discussed, as it influences the way RS is shaped within these church communities. Finally, the specific characteristics of this research group are discussed.

1.4.1 Millennials and baby boomers

Millennials were chosen as the research group because they are the generation that has left the church in greater numbers than previous generations (Hierden & Bikker, n.d; Knippenberg, 1992; Slendebroek & Wijma, 2011; Van der Meulen et al, 2014). It is the first generation growing up and coming of age within the postmodern era, raised by baby boomers, who grew up in the modern era, times with different core values. Drawing on generational theory, this section briefly explores the core values of millennials and those of their parents (baby boomers) and what these core values mean for their religious experience. Chapter 6 also discusses these generational characteristics. Preceding this exploration, table 1.3 provides an overview of the generational designations used in this study. Different classifications of generational duration are given in literature, and the designations differ (Bontekoning, 2011; Knippenberg, 1992). In this study, we align with the designations used in common parlance to increase recognisability. The generally accepted duration of a generation is 15 to 20 years; however, the boundaries between generations are diffuse. Characteristic features of a generation, therefore, change gradually.

Table 1.3. The Generations involved in this study, see cursive text (Bontekoning, 2010, p. 32, referring to Becker, 1992)

Generations	Years of birth	Note
Pre-war generation	1920-1930	Grandparents of the millennials
Silent generation	1930-1940	
<i>Protest generation</i>	<i>1940 -1955</i>	<i>Parents of millennials, late members of the protest generation and early members of the lost generation are collectively referred to as baby boomers in this study</i>
<i>Lost generation</i>	<i>1955-1970</i>	
<i>Pragmatic generation</i>	<i>1970-1985</i>	<i>The late members of the pragmatic generation and early members of the millennials are collectively referred to as the millennials in this study</i>
<i>Millennials</i>	<i>1985- 2000</i>	
Gen Z	Born after 2000	The children of the millennials

A generation can be defined as ‘a clustering of cohorts (birth years), characterised by a specific historical location, and by common characteristics at the individual level, such as life courses, value orientations and behavioural patterns, and by common characteristics at the system level, such as generational culture and generational organisations’ (Bontekoning, 2010, p. 25, referring to Becker [translation by author]). The definition shows that a generation has certain characteristics in common, such as value orientations and behavioural patterns. Taylor (2007) calls this the social imagination or *zeitgeist*. Each era has a distinctive way of understanding ‘self’ and ‘world’, which involves how people relate to themselves, the world and to God. This can be described as ‘the way ordinary people imagine their social environment, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but transmitted through images, stories, legends, etc.’ (Taylor, 2007, p.172). This social imagination is not questioned; it is as things are perceived, as they are for people within a particular culture. This social imagination is not static, but changes under the influence of, for example, developments in society and science (Heitink, 2011). Social imagination is characterised by certain core values, which may differ over time: postmodern core values differ from the core values of modern times.

The social imagination of the time in which the millennials (born between 1985 and 2000) grew up is characterised by the core values of the postmodern era: *authenticity* and *autonomy*, with the associated need for connectedness, participation and relationality (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; Heitink, 2011; Perrin, 2020). These core values guide millennials’ choices and behaviour. Regarding the experience of religion, this means: the religious life I am part of should be wholly my choice, it should be meaningful for my spiritual growth, and the pursuit of my desires is the purpose of my life (Root, 2017). Here, the emphasis is on experiencing God and giving meaning to these experiences together with others. An individualistic perspective and a need for connectedness surface in these core values.

The social imagination of the time in which the baby boomers, the parents of the millennials, the late members of the protest generation (1940-1955) and the early members of the lost generation (1955 -1970) grew up was characterised by the core values of *conformity* and *duty* (Root, 2017; Taylor, 2007). For religion, this meant: conforming to the collective, meeting the expectations of this collective, and seeing it as a duty to serve the community you belong to with your gifts and talents. In this perspective, the collective (society and church community) is the focal point. During the formative years of these baby boomers, the culture shift from modern to postmodern took place in the roaring sixties of the last century. It can be expected that this cultural shift influenced their values, norms and beliefs. The baby boomers raised their children in a time with different core values from those they themselves grew up with. Core values of conformity and duty are at odds with core values of authenticity and autonomy. Although core values tend to be stable, baby boomers may have been more influenced by the core values of the postmodern era than they themselves realised. Groen and Vermeer (2013), for example, demonstrate that they paid more attention to their child's autonomy in raising their children than their own parents from the pre-war (1920-1930) and silent (1930-1940) generations.

The difference in core values between millennials and baby boomers may have influenced church disaffiliation. In millennials' individualistic perspective on faith, there is less room for duty and conformity. Being a dutiful member of a church and conforming to the collective was abandoned, the individual with their own wishes and desires becoming the focus, and meaning-making being seen as an individual quest. Although millennials are the largest group leaving the church, this does not mean that they have no desire for spirituality and meaning: quite the contrary, as several authors argue (Paas & Van Saane, 2020, p. 156; Packard & Ferguson, 2019; Stoffels, 2010). It is just that, compared to previous generations, they find it to a lesser extent in institutionalised churches. In their search for meaning, millennials desire loyalty, relationality and participation (Perrin, 2020). Authenticity and autonomy do not mean that the individual considers himself most important or, to put it differently, is self-centred. It does mean that millennials need to make their own choices, which should feel right for them as individuals, in connection with others, and mean something to the community to which they are committed.

A crucial characteristic of most of the millennials in the research group is that they were raised by parents who were members of the GKv or NGK. To explore what influence this may have had, a description of these churches now follows.

1.4.2 Justification of the choice of the denominations GKv and NGK

The genesis of the GKv and NGK explains the spiritual climate within which the RS of the millennials in the research group took place. This research was conducted within the GKv and NGK for two reasons: common roots and a common future. These two reasons lead to similarities and differences between respondents from the GKv and NGK.

Common roots

Firstly, these two Reformed denominations share the same historical roots. Most parents of the surveyed millennials grew up within the GKv. This is a Dutch denomination, formed in 1944, when groups of church members or entire congregations who disagreed with certain synodical decisions of the GKN broke away. The reason was a difference of opinion on the covenant, regeneration and baptism. The synod of the GKN imposed binding doctrinal views on these subjects and took disciplinary measures against those who did not agree with these doctrinal views (Spoelstra, 2016, p. 82). About ten per cent of the members of the GKN left to form a new denomination, the Netherlands Reformed Churches (Liberated). These GKv churches were convinced that their denomination was in line with the Reformation of 1517, so they called this detachment a Continuing Reformation and regarded their views as the 'true doctrine' and their church as the 'true church'.

After the Liberation, these churches rapidly organised themselves, establishing their own 'pillar' (Dekker, 2013), consisting of many organisations, such as GKv schools, which were only open to members of the GKv. This pillar was necessary to protect themselves from outside influences and raise their children within the church circle. This pillar remained intact until the late 1990s, after which more room became available within the GKv for admitting non-church members to their organisations, such as appointing members of the NGK and Christian Reformed Churches (CGK) as teachers in GKv education.

Regarding GKv schools, these were founded to align and reinforce primary RS within the family and secondary RS within the church and school, shielding children from the world outside the GKv (De Muijnck, 2008; Spoelstra, 2016). The vision of education within the GKv was: 'By equipping, a child is to be formed into an adult who is fit and willing to spend all the gifts he received from God to God's honour and to the salvation of the creature' (Heek, 2007, p. 141). This equipping model was at odds with the thinking on parenting in post-World War II society, where the focus was on the development of the child. Neither did the GKv see faith education and development as a quest; after all, the truth was known and had to be transmitted and confirmed (De Muijnck, 2008, p. 112). It was the (unwritten) norm within the GKv that children of church members attended GKv education (Spoelstra, 2016, p. 150). The GKv schools are characterised by a strong connection to the GKv, both formally and informally, and the population is therefore homogeneous. Within the conservative Reformed denominations, the GKv can be characterised as Orthodox Reformed (Stoffels, 1995).

The NGK originated from the GKv through a church split in 1967. The cause was that some church members within the GKv accused the church of having traded freedom in Christ for bondage to the church (Spoelstra, 2016, p. 95). They argued for a broader thinking about the Bible and the confessional scriptures, for more connection with the GKN and a more open attitude towards society (Spoelstra, 2016, p. 181). This led to the schism in 1967, after which some 20,000 church members founded a new church, the NGK. Broader thinking led them to give local churches the freedom to steer their own course, without this leading to them letting go of each other as sister churches. Women in ministry can be seen as an example of this. The NGK were critical of the strongly organised pillar of the GKv, and were more open to society. Their children attended the Protestant Christian (PC) schools. PC schools are characterised by a more formal (only in official documents) link with the church

and a heterogeneous population (Vermeer, 2009). PC schools admit pupils and teachers from different religious movements: this brings pupils into contact with diverse views at an early age, and therefore introduces them to varying perspectives on faith and society. Within this education, there are more opportunities for teaching critical dialogue skills. Exalto and Bertram-Troost (2019) see these competencies as necessary both to reflect on one's own teaching and to participate in a secular society. The NGK can be characterised within conservative Reformed denominations as Evangelical Reformed (Stoffels, 1995).

Common future

Secondly, since 2023, the GKv and the NGK have merged on a national (organisational) level. After more than 50 years of separate action, discussions began with the aim of creating a single denomination, that of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The period of separation has produced differences within these churches, at least, as mentioned above, regarding the secondary RS of today's millennials and the degree of church disaffiliation. Regarding secondary RS, the GKv and NGK millennials were raised in different church and educational climates. Regarding church disaffiliation, as the introduction showed, it is clear that this began earlier within the GKv than within the NGK. This may have to do with the differences in RS, but perhaps also with the differences in convictions about some doctrinal issues, such as women in church office.

Similarity and difference

The background of the millennials shows that, besides having different core values from their parents, they have similarities and differences concerning this research group specifically. The similarity is that these millennials were raised by parents, most of whom were raised within a similar spiritual climate, the pillar of the GKv, and who experienced a church split in their formative years. The difference is that these millennials were brought up in a different spiritual climate, either within the strong GKv pillar (which began to crumble at the turn of the century) or within the broader thinking of the NGK, with more opportunities for engaging with dissenters. It is important to take this similarity and difference into account when interpreting the results.

1.5 A Practical Theological Study

This section first justifies the choice of practical theology, then discusses the different perspectives through which the phenomenon of church disaffiliation is clarified. On this basis, it can be said that this study is fully a practical theological study.

1.5.1 Positioning within Practical Theology

Research on church disaffiliation can be conducted by various disciplines, such as religious pedagogy, religious psychology, religious sociology and practical theology. The perspective of practical theology was chosen because the research is conducted from a Christian perspective, it concerns the life of faith in practice, and it focuses on building up the church

congregations. This is in line with Wijnalda's (2009, p. 336) description of practical theology as a 'theological discipline with an empirical orientation, which scientifically researches individual and collective forms of faith praxis from and with a view to the congregation in relation to contemporary society'. This definition demonstrates that, within practical theology, the starting point is the experiential world of people and the situation of the church and society, and theory formation occurs based on empirical data. These empirical data can be obtained through one's own research, but empirical data from other disciplines are also used (Pleizier & Schaap-Jonker, 2009, p. 351).

In their own practical theology research, according to Osmer (2008), two levels can be distinguished within the empirical research process. The first level described by Osmer concerns four tasks of practical theology research: the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative and the pragmatic task. The descriptive-empirical task asks the question: What is going on? As mentioned in 1.3.3, the problem of declining membership numbers of the GKv, NGK and new NGK has been identified. Through this study, using research methods and theories from the social sciences, it becomes clear that there are factors within families and churches that partly cause this. Here we see that the descriptive and interpretive tasks are intertwined. The interpretive task asks why this is going on, and the research question ties in with this. It involves identifying factors through the interpretation of the experiences of millennials and their parents, influencing church disaffiliation. This entails using different perspectives to interpret the data. In interpretation, the context in which this study was conducted plays a major role, as does the person of the researcher. The latter is articulated in chapter 2.1. The normative task, which asks how things should be, is met by establishing the relationship between the findings and a particular theological view from a Christian perspective (Conclusion and Discussion). Based on this, recommendations can be made for practice. The latter fulfils the pragmatic task of answering the question of how practice can respond to what is going on. The second level within the practical theological research process Osmer (2008) calls 'methodological reflection'. This concerns the theological convictions that play a role within the research. This reflection concerns the ontology of this research, critical realism, the epistemology assumed and the influence of the researcher in this process. This is described in Chapter 2.

Practical theology conducts its own empirical research, but also draws on insights from other disciplines such as religious sociology, religious pedagogy and religious psychology (Pleizier & Schaap-Jonker, 2009). As a result, it is closely linked to the social sciences. In particular, it uses research methods and theories common within the social sciences in its descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks. In doing so, the research focuses on faith in practice and is connected with the church congregations.

Based on the above, it can be said that this research is a practical theological study that, by using multiple disciplines (and can therefore be called interdisciplinary), highlights and explores the phenomenon of church disaffiliation from different perspectives. The resulting picture is more multifaceted than from a single perspective, and it demonstrates

the complexity of the phenomenon. There is no single answer to the research question. Therefore, the following sub-paragraphs explore different perspectives concerning RS.

1.5.2 The Religious-Pedagogical Perspective

The aim within this perspective on RS is to transfer knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs of one's religion to children. The parents are primarily responsible for this, and secondarily, other socialising contexts such as church and church-bound schools. Regarding parents, in particular, the theory on parenting styles and the processes involved is employed. For church and school, theories on faith transmission and processes reflecting what views are held about RS are considered.

Regarding primary and secondary RS, it can be said that those responsible for RS are both goal-oriented and non-goal-oriented educators. The goal-oriented are concerned, in particular, with what they consider important: knowledge transfer, religious practices and rituals. The non-goal-oriented are mainly concerned with exemplary behaviour, such as reactions to certain events, interactions with each other and lifestyle. From a religion-education perspective, role models within (core) family and church are important to RS, people who, in their teaching and living, demonstrate and make heard who God is and what He means in their lives, both on a cognitive and affective level. The absence of role models can lead to a decline in the plausibility of faith. In other words, if faith does not visibly and palpably affect something in the lives of believers, why should you believe and go to church?

Regarding the primary and secondary RS, church disaffiliation can be viewed as a partial failure: the entire purpose of the RS has not been achieved, and attachment to the church community has not occurred. The religious-pedagogical perspective emerges particularly in Chapters 4 and 6.

1.5.3 The Religious-Psychological Perspective

From the *religious-psychological perspective*, taking into consideration the working definition of RS, the emphasis is on establishing a relationship with God and the church community. The goal is for the young person to come to an autonomous choice for faith in God and for the church congregation. From this perspective, young people's experiences of primary RS are interpreted from theories of attachment and developing images of God. Regarding the experiences of parents of church disaffiliates, these are interpreted from coping theories.

Within this perspective, the yes/no achievement of the goal of RS is difficult to determine, as it mainly concerns the inner faith. It may be so that a relationship with God has been established, but not with the church community. The young person may choose to believe in God, but at the same time choose not to be a member of a church denomination. Chapters 3 and 5 interpret the results of the group and individual interviews from this perspective.

1.5.4 The Religious-Sociological Perspective

From the *sociological perspective*, RS is seen as: 'appropriating the religion that is dominant in (the part of) the society, in which the child grows up' (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011, p. 47;

Thiessen, 2016, p. 9). Compared to our working definition, 'that part of society' can be seen as the church congregation within which the child grows up. The goal is to bind young people to the church community in which they grow up. Whether or not this goal is achieved is measured mainly through 'outward' characteristics such as participation in religious practices (church attendance, prayer, Bible reading), the outside faith. From this perspective, church disaffiliation can be seen as a failure of the RS; parents and the church have failed to maintain the connection with young people. The religious-sociological perspective appears in most chapters as the problem has been identified based on sociological research, but also because the experiences of baby boomers and millennials have been viewed from a generational perspective.

1.5.5 Conclusion

Based on the above, as described in 1.5.1 and the different perspectives on RS, this study can be called a practical theological study. In particular, the value of practical theology in this research emerges as the discipline within which, by taking an interdisciplinary approach, various perspectives surrounding the phenomenon of church abandonment come together. The perspectives mentioned above each offer an insight into a dimension of the phenomenon. Practical theology, as an interdisciplinary science, offers the opportunity for a holistic approach, revealing the complexity of the phenomenon.

To summarise: This study uses mainly religious-psychological, religious-pedagogical and religious-sociological theories, while also including practical theological theories. These perspectives individually do not offer a holistic view of the phenomenon. Practical Theology, as a discipline within which interdisciplinary work can be done, does offer that possibility.

1.6 Relevance of the research and structure of the thesis

This section indicates the relevance of the research, both for science, for society and for practice, concluding with the presentation of the outline of the thesis.

1.6.1 Scientific relevance

Figures illustrate church disaffiliation, but *why* the figures are as they are is not clear. This also concerns the GKv and NGK churches. Although church disaffiliation became visible within these churches later than within the RKK and PKN, it is present. Only a few surveys show the story of parents (baby boomers) and millennials.

Regarding the baby boomers: to the researcher's knowledge, no research has been conducted describing the feelings and experiences of baby boomers when their children leave church. How do they cope with their children's church disaffiliation, which can be described as an 'intrusive event' or crisis in their lives? Ganzevoort (1994a) researched the impact of intrusive events on faith development, but not in relation to children's church disaffiliation. The findings of this part of the study are therefore of particular interest to

religious psychology and practical theology. It may lead to the development of guidelines for churches in shaping pastoral care for this group of church members and give rise to support for parents in raising their children. The insight offered by this study provides opportunities for this.

As for millennials, their experiences offer knowledge accumulation in the field of religious psychology and pedagogy. Some qualitative studies have been conducted, as mentioned in 1.3.2. However, these offer too little insight into the complexity of the phenomenon. It can be observed that there is a gap in knowledge regarding the 'why' of church disaffiliation by millennials in general, but certainly for this generation within the GKv and NGK. This is a problem because if this knowledge is not available, it cannot be taken into account. In the field of religious pedagogy, it can provide insight into the relationship with parenting styles. Regarding religious psychology, this research can offer insights into a possible relationship between attachment styles and church disaffiliation. For religious sociology, this research offers little or no contribution; however, it is based on observations from this field. For practical theology, this research is important because it examines the influences of RS, both primary and secondary, from multiple scientific disciplines. This study aims to clarify, from the perspective of church disaffiliates and their parents, 'why' they left the church. This is important to know, primarily for those denominations themselves, but also for other conservative Reformed church communities where church disaffiliation is occurring, such as the Reformed Congregations (GG). The Church Yearbook 2025 reveals that those churches also face church disaffiliation with 'destination unknown' (Wijma, 2025, p. 201).

1.6.2 Relevance for Conservative Reformed churches

Although church disaffiliation affects almost all denominations in the Netherlands, this study is particularly relevant for the smaller Protestant churches such as the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*, *Hersteld Hervormd*, and, of course, the GKv and NGK. If the tide of church decline is not stemmed, these churches will not be able to fulfil their functions at the national, regional and local level as well as before.

In the past, churches had a clear task in relation to society (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011, pp. 167-168). At the regional and national levels, the church acted as an advocate for all the local churches. The latter particularly applied to the larger church communities such as the RKK and PKN, but to a lesser extent also the GKv and NGK. The influence of the larger church communities on society has been marginalised. The smaller churches still have a chance to contribute on the national and regional level, provided they remain numerically adequate. These churches can use the knowledge that this research can provide as a means to reverse the trend of church decline. They can use the results of this study to adjust their policies and support local church councils in a more focused way in their tasks towards society. Tasks that may be different in changed times from what they used to be.

At the local level, churches provided pastoral and diaconal aid to individuals, both inside and outside the church congregation, thus having a unifying function. Importance is attached to these functions of the church, as shown in the study by De Hart and Van

Houwelingen (2018, p. 98), who state that 44% of lapsed churchgoers do not consider it a good thing if the church loses these social functions. For local church councils, this means that, if the trend of church disaffiliation can be broken or reversed, they will be in a better position to fulfil their functions at the local level. After all, church disaffiliation means loss of opportunity, less manpower being available, and financial resources dwindling. For church workers (youth workers, church ministers, pastoral workers), church disaffiliation can mean that their tasks become more difficult. If fewer volunteers are available and certain positions can no longer be filled, it means that they will have to/will take on more tasks or that certain tasks can no longer be performed. This aside, it is frustrating for youth workers to experience that their work and efforts do not bring the desired results. Through the knowledge provided by this research, more targeted pastoral care (for parents and involved family members) and youth work can be developed, appropriate for the own congregation, so that any hesitation to act on church disaffiliation can be taken away.

In addition, it is important at the local level that the taboo surrounding church disaffiliation is lifted (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011; Kuiper, 2018). For part of the church community (parents, grandparents and family), church disaffiliation is a deep sorrow and difficult to accept. That which is important to them is not considered important by the children/family members (Bosscha, 2015). This evokes all kinds of emotions, such as anger, sadness and guilt. If, through this research, there is more clarity on the 'why' of church disaffiliation, local congregations will have a better understanding of the parents and family involved. This research can help bring the issue to the attention of congregations and make it a subject of discussion.

Summary: There has been no recent research in the Netherlands on the story of millennials leaving the church. This research seeks to remedy this lapse regarding the GKv and the NGK by conducting interviews with parents and church disaffiliates from these church communities. Possible patterns can be discovered in the motives of church disaffiliation among millennials, allowing for a better understanding of the phenomenon and, insofar as causes lie within family, church and school, allowing local congregations to take them into account in the shaping of RS. For the church to continue to transmit the faith to coming generations and guide them to choose the Lord of the church, it is important to clarify the 'why' of church abandonment to respond to it appropriately.

1.6.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 describes the research design and justifies the choices of methodology and analyses. It also examines the validity of the study and the ethical guidelines used. Chapters 3 to 6 contain articles published, accepted or offered to international journals. Chapter 3, *'What else could we have done?'*, answers the sub question: How do parents from two conservative Reformed church communities in the Netherlands experience their children's church disaffiliation, and what do they perceive as influencing factors? The parents' experiences with their child(ren)'s church disaffiliation will be discussed. Here, particularly, the emotions associated with the phenomenon of church disaffiliation come to the fore. It is experienced as a crisis, which needs to be addressed. By

using (religious) psychological emotion theories, these emotions are interpreted, and their influence on the parents' faith development is described. This chapter was published in the International Journal of Practical Theology.

Chapter 4, *'Practise what you preach and tell what you feel'*, answers the sub question: How do millennials, who grew up in a conservative Reformed church community and left this church, experience the role of their parents concerning their religious socialisation? The experiences of the millennials with their parents' parenting styles and their influence on their faith development will be explored. It appears that most parents use a combination of parenting styles, authoritative or permissive in socialisation on the one hand, and authoritarian concerning religious socialisation on the other. This affects the image their children develop of faith and the church. This chapter has been published in the Journal of Youth and Theology.

Chapter 5, *'Honestly, I think, my image of my parents and my image of God just very much coincided'*, answers the sub question: What is, according to millennials who have left the church, the influence of their parents on the God-image they develop and their ability to establish a relationship with God and the church? It describes the influence of parents according to the experiences of millennials on their image of God and others, and their ability to establish relationships with God and others (the church). Starting from attachment theory, the experiences are interpreted, and it is found that the image of parents and the image of God are closely linked. The attachment theory is insufficient for the interpretation of the relationship development with the church. It became apparent that the relationship with the church is influenced by several factors, such as the child's personality and the (cultural) context in which one grows up. This chapter has been submitted to The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion.

Chapter 6, *'Behave like us, then you belong to us'*, answers the sub question: How do millennials who grew up in and left a conservative Reformed church community perceive the influence of church and education on their religious socialisation? It describes the experiences of church-going millennials regarding the influence of church and school on religious socialisation. From the theory, it became apparent that the view the church and school have of RS, as well as the bond between the church and the school, influences how they shape religious socialisation. This chapter has been submitted to The International Journal of Christianity and Education.

Chapter 7 answers the central research question and discusses the conclusions in the light of theory. A paradigm change is advised and recommendations for practice and further research are offered. Also, the role of the researcher is reflected upon.

2. Research design

An exploratory interpretative qualitative design was chosen to answer the research question ‘*Why do millennials from the GKv and the NGK leave the church they grew up in without joining another church, group or community, according to their parents and themselves?*’

Exploratory because not much research has been done on church disaffiliation within the church communities concerned. *Qualitative* because this offers the opportunity to undertake an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon, focusing on the experiences of those who leave the church, which is not possible with quantitative research. The aim is to identify certain possible causes for leaving the church, which can be further investigated. Because the experiences of the respondents are the focal point, this is interpretative research: the respondent(s) and the researcher both interpret and give meaning to past experiences and events. The advantage of a *qualitative* design is that it is flexible: should the data give cause, the research question can be adjusted during the process (Boeije, 2008; Evers, 2024).

Two studies were conducted: Study 1 among parents, and Study 2 among millennials who left the church. The survey among parents was chosen to explore the phenomenon, identify themes for the interviews with millennials, and make contact with their children, the millennials who left the church. First, section 2.1 discusses the assumptions underlying the research. This is followed by section 2.2, which explains the method used to recruit respondents. Section 2.3 explains the data collection methods used for the parents and the church leavers themselves, respectively. Section 2.4 describes the analysis methodology, followed by Section 2.5, which discusses how validity and reliability were ensured and outlines the ethical guidelines used.

2.1 Assumptions within this study

This study is based on *critical realism*. Critical realism assumes that there is a layered reality, part of which can be discovered and understood by humans (De Muyne & Kunz, 2021; Robson, 2002; Swinton & Mowat, 2009). There is an objectively observable reality from which humans can acquire knowledge. However, not all of reality is knowable to humans. In this ontology, Hoddy (2019) distinguishes three domains: the domain of reality, the domain of the actual, and the domain of the empirical. The domain of reality involves natural and social objects, structures, and their mechanisms, the domain of the actual concerns events that happen as they happen when certain mechanisms are activated, and the domain of the empirical refers to our efforts to understand these events and develop knowledge (Hoddy, 2019). To illustrate this, we provide examples per domain in the context of our research in fig. 2.1, based on the original model by Hoddy (2019).

The domain of the ‘real’ involves the reality in which the baby boomers and millennials from the GKv and NGK lived at the time of the RS. The domain of the actual concerns the phenomenon of church disaffiliation as it presents itself to us, without yet

knowing which mechanisms have been activated. The empirical domain refers to the causes and factors that led to the phenomenon's actual occurrence.

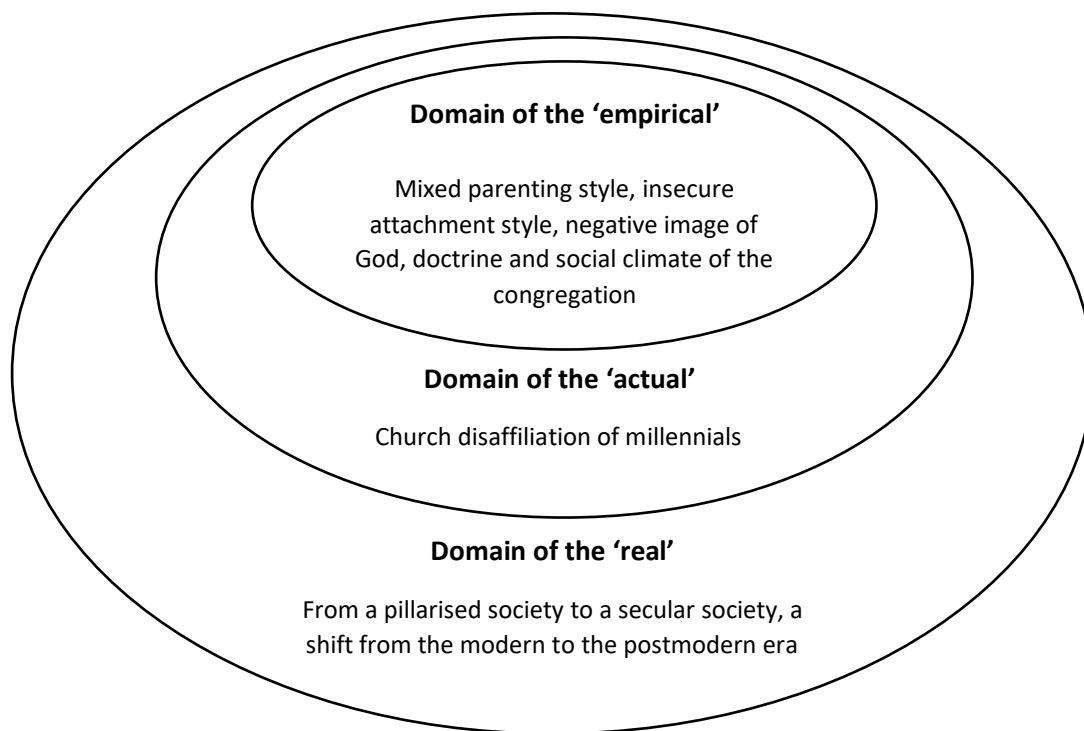


Figure 2.1. A critical realist view of stratified reality, according to Hoddy (2019).

This ontology of critical realism (reality can only be known in part) leads to an epistemology that accommodates multiple worldviews, including the Christian worldview underpinning this research.

In the epistemology of critical realism, knowledge is described as 'a social and historical product that can be specific to a particular time, culture or situation' (Robson, 2002, p. 34). As in social constructivism, knowledge is viewed as a product shaped by experiences within social networks through meaning-finding and meaning-giving. In other words, knowledge is constructed by people, influenced as they are by their experiences and the social networks and cultures in which they find themselves. The criterion for testing this knowledge is not verification, as in positivism, where reality is limited to the observable. In critical realism, the emphasis is on falsification, which involves human interpretation (De Muynck & Kunz, 2021). Precisely because reality cannot be known entirely, and therefore cannot be verified (proved to be true), the emphasis is on falsification: proving that it is not true.

In this exploratory research, respondents came from specific contexts: family, church and school. These contexts partly determined their experiences, which demands a critical realist approach: truth was taken to be what the respondent said, as interpreted by both the respondent (retrospectively) and the researcher, and this was used as the basis for the analysis.

Within the critical realist perspective, the researcher and reality are strongly intertwined and can certainly not be viewed as independent. This requires a reflective attitude on the part of the researcher, reflection on their own previous experiences and involvement in the subject of research. Finlay (2021, p. 107) defined *reflexivity* as: ‘critical self-awareness of the researcher: the process by which the researcher examines understandings of self/other and analyses how these preconceptions influence and impact the research’. Braun and Clarke (2020a, p. 3) noted its importance as follows: ‘the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytical resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation’. This intertwining of the researcher and the reality under investigation was, on the one hand, an advantage: the researcher knew the context and was therefore more likely to recognise the respondents’ experiences. On the other hand, it could be a disadvantage if the researcher relied too heavily on their own experience, influencing the interpretation of the data. To prevent this bias, various discussions were held with the supervisors of this research and a co-researcher.

This critical realist epistemology led to an approach to the data that was primarily *experience-oriented*, but also *critical*. In the experience-oriented approach, the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the respondent are valued. A critical approach is based more on certain patterns and interprets the experiences within a specific context (Byrne, 2022). In this study, the emphasis was on the experiential side, which was reflected in the sub-questions of the research question. Within those experiences, themes were sought per context that had a decisive influence on those experiences: the critical approach. Each respondent gave meaning to what he or she had experienced within a specific context. The researcher interpreted all these experiences and identified similarities and differences, which involved double hermeneutics.

2.2 Recruitment of respondents

To make contact with millennial church disaffiliates, several congregations of the aforementioned church communities were asked to collaborate. The congregations approached the parents, who in turn approached the church disaffiliates. Their responses are discussed in chronological order. Table 2.1 shows the number of parents and millennials who participated in the study.

2.2.1 Congregations

The following strategy was used to find congregations willing to participate in the study:

- Based on the annual Handbook 2019 of the GKv (Kuiper, 2019) and the Information Booklet 2019 of the NGK (Van Dijk, 2019), locations in the Netherlands were identified where both a GKv and an NGK congregation were present. To ensure comparability between respondents from the GKv and NGK, the background circumstances needed to be somewhat similar.

- The Praktijkcentrum of the GKv and the Steunpunt for the NGK were asked which congregations they considered suitable for participation in the study. These organisations collaborate with the churches to provide support in the practice of congregational life. They were asked to name congregations:
 - Where this phenomenon had already been recognised: are they open to it?
 - Where no major problems have arisen in recent years: do they have the time and attention for it?
 - With a broad composition in terms of educational level: in student cities, several studies have already been conducted among highly educated people (Stoffels & Dekker, 1987; Uecker, Regnerus & Vaaler, 2007), but leaving the church also affects less educated people.

This resulted in several congregations being selected: one congregation was excluded due to the researcher's family ties with this NGK. The remaining congregations were approached by phoning the chair of the church council or the church minister, and if there appeared to be possibilities, by placing an appeal in the church magazine (Appendix 1). Five congregations were willing to participate. In the case of one geographical congregation, the GKv church was willing to participate, but the NGK congregation was not. This GKv congregation served as a pilot.

2.2.2 Parents

The parents were recruited through purposive sampling: the characteristics of the population were decisive (Boeije, 2005, p. 50). The parents had to have one or more children who left the church and needed to be members of the GKv or NGK. In addition to the appeal in the church magazine, the researcher gave a verbal explanation during a church service. Eligible congregation members were invited to join a parents' meeting. They were asked to register for this. This made it clear in advance how many people could be expected to attend. If too many responded (more than 15), a second meeting would be arranged. A large group could jeopardise the confidentiality of the meeting, but refusing parents was not considered ethically responsible, as registration had already been a barrier for them due to the sensitivity of the subject.

Two things stood out in this recruitment method. The first was that the number of registrations was lower than expected. The church councils involved had expected a massive response, but only six to eleven parents per parish registered. The possible reason for this, as mentioned above, is that it is a sensitive subject, which means that some parents were scared to participate. This was also evident when two parents withdrew at the last minute because they were too apprehensive. This is in line with Gibbs (1997, p. 3), who stated that focus groups are not suitable for every respondent, as the group can be perceived as intimidating. The second thing that stood out during the pilot was that the criteria for participation need to be emphasised very explicitly. During the pilot meeting, it was discovered that an interested party from the church council, who did not meet the criteria, had registered, which was somewhat disruptive during the meeting. After this, when parents registered and/or arrived at the meeting in the four congregations involved, they were

explicitly asked whether they met the criteria. In one case, upon arrival, a church council member was asked by the researcher not to participate, based on these criteria, with an explanation of the reason, this being the sensitive nature of the subject and the confidentiality of the meeting.

At the end of the focus group meeting, parents were provided with an information letter (Appendix 2) for their children, with the appeal to ask their children to participate in the study and, after obtaining consent, to deliver their contact details to the researcher. The parents registered twenty-one millennials, fourteen of whom participated. The reasons why seven did not participate were: they did not wish to join (on second thought), they did not respond to the two invitation emails that were sent, and they were staying abroad, which made a face-to-face interview impossible. Four more participants were recruited through the respondents. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the participating parents and millennials, listing the times at which the interviews were conducted.

2.2.3 Millennials

Contacting people who have left the church is problematic for several reasons. They often leave the church quietly, without leaving an address (Schaeffer, 2018). As a result, many church councils are unaware of which millennials have left the church without joining another church, group or community. In addition, even if church councils do have address details, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) prohibits them from passing these on to third parties without the written consent of the individuals concerned. Finally, these churches are small, so recruitment through the national press would probably yield little response. That is why recruitment through parents was chosen. There are disadvantages to this: parents may pressure their children to participate, which means that participation is not entirely voluntary. Also, depending on the relationship between the parents and the children, the children may not appreciate their parents knowing that they are participating. Nevertheless, this approach was chosen to carry out this research within these small church communities. Measures have been taken to minimise the disadvantages by making strict agreements with both groups of respondents. These agreements were: 1) the data from the questionnaires of both groups will not be compared on an individual basis, 2) the participation of the millennials is voluntary, which is explicitly stated in the consent form, and 3) the researcher will not provide any information about the children to their parents and vice versa. The fact that this last agreement was necessary was proved by the fact that one parent inquired with the researcher whether her child had also participated and, during the interviews with the millennials, several respondents made questioning remarks such as: 'My father/mother has probably already told you that, hasn't he/she?' The researcher's standard response would then be: 'You tell me'.

Table 2.1. *Participating parents/millennials*

	<i>Pilot*</i>	<i>Congregation 1 village</i>	<i>Congregation 2—village</i>	<i>Congregation 3—city</i>	<i>Congregation 4—city</i>	<i>Total in the study</i>
Date of meeting	20 November 2019	30 September 2020	22 September 2020	14 January 2020	21 January 2021	
Number of mothers	4	2	5	2	5	14
Number of fathers	6	2	1	3	6	12
Total	10	4	6	5	11	26
Millennials who were contacted	1	3	4	4	9	21
Of which participated	1	1	2	4	6	14
Snowball sampling	4					4
Total						18

*The parents of the pilot focus group are not included in the total number of participating parents.

2.3 Data collection instruments

Methodological triangulation was chosen for data collection because it provides a more complete picture of the situation of church disaffiliation (Baarda, De Goede & Teunissen, 2005) and increases the validity and reliability of the data (Maso & Smaling, 1998; Van Staa & Evers, 2010). Three research instruments were used, which will be briefly explained below:

1. A questionnaire for both the parents and millennials;
2. A focus group interview with the parents;
3. An individual interview with the millennials.

2.3.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was chosen as a means of gathering data in a relatively short time period. The questionnaire consists of three parts: about the person (baby boomer/millennial) themselves, their parental family and the family they have founded. The questions cover three themes: church involvement, religious education and generational characteristics. Appendix 3 shows the structure of the questionnaire.

The *purpose* of the questionnaire was:

- To collect name and address details; these are necessary to be able to contact the parents/millennials again at a later stage.
- To identify the characteristics of their parental family and the family they have started with their partner (in the case of millennials, if applicable).
These characteristics include involvement in the church community, religious practices, and the possible influence of leaving the church on relationships with family and friends. For millennials, the latter category focused on the influence of leaving the church on relationships with parents, as well as family and friends.
- To supplement the interviews. Due to the open nature of the interviews, not all topics are covered in the same way, so a structured form of supplementary questions may be necessary (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

After the parents/millennials had registered, the questionnaires were sent to the respondents before the focus group/interview, with a request to complete them before the meeting/interview and return them or hand them in upon arrival. A conscious decision was made to send the questionnaires in advance, so that they also served as an elicitation tool, enabling respondents to focus their thoughts on the subject in advance. The researcher always brought paper versions along for respondents who had forgotten to complete the questionnaire. The advantage of this approach was that the response rate to the questionnaires was 100%. During the pilot, it became apparent that a question about church attendance was perceived as 'controlling' by one of the parents: the wording of this question was subsequently adjusted.

2.3.2 Focus group interviews with baby boomers

Focus group interviews were chosen to 1) explore the phenomenon of leaving the church in a relatively short period of time (Evers, 2017) and 2) to hear the experiences of the parents and offer them the opportunity to discuss this sensitive subject. A focus group has an advantage over an individual interview in that respondents can reconsider their own beliefs and understanding by explaining and clarifying their experiences to each other, and it may bring to light other experiences that they may have forgotten (Gibbs, 1997). This delves into the phenomenon naturally, provided there is a degree of trust within the group. To ensure this, some rules were agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting to guarantee confidentiality, such as keeping what was shared confidential, allowing each other to finish speaking, and only asking clarifying questions. The pilot meeting gave no reason to change this approach.

The main purpose of the focus group was exploratory:

- To explore the phenomenon of leaving the church in general; this could potentially identify themes for the interviews with those who had left the church.
- Hearing the parents' story: their story may complement that of the church disaffiliates, providing a more complete picture of the 'why' at the group level.

The exploration focused on the *reasons* for leaving the church from the parents' perspective. What answers do they give to the research question for their child(ren)? What do they see as possible causes, reasons or motives for leaving the church, and how did they experience this themselves? Parents might talk about their relationship with their child and point to events that, in their opinion, have influenced their child(ren)'s faith formation, which the children themselves may not have considered.

The focus groups were organised for each participating congregation. These meetings took place in the congregation's own church building and lasted approximately 150 minutes. An assistant was present at the meeting. Their task was to monitor the process during the discussion and provide technical support, for example, operating the projector and recording equipment. Before the meeting, the programme was discussed in detail between the researcher and the assistant, and agreements were made about when to intervene. The assistant only intervened in terms of the process, not the content, took notes during the meeting and acted as a sparring partner in the preparation of the report. The focus group programme is included as Appendix 4. Audio and video recordings were made of the focus groups. The use of a 360-degree camera made it possible to produce a verbatim report of the meeting, as every speaker was captured on camera. The consent form (Appendix 5) for these recordings was sent to the parents before the meeting with a request to return it completed at the meeting. The assistant monitored this.

The evening began with an inventory of the respondents' expectations. These were adjusted if necessary. This was followed by the question, 'When you talk to someone else about leaving the church and what that entails, what themes, topics and thoughts do you share?' After discussing this, a second question was asked: 'What are your own experiences with your child leaving the church?' Respondents were first asked to think about this individually, with the instruction also to consider what they did not want to share, in view of their child's privacy. This was to prevent people from regretting what they had shared with others afterwards.

Each parent was then allowed to tell their story. The other respondents had the opportunity to respond by asking clarifying questions. The order of the questions was deliberately chosen. The first question was asked to discuss this potentially sensitive subject from a distance, thereby increasing the sense of safety and confidentiality within the group. However, it turned out that the respondents also shared their own experiences here. This showed that the theory did not guide the research, but rather the research guided the theory: see Section 2.4.1.

Finally, the respondents were asked whether they felt a need for a follow-up meeting. If so, the researcher would pass this on to the relevant church council. One congregation continued to discuss this theme in discussion groups and at a church meeting. Many parents felt that little attention had been paid within the congregation to the fact that one or more of their children had left the church. By offering parents a platform for discussion, the phenomenon was brought to the attention of the congregations and church councils.

The pilot took place in Autumn 2019, and the focus group meetings were planned for Spring 2020. Due to the COVID pandemic, three meetings had to be postponed, with the last one taking place in Spring 2021. For the meeting schedule, see Table 2.1.

2.3.3 Individual interviews with millennials

Open interviews were chosen to hear the story from the perspective of millennials, focusing on their ideas, opinions, perceptions and experiences. An open interview with a list of topics is a suitable tool for this because it does justice to the respondent (Baarda, de Goede & Van der Meer, 1996, pp. 19-22) and the sensitive nature of the subject matter (Verhoeven, 2018, p. 149). The list of topics (Appendix 6) was structured around age groups and the contexts of family, church and school. Age groups were chosen because certain events in childhood/adolescence can influence the choices and course of the respondents' future lives (Habermas & Bluck, 2000, p. 760). The contexts of family, church and school were chosen because religious socialisation takes place in a targeted manner within these contexts.

Before the interview, the questionnaire was sent out for elicitation purposes, along with a request to prepare photographs from each stage of life involved. As with the parents, the questionnaire served to focus the respondents' thoughts on the subject. Photo elicitation was chosen because it is a technique for generating data about perceptions and experiences, deepening the relationship between the respondent and the researcher, and bringing spontaneous reactions to light, which leads to more detailed interviews (Van der Does, 1992). More than half the respondents forgot to prepare photos. A possible reason for this may be that most respondents did not (or no longer) have photo albums, only digital photographs. One respondent stated that she had not done so because she did not see the point of it. As far as the researcher can judge, forgetting the photos did not affect the results: the respondents were perfectly capable of telling their stories without photos.

The interviews took place at the respondents' homes, with two exceptions where this was not possible. The decision was made to interview the respondents in a safe environment, to emphasise that the researcher was the guest, as well as for practical reasons. After explaining the purpose of the research and signing the consent form (Appendix 5), each respondent was asked the following initial question: 'Tell us your story about your experiences with faith and the church as a child, adolescent and young adult.' The researcher ensured that the contexts in each phase of life were addressed and only asked clarifying questions.

In an open interview, the relationship between the respondent and the interviewer is important. There needs to be a degree of trust on both sides to achieve the purpose of the interview. This trust can be expressed on Maso and Smaling's rapport scale (1998, pp. 108-109), ranging from 1, under-rapport (no or little trust) to 9, over-rapport (love, friendship). Both extremes are detrimental to the quality of the research. In most cases, there was dialogue (point 5 on the rapport scale): openness, mutual trust and respect. In two cases, there was trust (point 4) on the part of the respondent, but the openness was 'reserved'. Many follow-up questions were needed. When one of these two was asked what their motivation had been for participating in the research, they answered: 'you just do it, out of a

sense of duty'. This respondent was academically educated and understood the importance of scientific research, but was not very enthusiastic about telling her story. In one case, there was goodwill (point 2). At the beginning of the interview, this respondent announced that she could explain exactly why she had left the church and that she did not think it necessary to prepare any photographs. This was the shortest interview (30 minutes). This may highlight a disadvantage of the recruitment method via the parents: there is a possibility that these three respondents felt pressured by their parents.

While saturation seemed to have been reached at the end of the second round, a new aspect emerged in the third round, namely the influence of the doctrine of heaven and hell on the development of faith. Two more interviews were conducted after that, which did not reveal any new codes or (sub)themes.

The first interviews were planned for spring 2021 but were delayed due to the COVID pandemic. The first round took place in spring 2022, and the last round in summer 2023. Due to the pandemic, the first interviews were scheduled fairly closely together because of the uncertain situation. The researcher did not want to keep rescheduling appointments with the respondents. Table 2.2 lists the ages of the respondents, their church background and the date of the interviews.

Table 2.2. *Age, church community and interview dates for millennials*

Respondent	Age	Denomination	Interview date	Round
Robby	44	NGK	19 January 2022	1
Ada	34	NGK	1 February 2022	
Bea	28	GKv	14 February 2022	
Gerrit	29	GKv	21 February 2022	
Corine	33	NGK	2 March 2022	
Philip	30	NGK	7 March 2022	
Anthony	37	GKv	6 April 2022	
Victor	30	NGK	13 April 2022	
Carolien	28	NGK	24 May 2022	2
Yoda	33	GKv	20 June 2022	
Daphne	38	NGK	13 August 2022	
Elly	46	GKv	22 August 2022	
Jaap	40	GKv	1 September 2022	
Lisa	37	GKv	12 September 2022	
Jamie	30	GKv	11 May 2023	3
Frederique	34	NGK	7 June 2023	
Anje	35	GKv	6 July 2023	
Elias	39	NGK	27 September 2023	

2.4 Analysis of the data

This section explains the choice of the analysis method used, namely Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA). This method was chosen for several reasons. This section first discusses the role of theory (2.4.1). After clarifying RTA and justifying its selection (2.4.2 and .3), the analysis process is justified (2.4.4).

2.4.1 Role of theory

First, the role of theory in the research is discussed, as the practice of the research guided the literature study, which led the researcher to use thematic analysis. This role required the conduction of a literature study on church disaffiliation prior to data collection, to explore the phenomenon. This literature was mainly sociological in nature. It concerned secularisation, compartmentalisation and the era in which both parents and millennials grew up (Perrin, 2020; Root, 2017; Taylor, 2007). This clearly showed that parents had the greatest influence on religious socialisation (RS). Therefore, literature was sought to explore what that influence consisted of. This led to the insight that the way in which RS was shaped was largely limited to the 'outside' of faith, namely participation in church activities, and the involvement and strictness of the parents (Dollahite et al., 2019).

While listening to the recordings, transcribing and open-coding the (focus group) interviews, other perspectives emerged. For example, the focus groups demonstrated that parents had difficulty separating the facts (question 1) from the experiences (question 2), which had consequences for their perception of their child's departure from the church. This led to further study of emotion theories. The individual interviews led to the perspective of the 'inside' of faith: feeling and experiencing. The respondents wished to experience faith and did not see what faith did to their parents at an affective level. Another example is that during the interview, one respondent discovered that her image of God was very similar to her image of her parents. This led to a study of literature on the relationship between images of God and attachment theories, and to a re-reading of the earlier interviews with this perspective in mind.

This role of theory in the analysis can be seen as 'data-driven' or abductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maso & Smaling, 1998). While the emphasis at the start of the research was on factors that encouraged people to leave the church, during the analysis process, the sub-questions were adjusted, focusing more on the experiences of the respondents, which, while also bringing the factors to the fore, deepened the interview and led to more discussion from an affective perspective. This illustrates that a flexible research design is desirable in exploratory interpretative research. The data can offer a different perspective than was initially anticipated. The researcher found this surprising, and it influenced the choice of reflective thematic analysis (RTA) as the analysis method.

2.4.2 What is reflective thematic analysis?

RTA is an analysis method that focuses on the role of the researcher, using open coding and searching for themes within the data. As mentioned above, the choice of this analysis technique was partly determined by the role of theory while conducting the research.

Various approaches are available for processing and analysing qualitative data within an exploratory design. These include Grounded Theory (GT), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Thematic Discourse Analysis (TDA) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Braun and Clarke (2020b, pp. 2-3) describe these analysis techniques as ‘a family of thematic analysis methods’, indicating that these techniques have much in common but differ in details. Within this research, RTA was chosen instead of another thematic analysis methodology. The decisive reasons for this were the flexible role of theory within RTA, the emphasis on the reflective and interpretative role of the researcher, and the (flexible) guidelines for implementing RTA. Let us first clarify what is meant by a theme, followed by a description of why another member of this family was *not* chosen. This description is based on Braun and Clarke (2020b).

2.4.3 Choice of RTA

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Verhoeven (2018), a theme can be seen as a kind of ‘sensitising concept’ that emerges from the data, guides the analysis and is related to answering the research question. To distinguish it from sensitising concepts within GT, a theme can be better described as an ‘organising concept’, formulated from the codes around ‘a relative core commonality’ (Braun & Clarke, 2020b; Byrne, 2022). The subtle difference between a theme and a sensitising concept is that a theme emerges during analysis from the data codes, and a sensitising concept from the problem statement before and during analysis, based on the data. This difference influences the role of theory in the research: analysis can lead to further literature research.

Grounded Theory was less applicable as it is based on sensitising concepts, guiding concepts based on the researcher’s prior knowledge and experience and linked to the research question (Baarda, De Goede & Teunissen, 2005, p. 43). Every researcher brings certain prior knowledge and expectations about the outcomes of the research (Verhoeven, 2018, p. 29). During the analysis, the data is screened for patterns of these concepts with the aim of developing a theory. The GT is therefore based on more or less explicit assumptions, which can be a limitation in exploratory research. The RTA searches for themes based on the codes from the data and is more open. Because RTA does not search for patterns of more or less explicit sensitising concepts in advance, every theme is important, regardless of how many respondents indicate it. These themes are linked to existing theories and provide direction for and/or require further research. In addition, GT focuses on developing a theory, which is not necessarily the goal of this exploratory research, nor is it necessary (Evers, 2024, p. 21).

The choice of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* over RTA is justifiable, as RTA and IPA are largely similar. Both search for themes based on codes. Disadvantages of IPA compared to RTA are that 1) it is more suitable for a smaller group of respondents, and 2) it

searches more deeply within the individual data for themes of certain respondents. The IPA is based on a leading theoretical framework, which can, however, be adapted. Within the RTA, the theoretical framework is created based on the data. However, these are minor differences. In general, it can be said that IPA analyses more in-depth than RTA. This is not necessary for our exploratory research, which aims to identify as many factors as possible for abandoning the church, and there is no leading theoretical framework. Theory is studied based on the factors/themes mentioned by the respondents.

Thematic Discourse Analysis could have been used because in this study, data were mainly collected through (group) interviews. Language was the means of conveying thoughts and feelings. Within TDA, as with RTA, attention is paid to the way something is said, intonation and facial expressions. The advantage of RTA over TDA is that it pays more attention to implicit themes. It also provides practical guidelines for analysis, recommended for novice researchers.

In summary, the choice for RTA is determined by the more or less subtle advantages it offers over the other analysis methods mentioned, even though they also use thematic analysis.

2.4.4 RTA procedure

RTA provides guidelines for the analysis process, which are summarised in Table 2.3. Verhoeven (2018, p. 295) describes this form of analysis as a 'version of the Grounded Theory approach'. This term indicates that thematic analysis uses some concepts from GT, namely iteration and the method of coding. Iteration refers to the cyclical process, the alternation of collecting, analysing and re-collecting, etc. Data collection continues until saturation is reached, i.e. when the last interviews no longer add any new themes. The coding is broadly similar to that of GT. Open (Phase 2) and axial (Phase 5) coding is used, and themes are identified, which are continuously refined and adjusted. It should be noted that this is not a linear process: phases can be distinguished, but not separated. There is constant iteration in data collection, analysis and reporting, and these phases occur partly simultaneously (Evers, 2024, p. 21). The phases of the analysis process are discussed, with phases 3 to 5 coinciding.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data

This phase coincided with the initial processing of the data. The questionnaires were entered into Excel, and the data were used to supplement the results of the focus groups and interviews. The results were integrated into the interview findings, for example, regarding the frequency of faith conversations with each parent and the ages at which millennials were allowed to make their own choices about participating in church activities. This methodology can be seen as complementary to the interview.

The recordings of the focus group and individual interviews were heard and transcribed. Although it is not necessary within the RTA to transcribe verbatim, this was

done in this study. This was related to Phase 2, the search for semantic and latent themes, as it made it easier to find latent themes, specifically. The transcripts were sent to the respondents for member checking, with a request to respond if any changes or clarifications were required. Two parents and eleven millennials made use of this opportunity. No changes were made; only a few clarifications were provided, and the pseudonyms of two respondents were changed. After consultation with the researcher, the gender of one respondent was recorded as female as opposed to male. Due to the specific circumstances of this respondent, they would otherwise be too recognisable within the 'small' world of GKv and NGK.

Phase 2: Open or initial coding

The next step was open coding. This was done manually for the focus groups, using Atlas-Ti for the individual interviews. The reason for manually coding the focus group reports was that the researcher had not yet completed training in Atlas-Ti. During the open coding of the individual interviews, a prefix was added to the codes, making it possible to recognise the context and age group in which a specific statement was made (Friese, 2019). For example: PK = adolescent + church, VG = adult + family and KS = child + school. Certain perspectives already surfaced at this stage, such as the parents' emotions and their influence on the millennials through their parenting style.

In this phase, both semantic and latent statements were coded. The researcher's attention was drawn not only to what was explicitly (semantically) stated, but also to what was implicitly (latently) present in the respondents' words. For example, one respondent explicitly stated that exclusion of those with different beliefs and behaviours took place within the church. Another respondent expressed this more implicitly by saying that her parents ignored her friends who were not believers. The explicit drew attention to the implicit, which was latent in the text.

Phases 3 to 5

Through iteration, the process of repetition during research in which previously collected data is reviewed based on new data (Verhoeven, 2018, p. 102), these phases overlapped. Data collection, analysis and reporting took place simultaneously. They are briefly discussed and summarised in Table 2.3, in which the examples were taken from all three rounds of interviews. Earlier rounds helped determine the coding of later rounds and vice versa. The phases are arranged as follows to increase the readability of the diagram: open coding, axial coding, thematisation and connection to the theory.

Identifying themes

Following open coding, a code list was created to discover themes. The codes were grouped and carefully reviewed again. This sometimes resulted in the making of new codes or a reformulation. Similarities and differences were sought. These themes provided a new perspective on the data from later interviews. The parenting style, for instance. The initial

interviews already revealed an ambiguity in parenting style, which was confirmed by the later interviews. However, the later interviews also influenced the coding of the first round. For example, regarding the image of God: when a respondent explicitly mentioned this, earlier interviews were reinterpreted from this perspective; it turned out to be a theme that emerged among several respondents.

Reviewing, defining and naming themes

As mentioned above, the themes were adjusted or refined during the process, and new themes were added. Literature was also found to interpret the themes. Themes were merged, or a distinction was made between main themes and sub-themes. An example of this is the main theme ‘the teachings of the church’, which, through the sub-theme ‘exclusivity’, influences the main theme ‘the social climate within the church community’.

Phase 6: Reporting

The reporting of the results is described in four articles, Chapters 3 to 6, as mentioned in 1.5.3 Structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 7 reflects on the role of the researcher throughout this process.

Table 2.3: *Phases of thematic analysis* (Braun & Clark, 2006; Byrne, 2022; Finlay, 2021)

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Description of the process</i>
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and reviewing the data, and noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis to the research question and literature, and producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

2.5 Validity and reliability

To ensure the validity of the research, source and method triangulation as well as member checking were employed (Baarda et al., 2005; Bowen, 2005; Yin, 2009). The sources were the parents and their adult children. Three research instruments were used: a questionnaire, a focus group and individual interviews. Member checking was used to increase validity by

emailing all respondents the transcript of the interview and asking them whether it was an accurate representation of the discussion, whether they wanted to add anything or whether they wanted anything to be reworded. Regarding the results described, the respondents were asked whether the quotes about themselves had been interpreted correctly and whether anonymity had been guaranteed. As mentioned earlier, the pseudonyms of two respondents were then changed, and the gender of one respondent was recorded differently in consultation with the co-researcher and the supervisor. Otherwise, this respondent would have been too recognisable due to specific circumstances. To ensure reliability, a transparent research method was chosen: a fellow researcher coded 10% of the individual interviews. This clarified certain themes; no new themes were added.

To avoid harming the interests of those involved, the following ethical guidelines were observed regarding informed consent, transparency, anonymity and confidentiality, and member checking.

- Informed consent: the group and individual interviews were started only after the signing of the informed consent form by the participants. See Appendix 5.
- Transparency: to ensure transparency, the respondents were fully informed about the research by means of an introductory letter, see Appendix 2. The researcher was always available to answer any questions. This point is also included in the consent form.
- Anonymity: the results of the individual questionnaires and interviews were processed anonymously and were only available for inspection by the researcher and the independent co-researchers. Only fictitious names of respondents were used in the report to prevent recognition within these two relatively small church communities.
- Confidentiality: the data is treated confidentially. The data will not be made available for other studies unless the respondent gives their consent. No information will be disclosed to third parties.
- Member checking: only results based on reports, transcripts and descriptions approved by the respondents have been published.
- Data Management Plan: this research was approved by the ethics committee of the Theological University of Apeldoorn on 9 May 2025. No ethics committee had been established at this university before this research, which is why it was approved retrospectively, following submission of a data management plan.

Table 2.4. Sample analysis per article of Phases 2 to 5.

What else could we have done?					
Excerpt	Open	Axial	Theme	Interpretation	Theory
<i>Told us he wanted to have a conversation, said: I don't believe anymore. A shock. We absolutely did not see coming. Not the best conversation of your life, is it? After that, my wife and I went to see him again to listen to him carefully.</i>	Unexpected, surprised by the situation Emotional conversation Listening	Shock Disrupted communication Open conversation	Emotions Family communication	Unexpected, initial reaction Needed time to adjust	Appraisal theory
<i>We pray for her a lot. God will not abandon her; she can still come back.</i>	Hope Prayer	Coping	Faith	Seeking support from God	Appraisal theory
<i>My daughter cohabitates with a man outside marriage. Other people are also aware of this.</i>	Deviant behaviour Judgement of others	Shame Deviation from church teachings and behaviour	Emotions Church teachings Social climate	Autonomous choices Parents still conformist	Appraisal theory Zeitgeist
Practise what you preach, and tell them what you feel					
Excerpt	Open	Axial	Theme	Interpretation	Theory
<i>I think it's really nice that when there are times when, well, something happens that makes them sad, they can fall back on their faith. And I know from my mother that she sometimes finds it difficult. She thinks, well, does it have to be this way, when there is a God? And I find that difficult to see, because on the one hand, you have so much to hold on to, and on the other hand, you don't really know what to do with it in some situations.</i>	Sees the value of faith in parents Sees doubt and struggle Sees ambivalence in mother	Faith provides support Mother's approach to faith in difficult times	Power of faith Ambiguity in parents: cognitive/ affective	Saw the value of faith less in difficult times with the mother May point to faith as culture, way of life	Coping

<p>When I was 18, I was able to withdraw from the church. Yes, I hear that. Well, we respect each other's choices.</p> <p>And I never really talked to them about whether they found it very difficult. Yes, of course, they didn't like it.</p>	<p>Respect within the family.</p> <p>No conversation about feelings and religious experiences</p> <p>Expects that parents won't like it</p>	<p>Respect for autonomy</p> <p>No open communication about feelings</p>	<p>Parenting style of parents</p> <p>Discussion about faith</p>		<p>Parenting styles</p> <p>Transmission theory</p>
<p>Honestly, I think that my image of my parents and my image of God just really coincided.</p>					
Excerpt	Open	Axial	Theme	Interpretation	Theory
<p>I thought it was a man (God) and, well, yes, I think love was central. Loving, but also a bit unpredictable, perhaps. Or at least, you didn't always know... I mean, you could pray for something, but you didn't know if it was going to happen. I'm not sure if I experienced that consciously as a child, or if I added that later on (Faith).</p>	<p>God is love, but also unpredictable.</p> <p>Never knew exactly</p> <p>Why pray if you don't know exactly what God wants? Does God even listen?</p> <p>Retrospection</p>	<p>Positive and negative aspects of God</p> <p>Gods randomness/incomprehensibility</p>	<p>Image of God</p>	<p>Knowing and feeling conflict with each other</p>	<p>Literature on Images of God: Schaap-Jonker, Nicolai, Kirkpatrick</p>
<p>And then the message was always: yes, but God loves you, and there is forgiveness. So I think that was very dominant in my image of God. But yes, I think, to be honest, as a child I never had a very strong sense of sin or guilt or anything like that. So I never really felt that it applied to me very much. I don't think I ever, I can't remember ever really begging God on my bare knees, saying, Oh, please forgive me?</p>	<p>Know this: God loves you</p> <p>Forgiveness</p> <p>Did not relate sin and forgiveness to himself</p>	<p>Cognitive</p> <p>Affective</p>	<p>Image of God</p>	<p>A difference between dimensions in God's image.</p> <p>Does not relate negative aspects to himself</p>	
<p>I was always very good at singing along, and I could always recite lots of Bible verses and Bible books. And I knew all the theory well. Um, but looking back now, I can't actually remember a moment when I ever really believed any of it</p> <p>And that's, uh, also a bit how I am. Uh, in that sense, I'm very good at putting on a mask or presenting myself, uh, in a certain way to the outside world.</p>	<p>Good at learning</p> <p>Never believed in any of it</p> <p>Doesn't expose himself</p> <p>Doesn't want to hurt others</p>	<p>Cognitively oriented socialisation, did not believe in it</p>	<p>Attachment</p>	<p>School context</p>	<p>Transmission of faith</p> <p>Attachment theory</p>

<p><i>Not wanting to hurt people. But also just to protect myself. That's just something I've developed over the years. That's just how I am, that's the kind of person I am.</i></p> <p><i>But it started to bother me more and more. I started to find myself a bit hypocritical because I always went to church very obediently, and when we prayed at home, someone always had to say the prayer. But I started to dislike it more and more. I didn't feel like going to church anymore. I wasn't doing it for myself, I was doing it one hundred per cent for my parents.</i></p>	<p>Self-protection: what for?</p> <p>Considers himself hypocritical : No choice of his own</p> <p>Reluctance to pray and attend church</p> <p>Did it for others, loyalty</p>	<p>Avoidant behaviour</p> <p>Fear of others' judgment?</p> <p>Cognitive dissonance</p> <p>Avoidant</p>	<p>Social climate</p> <p>Not authentic, not autonomous</p>		<p>Core values</p>
<p><i>Behave like us, then you belong to us!</i></p>					
<p><i>Excerpt</i></p>	<p><i>Open</i></p>	<p><i>Axial</i></p>	<p><i>Theme</i></p>	<p><i>Interpretation</i></p>	<p><i>Theory</i></p>
<p><i>Every Friday afternoon, I believe, we had to learn a psalm by heart like a hymn. Well, of course, you had to study very hard to learn it by heart. I didn't like that at all. And yes, it did take up a lot of your time,</i></p>	<p>Memorising, tension</p> <p>Having to, obligation</p> <p>Spending a lot of time on it</p>	<p>Emphasis on cognition</p> <p>Meeting expectations</p>	<p>Vision on learning</p> <p>Transmission central</p>	<p>Experienced it as an obligation, which caused tension</p>	<p>Religious socialisation: Schwartz, Kock and Sonnenberg,</p>
<p><i>When I started secondary school, I think I really did experience a kind of culture shock. Because that's what I knew from primary school: everyone went to church and believed in God.</i></p>	<p>Shock when she met people who thought differently</p>	<p>The protected world of GKv disappears</p> <p>Influence of religious groups</p>	<p>GKv school's vision on RS</p>	<p>The protective effect of the pillar is evident here</p>	
<p><i>But then I really thought about all those people in my class, who are actually all nice people. You're not bad people at all, and so a whole new world opened up for me, and they were all allowed to do things, like go to the cinema or on Sundays, watch a lot of television or play sports, you name it. And I</i></p>	<p>Non-believers are nice people, too</p> <p>As a child, I thought non-believers were bad</p>	<p>Image of non-believers</p>	<p>Exclusivity, social climate within the church</p>	<p>Suddenly, realising that there are people outside the GKv who have different beliefs</p>	

<i>thought, well, I want that too. Then it's much more fun. Yes, and then. But that wasn't allowed.</i>	Many fun things were not allowed Rules about what was and wasn't allowed	Meeting expectations	Faith as cultural transmission	Culture shock, eye-opener	
<i>Well, I know, I found it difficult that, at a certain point, you were announced as having withdrawn from the church. I found that very difficult because I thought, yes, and then my parents are sitting there, and everyone hears this all at once, even though I hadn't been to church for two years. But, and I felt particularly sorry for them, they would be looked down upon for something they couldn't do anything about.</i>	Fear of withdrawing Fear of judgment by others: parents being judged. Loyalty to parents	Loyalty to parents Judgmental character	Church policy Social climate	Traditional view of RS	View of RS
<i>It is always said in the faith that you should not judge, but it happens very often. Yes, there have been people who used to say hello to me when I walked down the street, but after I left the church, they stopped saying anything. I think that's not how it should be.</i>	Judgmental behaviour No longer greeted by churchgoers: Changed attitude of churchgoers	Does not meet expectations Not seen for who she was	Exclusivity Social climate	The difference between doctrine and life	Behave, believe, belong
<i>Yes, because they (the church council) thought I was still very young, so maybe you'll change your mind. So I got very angry and sent an email back. I made it very clear that yes, I'm not going to change my mind. So that took almost six months. They said, 'OK, we'll remove you from the church. Yes, I think I'm an adult, and I can make my own choices. So who are you to say we're not going to do it?</i>	Feels no respect for her own choice Angry at the church council My decision Does not recognise the authority of the church council	Autonomy is not respected Breaks with conformity	Church policy	Does not feel seen for who she is, and is not taken seriously in her decision to leave the church	Core values of millennials
<i>Travelled back and forth from A to B by train. Yes, that's purely about identity. That too, I would think, is quite expensive and not very practical in terms of travel time, but for us it felt completely logical, yes. Yes, that was, yes, that's</i>	Travel time to GKv school Was just, wasn't questioned	Influence of religious affiliation	Vision on RS, culture within GKv	Influence of important groups	Vision on RS and the church

<p><i>what you did. And we did it with a whole group. So it was also very enjoyable. Yes.</i></p>	<p>Fun on the train</p>	<p>Meeting expectations Bonding with children from the church</p>	<p>Influence on confessing faith</p>	<p>A reason for doing the public Profession of Faith</p>	
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3 'What else could we have done?'

Parents' experiences of their children's church disaffiliation in four Dutch conservative Reformed congregations

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3.1 Introduction

Many religious parents are faced with grown-up children disaffiliating from the church they grew up in. Where children tended to follow their parents in believing in God and in choosing their church community, this is no longer the case in the 21st century. Church disaffiliation has been occurring throughout the Western world since the 1970s, first affecting mainstream denominations in the Netherlands (De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018; Dekker & Stoffels 2011; Packard & Ferguson 2018; Perrin 2020), such as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Roman Catholic Church. Thirty years later, however, it has also started affecting smaller conservative churches (Dekker, 2013). Current research on church disaffiliation in the Western world mainly focuses on adolescents and is mostly quantitative, retrospective, and based on the variables of church involvement and church attendance (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016; De Hart, 1990; Storm & Voas, 2012). The results of these studies are unequivocal: parental religious socialisation is the most important predictor of the successful integration of young people into churches (Lanser, 2001; Regnerus, Smith & Smith, 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Sherkat, 1998). Although qualitative research has been conducted on the 'why' and 'how' of church disaffiliation, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has addressed the emotional response of parents to their children's church disaffiliation (Dyck, 2010; Packard & Ferguson, 2018; Perrin 2020). However, this parental angle did receive some minor attention in the non-scholarly Dutch church press, e.g., by De Graaf and Ruiter (2011) and Kuiper (2018).

The central question of this qualitative study is: how do parents from conservative Reformed congregations in the Netherlands experience the church disaffiliation of their children? In other words, how does it affect them, and what do they see as contributing factors? The answer to this question is relevant for churches seeking to provide appropriate pastoral care to parents whose children have disaffiliated. If this topic is not addressed, it could lead to parental loneliness (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011; Kuiper, 2018). In addition, understanding the contributing factors identified by parents can help parents and churches be aware of the phenomenon and support primary and secondary religious socialisation.

This article will first seek to explore the issue from a theoretical perspective. Since a religious socialisation failure may be an emotional event for parents, concepts and processes from appraisal theory will be discussed, namely, the concept of emotions, coping

processes/strategies, and possible outcomes. Following the introduction of the methodology, the presentation of results is given, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks.

3.2 Theory on emotions

In this section, we explore the theories of emotions, coping, the possible outcomes of the coping process and the influence of faith. It is argued in non-scholarly literature that a child's disaffiliation from the church evokes intense emotions in parents. It concerns things of great importance to them, namely, faith in God and church association. When parents promise to raise their child towards a life with God and the church when their child is baptised (as was done by the parents in the target group of this study), and this parental goal is not achieved, it is difficult for parents to accept and cope with this outcome (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011; Kuiper, 2018).

The basic theory on emotions assumes that particular events can evoke a certain reaction that is connected to an (innate) basic emotion, such as joy or fear (Scherer, 2009). Emotions arise within particular circumstances delineated by sociocultural factors. This is emphasised in constructivist theory (Scherer, 2009). When applied to this study, the sociocultural setting of the Dutch Reformed congregations plays an essential role in how emotions appear. Appraisal theory views emotions as based on the appraisal of an event within a certain timeframe. It is based on 'the general desire of people to understand and seek meaning in the world, and an attempt to control and predict events ... and to maintain and/or to enhance self-esteem' (Spilka et al, 1985). This study uses appraisal theory as a framework due to its ability to 1) connect emotions to cognition (knowledge gained, for example, from previous experiences); and 2) cover the entire process, from experiencing an emotion to dealing with it (Frijda, 2008). Church disaffiliation mainly involves negative emotions (De Graaf & De Ruyter, 2011; Kuiper, 2018). Emotions, such as anger and sadness, often occur in conjunction. This, however, depends on the nature of the crisis, the personality of an individual, and/or the sociocultural context (Smith & Lazarus, 1990).

3.2.1 Appraisal and coping

Despite several theories on emotions, including basic, constructivist, appraisal and attribution theory, a consensus remains elusive (Scherer, 2009; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Therefore, some authors choose to describe emotions in terms of characteristics instead. According to Smith and Lazarus, an emotion is a physical and/or psychological reaction evoked by an internal, external, or imagined event that can cause harm or benefit. In addition, Scherer stresses the influence of emotions on behaviour. Emotions, so he argues, lead to a willingness to act and a compulsion to control. This, Frijda calls the 'status of action readiness with control precedence'.

According to appraisal theory, emotions are evoked by the appraisal of the impact of the event/crisis on people or their environment. Such an appraisal is strongly influenced by personal variables, such as beliefs, previous experiences, upbringing, and education (Frijda, 2008; Smith & Lazarus, 1990; Spilka et al., 1985). Appraisal can be categorised as primary, secondary or as a

re-appraisal. A primary appraisal evaluates the situation at hand, whereas a secondary appraisal estimates how to tackle it and what the consequences might be. Re-appraisal, on the other hand, involves an evaluation of new information or experiences (Frijda, 2008; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Re-appraisal often occurs after an individual has gone through the process of coping and leads to re-interpretation of the event. Primary and secondary appraisal can be distinguished but not separated. They influence and facilitate each other and can often occur simultaneously. In secondary appraisal, four components can be distinguished, i.e., 'accountability, problem-focused coping potential, emotional-coping potential and future expectancy' (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Accountability provides direction – who is responsible for this situation? – and focuses on the causes of the event. The other three components are aimed towards managing the situation. How can this undesirable situation be changed into a desirable one? Which possibilities are available, and how do they influence the future?

The emotions arising from the appraisal process need to be dealt with; this is the so-called coping. Smith and Lazarus (1990) distinguish two forms of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping aims to change the environment, such as altering the situation, searching for support and information. It may be argued that a problem-focused coping approach would not only seek to solve the problem of church disaffiliation (which is not possible), but also the emotional problems of the parents, e.g., feelings of guilt and loneliness and a lack of support. This is why we see the attribution of church disaffiliation to a person, a group or an institution as a form of problem-solving. On the other hand, an emotion-focused coping strategy attempts to alter the appraised meaning of an event or to regulate an emotional response. In practice, such a strategy could manifest as denial and distancing, repression, intellectualisation and rationalisation, and belief adjustments (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). The last-mentioned strategy is interesting for this study due to the stability of beliefs and convictions (Park, 2005b; Sherkat, 1998). Therefore, it is relevant to explore the role of religion in coping.

3.2.2 Religion and coping

Given the influence of earlier experiences and memories, religion plays an important role in all parts of the coping process and its outcomes. Religion can be defined as 'a search for significance in ways related to the sacred' and faith as 'a personal commitment to a religion' (Ganzevoort, 1998; Park, 2005a). Religion provides a framework for interpretation, provides answers to questions that would otherwise remain unanswered, facilitates the search for meaning, providing a sense of control, thus bolstering personal resilience, and influencing family dynamics and childhood experiences (Dolcos et al., 2020; Spilka et al., 1985; Park, 2005). Religion can also be 'a burden and a source of struggle for people facing difficult life situations, adding another dimension of pain and hardship of coping (Pargament & Wachholz, 2005, p. 479). Maynard et al. (2001, p. 72) argue that the way religious people cope 'is most likely the

product of an individual's concept of God and other personal religious factors such as religious participation and the importance the individual places on the religious and spiritual dimensions of his or her life'. Exline and Rose (2005, pp. 315-330) agree and support the idea that the concept of God is paramount to a religious individual's coping mechanism. The argument presented is that attributing the cause of an event to God, 'primarily occur[s] in faith traditions involving a personal, relational God who actively engages with individuals.

Regarding the coping process, Ganzevoort (1994) distinguishes three main forms by which crises impact faith and faith impacts crises, i.e., they can problematise faith, transform faith, or stimulate faith (*problematization, transformation and stimulation*). Subsequently, Ganzevoort describes four outcomes (re-appraisals) of the coping process on an individual's faith, i.e., the principles of deepening, renewing, questioning, and blocking. During deepening, faith may stimulate or transform a person's coping mechanisms, and the crisis may, in turn, stimulate or transform their faith. In renewing, faith problematises the crisis, which can then transform the individual's faith. In questioning, the person's faith can stimulate their processing of the crisis, but the crisis may also problematise their faith. In blocking, faith and crisis problematise each other.

3.2.3 Emotions of parents

As remarked earlier, we found no research addressing the emotional response of parents to their children's church disaffiliation. However, research has investigated the emotional experiences of parents whose children are perceived to lack social, relational, and economic success (Cichy et al., 2013). Although this study does not focus on religious socialisation, their findings may be applied to the field of religion due to the fact that parents, in both situations, have to deal with the failure of not reaching their intended socialisation goals. Cichy et al. (2013) observed negative emotions, such as guilt, anger, disappointment, and concern, in parents whose children failed to meet their expectations.

Guilt was described as 'a failure to adhere to standards, rules or goals; guilt is accompanied by feelings of responsibility and the belief that one should have thought, felt or acted differently'. Regarding the intensity of guilt, Smith and Lazarus (1990) distinguish between intentionally created harm and non-intentionally created harm. These two partly determine the intensity of an individual's emotional response. Guilt also evokes the reaction of *blaming*. In such a case, an individual holds someone or something responsible for the situation that has arisen. This may be the 'self' but can also involve others or institutions.

Second, *anger* seems to prevail when goals are not achieved through the actions of the self or by others, and the situation could have been prevented. The intensity of an angered response is also determined by an individual's perception of the intentionality of an act. Third, *disappointment* is the result of children not meeting expectations. Finally, *concern* describes the parents' fear of the future of their children and themselves. Even though there are differing

paternal and maternal responses, Cichy et al. (2013) conclude that both parents regard their inability to meet individual expectations as an overall parental shortcoming.

In Figure 3.1 (Paragraph 3.4.2), the theory is summarised. New findings, discussed in the results section, are inserted. Abbreviations will be referred to in the results section. The model may seem to suggest that emotions and coping strategies are part of a linear process. This, however, is not the case: all components influence each other dynamically.

3.3 Method

Given the apparent absence of research on parents' experiences of their children's church disaffiliation, we decided to conduct our own exploratory interpretive research on the subject (Boeije, 2005). The aim of the study is to explore emotional reactions of parents to the church disaffiliation of their child and to discover what they perceived as the contributing factors.

Through purposeful sampling, using our networks, four congregations with a conservative Reformed profile were found willing to participate (Evers & De Boer, 2017). In these congregations, parents with children aged between 20 and 40 years old and who had disaffiliated from the church were invited to sign up for this study. All participants were informed that the researcher had no affiliation with any church council or other institution. In total, there were 26 participants, all of whom signed informed consent forms, according to the ethical standards of the university. Table 3.1 shows the diversity among participants. We worked with focus groups. This allowed us to explore the breadth of the topic in a relatively short time. Another reason to opt for this method was its ability to provide more insight than individual interviews, through participants questioning each other and giving each other new ideas through the diversity of responses (Evers & De Boer, 2017).

Each focus group lasted 150 minutes and was held in the group's own church building. Before the meeting, the consent forms and, as a form of elicitation, a questionnaire and two articles on church disaffiliation were sent to the parents (Klos, 2009; Opbouw, 2009). Before conducting the focus group discussions, the questionnaire was validated in a pilot. Based on this pilot, the questions were reformulated in their final form.

During the meetings the opening-the-locks model of interviewing was used, mainly because it fits the exploratory design of this study perfectly (Evers & De Boer, 2017) Two main questions were asked: 1) what do parents think are the themes and factors influencing church disaffiliation among their children; and 2) what are their own experiences and feelings about their children's church disaffiliation. The first question was asked to discuss this potentially fraught topic from a reasonable distance, allowing for a safe and confidential environment to develop within the group. The meetings were led by one researcher, supported by a second researcher. This second researcher observed, operated the equipment, and wrote a report

(Evers & De Boer, 2017). Video and audio recordings were made. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and sent to the participants for member checking. Participants were asked to react to their own remarks during the meeting. Two of which amended some of their statements.

Thereafter, the transcripts were manually analysed by the first author through open and axial coding. After this process, the main codes or themes were identified, e.g., ‘social climate’, ‘religious socialisation, and ‘emotions’. The aforementioned theoretical framework was used in an abductive manner, and the identified themes were interpreted in light of the literature. Data collection and analysis alternated, typically with a two-week gap between meetings. However, the Covid pandemic resulted in a six-month delay between the first meeting (congregation D) and the second. Table 3.2 illustrates three analysis examples.

Table 3.1. Background data on participating parents

Congregation	A	B	C	D
Names* of mothers	Anna Heleen	Monique Femke Bianca Janneke Tamara	Chantal Ellen	Angela Danielle Karin Saskia Maaïke
Names* of fathers	Frank Daniel	Johan	Erik Jan Maarten	Jeroen Bart Arjan Martin Wouter Pieter
Included married couples	1	1	1	2
Average age of parents	60	65	60	62
Number of disaffiliated members per family	1 family: 2 2 families: 3	2 families: 2 2 families: 3 1 family: 5	1 family: 1 3 families: 2	6 families: 1 2 families: 2 1 family: 3
Educational level (highest) **	4 MBO	1 MBO 1 HBO 4 WO	3 HBO 1 WO 1 Mv***	5 MBO 4 HBO 1 WO 1 Mv***

* Names are pseudonyms

** MBO = secondary vocational, HBO = higher vocational, WO = college/university

*** Missing value

Table 3.2. Example of analysis

Fragment	Open	Axial	Theme	Interpretation	Theory
<i>He told us he wanted to have a talk, he said: I don't believe any more. What a shock! We absolutely did not see this coming. Not the best conversation of your life, is it? Afterwards, we went to see him again my wife and I, to listen to him properly.</i>	Unexpected, surprised by the situation. Emotional conversation Listening	Shock Disrupted communication Open conversation	Emotions Internal communication Coping	Unexpected first reaction Needed a period of adjustment	Primary appraisal Secondary appraisal
<i>We pray a lot for her. God will not let her go. She can still come back</i>	Prayer Hope	Faith	Coping	Seeking support from God	Coping strategy Secondary appraisal
<i>My daughter cohabitates with a man outside marriage. Other people are also aware of this.</i>	Aberrant behaviour Shame	Consequences church disaffiliation Deviation of accepted doctrines and conventions	Lifestyle Doctrine of church Social climate Emotions	Autonomous choices Parent still conformist	Primary appraisal Zeitgeist

3.4 Results

In this section, we describe the findings from the focus groups. First, we describe the emerging emotions and the appraisal process, paying extensive attention to the prominent emotions of disappointment and guilt, in conjunction with the contributing factors parents mentioned. Next, the employed coping strategies and outcomes of the process are described. In three of the four groups (Table 3.1: group B, C, D), the parents showed remarkably high levels of openness and confidentiality. We observed that the parents seemed relieved to be able to share emotions and experiences among the participants. In group A, the conversation was difficult. The reason for this was most likely the small group size (n = 4) due to cancellations and the family relationship between the remaining group members. Respondents may have believed that thoughts and feelings were so natural that they felt it unnecessary to verbalise them. It is also possible that relationship dynamics influenced the group's safety (Evers & De Boer, 2017).

3.4.1 Prevailing emotions and appraisal

The central issue addressed by the parents in every meeting was: what could we have done differently? Where have we failed? What was wrong in our parenting that caused our children

to no longer commit to the church, and to discard their faith? The questions can be interpreted as a mixture of emotions, including disappointment and guilt, which were the two prevailing emotions. We will describe these emotions in more detail because they illuminated contributing factors, occurred in conjunction with other emotions and showed all four components in the secondary appraisal, i.e., accountability (AC), emotional coping (EC), problem-focused coping (PC), and future expectance (FE). Where relevant, the abbreviation is given in brackets after the quotations.

Disappointment

The disappointment concerns the children, the parents themselves, God, and the church, and is caused by both unmet present and threatened future expectations. As regards the children, they had not fulfilled the expectations of the parents – that they would remain members of the church they grew up in – and most of them no longer believed in God, even though, in several cases, the children used to be actively involved in the church and showed enthusiasm for faith. The children made autonomous choices which, on the one hand, were appreciated, as Anna (group A) said, *'because it is really their own choice'* (AC); on the other hand, the parents sometimes needed time to accustom themselves to this situation, especially when these choices clashed with the parents' own convictions and the teachings of the church. The disappointment also concerned relationships within the family. As Janneke (group B) said: *'You can't share everything anymore. You don't have a common ground anymore'* (EC). Worry was also observed regarding the future, as expressed by Maaïke (group D): *'Will I see my child again later on? And what will happen to the grandchildren?'* (FE).

Regarding the parents, they were disappointed in themselves, experiencing a sense of inadequacy and failure, shame, and jealousy. They felt they had failed in the religious socialisation because the intended result had not been achieved. Thus, some were ashamed and jealous of other congregational members whose children were still active church members. This mixture of emotions, in turn, caused feelings of sinfulness and guilt because they thought they ought to be happy for those other congregational members.

Regarding God, they were disappointed (or angry) because most of the children had been searching but had not found Him. As Bianca (group B) said: *'The youngest one has been looking for God endlessly and never experienced God. I think that is really terrible, and I am angry about that'* (AC).

Parents were also disappointed in the church and in the congregation, for example, due to inappropriate pastoral care or because they felt that too much consideration had been given to older congregational members. The involvement and support of other members of the congregation was lacking, as Chantal (group C) told us: *'the disaffiliation of our children was publicly announced at the same time (in the service). And then you walk out there into that hall, and ... at one point, one person spoke to me, and then you feel so lonely'* (EC).

The comments from the parents revealed that emotions are often intertwined and triggered by one another. Disappointment was accompanied by sadness, concern, and anger. Sadness from unfulfilled expectations, concerns about the future, and anger towards others who may have contributed to their child's disaffiliation. Disappointment was also closely linked to guilt, the second most prevailing emotion.

Guilt

Nearly all the parents experienced a feeling of guilt. They were looking for someone or something to blame. Danielle (group D) was very clear about it: *'my husband and I find ourselves always blaming someone'* (AC). When asked what they felt guilty about, only six parents had an answer, mentioning the primary religious socialisation, which could have influenced their child's decision and could be traced back to themselves as parents (internal AC). As Frank (group A) stated: *'I had trouble talking about my faith. I should have done more'*. There were circumstances within the family over which they had no control, such as the illness or the death of a parent. In some circumstances, such as divorce or frequent moves (stopping the development of attachment to the church), they could have made other choices. However, most parents looked for factors outside themselves (external AC).

Guilt was also directed externally, predominantly towards the church. The factors most parents attributed to the church were the social climate, the doctrine and language of the church, and the absence of peers and role models within the congregation. The *social climate* within the church was mentioned by all parents, such as a lack of room for diversity, too little real connection, and not enough openness. Diversity was defined as people having doubts, different opinions, a disability, or a different sexual orientation. Many youngsters thought they were not seen for who they were. Having no real connection was expressed by Ilona (group C), whose son told her: *'They do not miss me anyway, and if they do, they'll ask you and not me when they meet me.'* The lack of openness and interest for others not only concerned relations between older and younger generations but also those within all generations; as Ellen (group C) stated: *'How open is the whole congregation to newcomers? Are they noticed and included in the group?'*

Being seen by others could, at the same time, also be experienced as social control. Femke (group B) said her daughter did not want to go to church any more, *'because she has the idea that people want something from her, or that they say they are glad she is there, and that keeps her away.'* According to the parents, the experience of being 'seen' varied from one youngster to another. Because of the many contacts most young people had outside the church, the threshold to leave the church was perceived to have become lower than in earlier times. As Ellen (group C) put it: *'They should actually miss something – a warm nest – but they do not miss anything'*.

Regarding the *doctrine* of the church, two fathers questioned whether the story told in church had relevance for young people today. They thought the narrative was not confronting enough. Daniel (group A): *'Do you confront? Just saying, "God is here for you", I don't think that comes through anymore. Because then you only get disappointed'* (AC). Regarding the *language* of the church, Erik (group C) stated: *'There is alienation from the church language. It is incomprehensible to them. If we're too lazy spiritually to adapt our story, we shouldn't sulk when they leave, either'* (AC).

Parents saw the absence of a suitable *peer group* and a *disconnect from youth ministry* within the church as factors. In some cases, the child did not fit in with the peer group, had friends outside the church, and, in several cases, met a non-believing partner. Some parents thought the church youth programme did not sufficiently address the questions their children had: the programme was partly focused on 'experiencing' faith, and not all young people appreciated that. Femke (group B): *'Youth workers can be too enthusiastic about their faith, and that can be threatening to searching young people who have doubts'* (AC/PC). By saying this, she implicitly advises the church's elders about the professionalism of the youth workers. Parents expressed that not every young person felt heard and taken seriously regarding the questions they had. Also, parents noticed that youth workers had a difficult time explaining the 'why' of faith (AC/PC).

The absence of role models and lack of intergenerational contact were also seen as factors. According to Femke (group B), her daughter found people in church *'so well behaved and boring'*, which was not the expectation she had for her own life. Regarding intergenerational contact, Bianca (group B) advised: *'Let older people tell what God has done in their lives'* (PC). They should share their difficulties and fears by telling an authentic, relatable story.

Parents appraised church disaffiliation as a threatening situation for both their children and the church. The secondary appraisal, in the data shown here, regularly included three of the four components listed by Smith and Lazarus (1990): accountability, emotional coping, and future expectancy. The component of problem-focused coping was almost absent, being mentioned only by giving implicit advice in three cases of external attribution. The factors they experienced as contributing to church disaffiliation were mainly outside themselves. As far as emotion-focused solving is concerned, parents emphasised that they lacked support from the congregation; regarding future expectancy, parents expressed concern, especially about the consequences of life without God.

3.4.2 Coping strategies and reappraisal

The coping strategies and reappraisal are described in conjunction because the coping process is not linear, and the distinguished parts are intertwined. Parents had different coping strategies for the emotions experienced, and the three ways in which faith influences coping, mentioned by Ganzevoort (1994), were recognised.

Based on the strategies of Folkman and Lazarus (1988), the following emotional solving processes could be observed: 1) distancing or denial; 2) repression; 3) intellectualisation, including rationalising and adjusting beliefs. We also found problem-solving processes in the categories 1) attribution and 2) support seeking.

The strategy of *distancing* is represented by Chantal (C), who said: *'You wonder what could have been done differently, but I am not going to feel guilty about it anymore, I have a pretty good idea of what happened'*. The remark made by many parents that church disaffiliation does not mean abandoning God can be seen as a form of *repression*; for example, *'you sometimes think to yourself, what does that mean for their future? But yes, I don't think about that too much, because you don't know anyway'* (Wouter, group D). An example of *intellectualisation* in the form of rationalisation was given by Erik (C): *'I always realised when our children were growing up that half would drop out'*. *Adjusting beliefs* occurred among several parents; one example was expressed by Jeroen (D), whose convictions concerning heaven and hell had changed. *Problem-solving coping* in the form of attribution could be observed among all parents. They mentioned factors within the church and the congregation that could promote church disaffiliation. The form of *seeking support* from others and God was common to all: *'What helps me now is that God is a loving Father. Well, if my children go a different way, how would I feel about that? I can't imagine ever letting my children go'* (Johan, group B).

All three ways in which faith influences the coping process, as mentioned by Ganzevoort, were observed (1994). *Problematization* was expressed by Jeroen (D): *'What does it mean that faith is given, not chosen? But what if it is not given to you? And can it be taken away from you again?'* Bart (D) mentioned the *transformation* of faith due to the crisis: *'Strangely enough, my personal faith has deepened; I used to be someone who was very attached to certainties. I threw that overboard. Only Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can reach them'*. *Stimulation* was seen in many parents. During the crises, they continued to trust God.

The outcomes for faith *deepening*, *renewing*, and *questioning* can be observed, but although two parents mentioned these terms, it was unclear what they meant by this, exactly. *Blocking* did not occur: all parents showed their trust in God, often by mentioning Psalm 138:8 (NKJV), *'Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever; Do not forsake the works of Your hands'*.

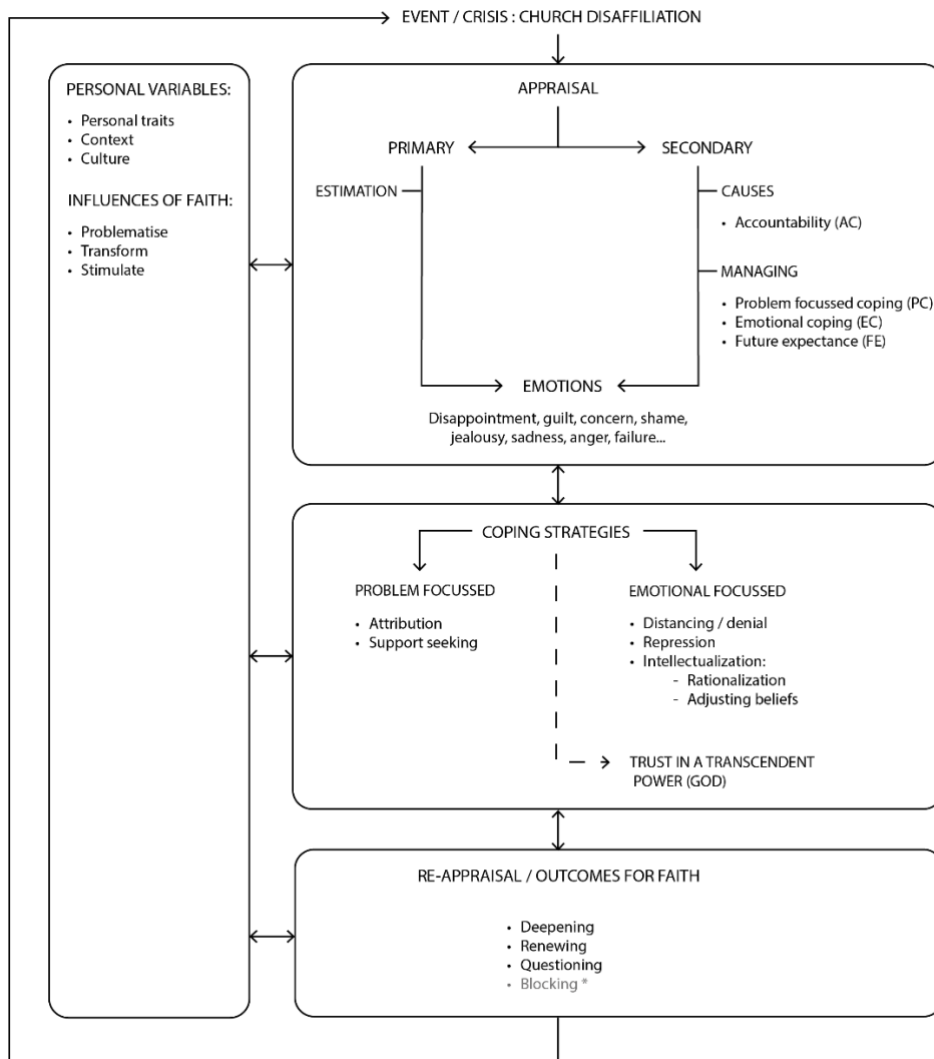


Figure 3.1. The coping process of church disaffiliation as described in the theory section, with new findings included. Based on Folkman and Lazarus (1988), and Ganzevoort (1994).

3.5 Discussion

The results raise certain points of discussion, namely the shame that parents experience, their attribution of contributing factors, the differences in the coping strategies they use, and the hope that their children’s church disaffiliation does not entail their leaving the faith.

First, the chosen coping strategies differ across individuals and correspond to those mentioned by Folkman and Lazarus (1988). Almost all parents attributed and named contributing factors in secondary religious socialising contexts, such as church and peer groups.

It was notable that adjusting beliefs (intellectualisation) occurred in the case of only three of the fathers. The mothers generally showed more denial, repression, and distancing, which is in line with the conclusions of Cichy et al. (2013) that differences can be seen between the emotions and coping processes of fathers and mothers. More research is needed to clarify the causes of these differences. Although the strategy of problem-solving was not often observed, the willingness to participate in the focus group meeting can be seen as a form of problem-solving, namely, seeking help and support from others and contributing to research on church disaffiliation. What all parents had in common was that they dealt with their emotions through their trust in God. Therefore, we recommend a further strategy be added to those listed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988), namely, trust in a transcendent power (God).

Second, the shame that parents experience because of their children's choices suggests that, although these parents are of the so-called generation baby-boomers, they value the autonomy and authenticity of postmodernity (like shown in the quotes of Anna) they themselves are still (partly) attached to the obligation and conformity of modernity (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; Heitink, 2011; Root, 2017). This mixing of values is consistent with Sherkat's conclusion that the majority of baby boomers still carry with them the values and beliefs of modernity, and with that of Groen and Vermeer, who state that baby boomers value autonomy more than their own parents in raising their children (Groen & Vermeer, 2013). This situation can create tension in parents: on the one hand, they accept their children's autonomous choices (influenced as they are by postmodernity), but on the other hand, they are ashamed and sad when their children make choices that conflict with the doctrine and habits within the church (still tending towards values of modernity).

Third, although the parents attributed several inducing dynamics to the church, nobody characterised these as intentional failings. This finding may explain why they did not experience anger against the church. The social climate was seen to be important, especially a non-inclusive climate, which is consistent with the findings of Packard and Ferguson (2019), who call this a 'push factor'.

Fourth, the hope that several parents derive from the assumption that disaffiliating from the church does not mean the child abandoning God is questionable. Quantitative sociological research shows that if disaffiliates do not join another congregation, they tend to move from believing–belonging to unbelieving–not belonging (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011). However, this pattern is not deterministic. Stoffels (2010), in an overview of 70 years of research on young people and religion in the Netherlands, argued that young people are interested in spirituality and meaningfulness but have little interest in the church as an institution. If church disaffiliates find forms of encounter outside traditional churches, this trend can be broken, but 'lone saints' run the risk of losing their faith.

3.6 Conclusions and limitations

3.6.1 Conclusions

The central questions of this study are: how does a child's church disaffiliation affect the parents, and what do they see as contributing factors? The answers to these questions are intertwined, mainly because the contributing factors mentioned by the parents are relevant to the coping process. The parents' experiences proved to be diverse, while also showing similarities. From the results of our research, three conclusions can be drawn regarding the failed parental role, the influence of faith on the coping process, and the outcomes.

First, all parents experienced the church disaffiliation of their children as a crisis caused by their faith. In almost all parents, their child(ren) leaving the church evoked the feeling of having failed in their parental role. This feeling is not surprising, given the baptismal promise these parents had made, and corresponds to the conclusion of Cichy et al (2013).

Second, it can be said that faith played an important role in the coping process of religious parents. Faith provides both worrisome and hopeful answers. Parents find hope in a Bible text like Psalm 138: 8. Apparently, parents use this often-mentioned text as a coping strategy to deal with the impact of the first. Further research is needed to understand how this kind of theologising helps parents cope with disaffiliation.

Third, the outcomes of the coping process did not change the parents' faith or their image of God. Although two of the fathers spoke of their faith deepening and being enriched, these participants could not be placed in Ganzevoort's (1994) typology because it was not clear how the process was influenced. Individual in-depth interviews are required to gain more insight into this process.

3.6.2 Limitations of the study

With regard to the scope of the study, we would like to make three remarks. First, the number of parents who signed up was small, possibly indicating either the complexity and sensitivity of the subject, about which not all parents want to speak within a group, or that there are parents who have accepted their children's disaffiliation and experience few emotions about it. Given the comments of several parents on this subject and the expectations of church councils, the former is likelier to be true than the latter.

Second, socialising contexts, such as schools, peer groups outside the church, and society, were (largely) not considered. Parents did mention these marginally, but the context in which they were invited to participate, their own church congregation, might have narrowed the focus.

Third, this is the story of 26 parents, told within the social context of their own church, retrospectively and as interpreted by the researcher. The results are not generalisable, but

transferable. Insight has been offered into the experiences of parents that may also apply within comparable church communities. This study provides churches with a methodology to gain greater insight into the experiences of their own congregants within their own church context, which they can utilise to their future advantage.

4. 'Practice what you preach and tell what you feel'.

Millennial church leavers' experiences of their parents' role in their religious socialisation.

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4.1 Introduction

Studies of children's and young people's religious socialisation (RS) all point in one direction: Parents are one of the most important predictors of its success (Bjørnvedt, 2025; De Hart, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Schwartz, 2006; Sherkat, 1998; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; Storm & Voas, 2012; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). For most Christian churchgoing parents, RS has been achieved when their children establish a relationship with God and become members of a church or group in which they experience fellowship with other believers. However, churches in the Netherlands and many other Western countries have experienced declining membership for many years, mostly due to young people leaving the church (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016). So couples do not always achieve this parenting goal of church affiliation, which is also an issue in conservative Reformed denominations.

Church disaffiliation has been studied mostly using quantitative approaches and focusing on measurable outward characteristics (Wijma & Slendebroek, 2011). To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted on the influence of parents on church disaffiliation. This article reports findings from a qualitative exploratory research project on parental influence as a cause of church disaffiliation. The study was carried out among millennials from four conservative Reformed church congregations in the Netherlands. Millennials (individuals born between 1980 and 2000) were chosen as the target population because they are the generation that has left the church in greater numbers compared to previous generations (Perrin, 2020; Root, 2017; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). A striking finding from the individual interviews is the roles of parents' parenting styles and children's attachment styles to their parents. In this article, we focus on parents' influence on their children's church disaffiliation through their parenting styles. In another article, we will focus on the parents' influence on their children's attachment styles.

The question we ask in this article is how millennials who grew up in a conservative Reformed church community and left the church experienced their parents' role regarding their RS (religious socialisation). The answer to this question is relevant because little is known about the experiences of RS by church disaffiliates. Scholars who have studied parenting styles and the transmission of faith have focused primarily on the parental influence as such. Church leavers' experiences are important for a broader understanding of the phenomenon, which is socially relevant for educators and institutions involved in young people's RS, such as parents, churches,

and church-affiliated schools. For parents, it is important to know what influence they have so that they can take it into account in RS. Regarding the involved church communities and schools, providing a socialisation context for young people is not sufficient; a supportive context for parents should also be offered.

In this article, we use a working definition of RS based on the work of Bebiroglu et al.(2015) and Boyatzis (2005), according to whom RS is ‘the process by which parents transfer their knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs about their own religion to their children and which aims to ensure that the children internalise these and establish a trusting relationship with God and fellow believers within an organised community’ (Barrow et al., 2020; Bebiroglu et al., 2015; Boyatzis, 2005).

This article is structured as follows: From a practical theological perspective, we begin by examining RS and parenting styles through the use of educational and sociological theories. To interpret the experiences of the participating millennials, we apply theories on socialisation processes. The theoretical discussion provides a framework for analysing empirical data. After briefly outlining our methodology, we present the participants’ experiences. Finally, we draw some conclusions and make recommendations for parents and churches, also providing suggestions for further research.

4.2 Literature Review

Many devout Christian parents desire that their children believe in God and become members of the church community in which they grew up (Bebiroglu et al., 2015; Boyatzis, 2005). At the time of their child’s baptism or dedication, they promise before this community that they will initiate their child into faith. This sets the direction and goal of their children’s RS, which is to know God, establish a relationship with Him, and become a member of the church community. This RS is influenced by various contexts, such as families, the church, schools, and friends. The church and schools are significant in this regard, and parents affect their children’s lives through the choices they make in engaging them with particular social institutions. In this study, we focus on primary socialisation in the core family. First, we discuss a theory of parenting styles; then, we describe the processes that are important for successful RS. It is necessary to discuss these aspects because the data revealed the significance of parenting styles. This confirms the generally accepted principle that parents are primarily responsible for RS (Bebiroglu et al., 2015).

4.2.1 Parenting Styles

Whether the goal of RS is achieved is largely determined by parents—what they want to transmit, how they transmit it, and which factors influence this. Their role involves their parenting styles and processes/factors that promote RS. This will be clarified using a theory of

parenting styles, based on which a model for analysing and describing the results is presented in Table 4.1.

When it comes to shaping primary RS, several parenting styles can be identified. In this domain, Baumrind's classification of such styles is widely accepted and used. Baumrind described a parenting style as 'the values and the beliefs that parents hold about their parental role and the nature of their children' (Ktistaki et al., 2014, referring to Baumrind). She distinguished three parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. With time, scholars have added nuances to these styles. For example, Ktistaki (2014) recognised two dimensions in them—demandingness and responsiveness—and arrived at two variants of the permissive style—indulgent and indifferent. As a result, four parenting styles can be distinguished. The *authoritative* parenting style is characterised by a warm relationship, a lot of love, and a balance between direction from the parents and space for autonomy for the child. The *authoritarian* parenting style is characterised by a cold relationship, little to no love, strong direction and control, and little room for autonomy. In the *permissive indulgent* style, the educator feels responsible but does not take into account the child's special needs. Finally, in the *permissive indifferent* style, the parent neglects parental responsibility and ignores their emotional and social roles towards the child.

Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019) have argued that although the parenting styles named by Baumrind and Ktistaki are based on empirical evidence and have proven their scientific usefulness, some additions can be made to them. We mention these because they are relevant to our research. First, Kuppens and Ceulemans considered the dimensions of parental control (demandingness) and support (responsiveness) as insufficient for classification. They identified a third dimension, *parental psychological control* (influencing thoughts, beliefs, and feelings), which may also affect the outcomes of RS. In its negative form, this dimension leads to manipulation and intrusiveness. It may play a role in RS because religious parents' intention is for their children to believe in and join their church community. Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019, p.177) referred to a study by Zhang et al. that showed that 'parental psychological control is indeed positively correlated with parent-centred intentions, implying that parents intend to satisfy their own needs by applying controlling behaviours with their children'. Second, according to the two authors, Baumrind paid little attention to the differences in parenting styles between the two parents and their joint impact on child development. A different parenting style may best suit each parent, partly depending on their own upbringing, culture, and perceived intrusive events. This nuance is important in the present study, as will be shown in the results section.

4.2.2 Processes that promote successful RS

To further develop our framework for analysis, the processes and factors that influence the achievement of the goal of RS were considered. Several authors agree that the authoritative

parenting style offers the best chance to achieve the aim of (religious) socialisation, but this is no guarantee (Dollahite et al., 2019, 111). Schwartz (2006) described three models of how parents can achieve this aim: transmission, transaction, and transformation. These models can be distinguished but not separated, as they influence each other. Based on these models and the empirical work of different authors, a framework for analysis can be constructed to describe millennials' experiences of their parents' parenting styles. The processes discussed below are summarised in Table 4.1.

The *transmission model* concerns the transfer of beliefs, values, and norms. In it, the parent is responsible, and the model emphasises the exemplary behaviour of educators—parents act as role models. According to several authors, regarding the transmission of beliefs and values, parental behaviour is a strong predictor of adolescent behaviour (Barrow et al, 2020; Lanser-Van der Velde, 2000; Schwartz, 2006; Smith & Adamczyk, 2012). Schwartz noted that this transmission is unidirectional, with the parents as the transmitters and the children as the receivers. This may be sufficient for adopting behaviours, but it is a poor predictor of the formation of attitudes towards religious beliefs. Based on their quantitative research on adolescents, Bader and Desmond argued that if parents' behaviours are consistent with the beliefs, values, and norms they want to transmit (i.e., if they practise what they preach), children develop positive attitudes towards faith, making them more likely to adopt their parents' religion (Bader & Desmond, 2006). Furthermore, Barni et al. (2011) and Tervo-Niemelä (2021) both emphasised the importance of agreement between parents concerning beliefs, values, and norms.

The *transactional model* pertains to the transmission of faith through open communication and mutual learning between the child and the educators. Both are responsible, and the child has the opportunity to express doubts and develop their own convictions. The autonomy of the child is respected. This model is bidirectional—both parents and children are actively involved, and there is reciprocity. Lanser-Van der Velde (2000) called it 'reciprocal faith learning'. According to the author, parents must adapt to changes in the times they live in, and they can learn to do so from their children. Moreover, Schwartz (2006) observed that if parents have a warm and close relationship with their children, the latter are more likely to adopt the former's religious beliefs. Smith and Adamczyk (2012) argued that parents' faith conversations with their children should include several elements, such as regular talks: 'about concerns that matter, what they feel and believe, and how they relate them to their own lives'. Here, Bebiroglu et al. (2015) and Dollahite et al. (2019) indicate the importance for parents of listening to their children, as children perceive conversations focused on their needs and interests, as opposed to those of their parents, more positively. Dollahite et al. (2019) also stressed the significance of making expectations explicit regarding children's religious participation and responsibility while respecting their autonomy.

The *transformational model* comprises significant others in addition to educators and children. Here, responsibility is shared. In addition to learning from parents and other educators, children also learn from their social environment. Parents' influence emerges through the institutions and contexts in which they place their children, such as the church and school. Bebiroglu et al. (2015) referred to this as 'channelling', which involves others (in addition to parents) being brought in as 'socialisation agents'. Institutions can reinforce and help shape transmission and transaction. Regarding transformation, Dollahite et al. (2019) argued that it is important not to force participation in church activities and to leave space for exploration. They underscored that a balance must be struck between flexibility and strictness concerning participation in church activities. If parents are too strict in this regard, children are more likely to remain uninvolved.

Based on the above discussion, it is to be expected that each parenting style is linked to one or more of the aforementioned models. We hypothesise that RS will be most successful with the authoritative parenting style, in which demandingness and responsiveness are in balance, and there is a lot of love. The autonomy of the child is respected, and both parents and child are responsible for the mentioned processes. This fits with the transformational and transactional models. The permissive and authoritarian styles are expected to be less successful. In the case of permissive parenting, there is a low level of demand and responsivity, as well as inconsistency in love, which hinders transmission and transaction processes. Here, significant others can be crucial in compensating for the lack of support, as predicted by the transformational model. With authoritarian parenting, there are high demands and no attention to the needs of the child, and insufficient love. This connects with the transmission model, in which the educator has sole responsibility and does not respect the child's autonomy. This lack of respect is detrimental to all three processes, especially the transaction. It can also be expected that this parenting style is accompanied by psychological control (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019).

Table 4.1. Framework for Analysis and Reporting

Parenting style	Dimensions			Expected processes used by the parents for RS		
	<i>Demandingness</i>	<i>Responsiveness</i>	<i>Psychological control</i>	<i>Transmission</i>	<i>Transaction</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
Authoritative	High: clear boundaries	High: a lot of love and affection	Low	Doctrine and tradition are central. Consistency between doctrine and life. Parents act as role models.	Mutual learning Open communication and faith conversations	Role models other than parents Not forcing participation Leaving space for exploration
				Respecting the child's autonomy		
Permissive indulgent	Low: lack of boundaries	High: some love and affection	Low or high	Doctrine and tradition are central. Inconsistency between doctrine and life. Parents do not act as role models.	No faith conversations	Role models other than parents Not forcing participation Leaving considerable space for exploration
Permissive indifferent	Low: no discipline	Low: no love and affection; indifference and neglect	Low	Inconsistency in transferring knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms. Inconsistency between doctrine and life. Parents do not act as role models.	No faith conversations	Role models other than parents Not forcing participation Leaving considerable space for exploration
				Respecting the child's autonomy too much		
Authoritarian	High: emphasis on discipline	Low: no love and affection; lack of communication	High	Doctrine and tradition are central. Consistency between doctrine and life. Parents act as role models. Conformity and obligation.	No faith conversations	Role models other than parents Forcing participation Not leaving space for exploration
				Not respecting the child's autonomy		

4.3. Method

A questionnaire survey (for collecting information about respondents and for elicitation) and open-ended interviews were conducted among eighteen millennials who grew up in families belonging to a conservative Reformed church community. The questionnaire consisted of three parts pertaining to the respondent, parental family, and current situation, and was focused on the characteristics of RS, church involvement, and faith conversations. The open-ended interviews were based on a topic list and dealt with RS in the contexts of family, church, and school (De Muynck, 2021). One topic was the parenting style of the respondent's parents. Questions were asked about rules regarding family practices (e.g., prayer and church attendance), relationships with parents, space for doubts and making one's own choices, and mutual learning. The results of the questionnaire and the interviews are presented here in an integrated manner. In this article, we only report data concerning the core family. A qualitative exploratory study was chosen because the question regarding the experience of parental styles has not been addressed in the literature; hence, an exploratory approach was needed (Baarda, 2005).

The participating millennials were recruited through their parents, who were members of the four congregations involved. Three respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. The respondents were informed that their communications would not be disclosed to their parents or to third parties. To avoid recognition in the congregations involved, pseudonyms are used here, and a descriptive method is employed to report the results. The criteria for participation were as follows: 1) belonging to the generation of millennials, 2) having been raised in a family belonging to a conservative Reformed church, and 3) no longer being involved or affiliated with a church denomination. Regarding criterion 1, some flexibility was taken into account because the boundaries of a generation are somewhat blurred; there are early and late adopters of change, and the spread can be around seven years (Bontekoning, 2010). Three respondents born before 1980 were admitted to the study based on this generational effect. During the interviews, it was discovered that four respondents did not fully meet criterion 2 because their parents switched churches during adolescence. However, they were included in the analysis because the reason for the change was that the parents did not feel at home in their church of origin and preferred a conservative Reformed congregation.

The interviews were conducted after informed consent was obtained, so that the laws safeguarding personal identity were not infringed upon in the gathering of information for this publication. The interviews were recorded with audiovisual equipment. For elicitation, the respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire and prepare photographs of different stages of their lives, which would aid them in recalling memories. Two-thirds of the respondents forgot to bring photos. As far as could be ascertained, this did not affect the analysis, as the interviewees described their memories well without them. They were asked to narrate their

experiences of faith regarding stages of life in the contexts of the core family, church, and school. The interviewer monitored the responses to ensure that the three contexts and the life stages were addressed, asking mainly clarifying questions. After transcription, member checking was executed. Only clarifications and/or additions were made. Reflexive thematic analysis was used, as this is suitable for an exploratory study (Braune & Clarke, 2006). After open-ended and axial coding, the theme 'ambiguity in parenting style' emerged prominently, which led to the final research question and an additional literature review. To increase inter-rater reliability, a co-researcher coded two interviews chosen at random and the results were jointly discussed. This did not yield any new themes, but certain themes were clarified. As the results were based on the respondents' past experiences, interpretation bias could not be avoided (Evers & De Boer, 2017). The primary researcher is a mother of church disaffiliates and a church member. She has experience of parents' feelings, such as hope, disappointment, and guilt, and was able to empathise with the respondents. She recognised many of the points they mentioned. Thus, measures were taken to increase the validity and reliability of the study, including discussions with co-researchers about possible bias, taking self-reflection notes after each interview, having a co-researcher code the transcripts, and member checking.

4.4 Results

The results from the interviews and the questionnaire are presented together based on the point made in Section 2.1 that the achievement of RS is largely determined by the parenting style—*what* parents want to transmit, *how* they transmit it, and *which factors* influence this. We start with the *what*—the doctrine of the church—because this was an important influence on the parenting style used for RS. Then, we focus on the *how*—the processes the parents employed to reach the goal of RS. The factors that affected this are described in the *what* and *how* subsections. Lastly, we describe some additional factors which influence the processes.

4.4.1 *What did the parents want to transmit?*

When baptising their child, the parents promised before God and the congregation that they would raise their child in the doctrine of the church and that he/she would become a member of the church. The parents in question were members of conservative Reformed churches. For them, the Bible is God's word. This means that there are rules concerning how church members must live their lives on earth. Hence, this doctrine determined their parenting style with regard to RS.

Three parenting styles were discerned in the data: authoritative, permissive-indulgent, and authoritarian. The permissive-indifferent style was not identified. A notable finding is that in all the authoritative and permissive-indulgent parents, the authoritarian parenting style was documented regarding religion. This was evident in the strictness concerning their children's

participation in church activities until a certain age or the time of leaving home. For all life domains, the parents applied the authoritative or permissive-indulgent style, except for religion, where they were authoritarian. This finding is based on the remarks of almost all respondents, except those who were raised with the authoritarian parenting style.

Bea (authoritative) is a good example. When asked about the parenting style of her parents, she said that in her family, nine out of ten things were open for discussion and negotiation; the one thing that was not was participating in church activities. This was a big point of contention. As for her religious development, she said that she never really believed: 'Once, when I was ten, we came home from the service, and I walked through the front door and just blurted out, "I don't believe in God". Then I had to cry, because of course you're not supposed to say that'.

This evidence shows two things. First, in Bea's family, there was open communication about everything, except religion. Second, it was expected that a child of the church community should believe in God. In this case, the parents respected the child's autonomy, but not when it came to religion. With the latter, the child was expected to conform to the parents' beliefs and adapt to the customs of the collective (the church community). Even as a ten-year-old, Bea already understood this very well. In the church communities in question, it was usual for members to behave as expected by the collective and fulfil their obligations. The doctrine the parents believed in dominated how they raised their children with regard to religion; hence, they combined the authoritative and permissive parenting styles with the authoritarian style. This influenced the how of RS.

4.4.2 How did the parents transmit church doctrine?

What the parents wished to transmit was clear: the church doctrine. In their parenting styles, they used three models to promote RS: transmission, transaction, and transformation. As the boundaries of these models are blurred, in practice, parents did not use only one model; also, there were differences between parents in terms of which model was deemed suitable in any given situation. We present the results per model in detail; where applicable, we connect them to the parenting styles experienced by the respondents.

Transmission

In this model, the parent is responsible for transmitting beliefs, values, and norms, and the exemplary behaviour of educators is emphasised. Doctrine and tradition play a central role. In our study, the parents took their responsibilities very seriously. This model was employed in all three parenting styles, most rigorously with the authoritarian-style parents. Regarding the transmission of beliefs, the millennials experienced both consistency and inconsistency. This led to the adoption of only certain values and norms from those received from their parents, and also to a lack of role models.

Most respondents observed consistency between the ideas their parents transmitted and the way their parents lived their lives. Almost all of them reported that their parents' whole lives were permeated by faith; in their experience, they did everything for the church. This demonstrates that some interviewees did not make a clear distinction between believing as an inner conviction and participating in church activities. For example, Elias (authoritative) used the words *belief* and *faith* (which can be viewed as indicating a relationship with God) and *ecclesiastical activity* (which pertains to participation in church activities) as synonyms during the interview. The minimal distinction between faith and ecclesiastical activity might have been linked to the parents' notion of what believing in God meant: conforming to the group and fulfilling obligations. This fits in well with their conviction that a believer should devote their entire life to serving the church.

Inconsistency between beliefs and behaviours was also experienced. This emerged in three respondents, who recounted their parents' reactions to intrusive events such as illnesses, the death of a family member, and unemployment. The inconsistency pertained to their mothers, who believed that God gives support, but who did not experience it during these events. This seems to indicate a one-sided view of God. Cognitively, the mothers knew that God helps his children. However, when facing difficulties and having their faith challenged, they either did not experience this help or did but could not communicate it.

Another domain of inconsistency concerned the values of charity and not judging. For example, as an adolescent, Anje (authoritative) did not understand why, if our salvation depends on whether we believe in God, her parents did not talk about this with their non-believing neighbours and colleagues. This indicates that there was a clear distinction between believers and non-believers, as well as between the church community and the society in which her parents lived and worked. Furthermore, two respondents identified judgmental behaviour in their parents towards non-believers and dissenters. Their parents accepted their believing friends over their non-believing friends and friends with different sexual orientations.

Most respondents reported that, since their childhood and adolescence, their parents' beliefs had changed. These changes, which could lead to shifts in behaviour, concerned women as church ministers, homosexuality, the doctrine of heaven and hell, and cohabitation before marriage. As adults, the respondents did not view these changes as examples of inconsistency. Instead, they appreciated the fact that their parents did not rigidly adhere to certain ideas and practices. This shift may have been caused by evolving societal views on the above-mentioned issues (Groen & Vermeer, 2013). It is also possible that the children's church disaffiliation led to an adjustment of certain beliefs. For instance, church disaffiliation led their children to other lifestyle choices, such as cohabitation before marriage. For the parents, their children's church disaffiliation and different lifestyles were intrusive events. Belief adjustment might have been used to cope with such events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Adopting values and norms

The respondents, most of whom no longer believed in God after leaving the church, adopted some Christian values and norms, but they no longer linked them to religion. Instead, they connected them to humanity, healthy working conditions, respect for others, autonomy, and environmental care. They considered them universal values. For example, Elly (permissive-indulgent) said the following in this regard: ‘I reject the Christian approach to sexuality, different sexual identities, and the male-female relationship. I also reject [the notion] that the earth is given to us for our own use. I do not subscribe to the Christian interpretation of stewardship. I do not believe in creationism, at least not as orthodox Reformed Christians profess it. What I pass on is reliability, honesty, thinking from another person’s point of view, and admiring the beauty of nature’.

Some Christian values were rejected, such as Sunday rest, no cohabitation before marriage, and judgmental attitudes towards homosexuals.

Lack of Role Models

A remarkable finding is the lack of role models. When asked if they knew someone who drew strength from their faith in daily life, most respondents could not name an example. Three interviewees (two authoritative and one permissive) mentioned their fathers, saying that they experienced support from God during intrusive events. When their fathers encountered difficulties, they showed on an affective level that they asked for and received God’s help. Most respondents did not observe this in their parents’ daily lives; they did see that knowledge of God and their faith in Him determined their lives, but not that they experienced his presence on an affective level. This may indicate a one-sided view of God among the parents: Believing in God means being convinced that he exists and complying with his rules. Their faith, as experienced by their children, seemed to be more about a cognitive belief than about an affective lived reality. The *zeitgeist* might have played a role here. For the millennial respondents, who grew up at a time when there was more emphasis on authenticity and feeling good about choices, cognitive experience might not have been sufficient. They also wanted to experience faith (Root, 2017). Their parents were convinced that they believed as God asked of them. Experiences were not that important—a believer should do what God asked and commit to the church.

Transaction

In the transaction model, there is open communication and mutual learning between the child and the educators concerning the transmission of faith. Both are responsible, and the child has the opportunity to express doubts and develop their own convictions. The autonomy of the child is respected.

The results show that seven mothers and six fathers spoke freely about their faith, six mothers and six fathers did so occasionally, one mother and two fathers seldom did, and two mothers and three fathers never did. Table 2 presents these results for each respondent, along with the parenting styles. This means that there was communication about faith in some families, but according to the respondents, this communication was focused on participation in church activities and the cognitive aspect of religion. In the authoritative and permissive-indulgent families, respondents could express their doubts and ask questions, but there was no mutual learning—the answers had to fit with the doctrine. In the authoritarian families, there was no communication of faith; it was normal for the parents to decide, and the children had to listen to these decisions and behave accordingly.

Three things stand out here: 1) the fact that in the permissive-indulgent families, there was faith communication (in two of them, there was a reasonable amount of discussion of faith), 2) the impact of an intrusive event on the transaction, and 3) the content of the conversations.

Firstly, faith communication in the permissive-indulgent families was not expected, based on the theory of parenting styles (Table 1). The following explanation can be proposed for this finding: In daily life, the children of these families were used to doing what they wanted because their parents set few or no boundaries. However, concerning religion, the parents used the authoritarian parenting style, with strict and non-negotiable rules. As this was not fully accepted by their children, the rules were discussed. In the two permissive families, both parents were employed in the church, so talking about faith was part of their daily work, and it is not surprising that there were many faith conversations in these households.

Second, the impact on the transaction when an intrusive event occurred in the family was notable. The case of Corine (permissive) shows what can happen when one parent stops exerting their influence. When Corine was ten years old, her mother died suddenly. Corine's mother was an open, spontaneous woman, while her father was a quiet man who seldom spoke about faith. As a result, during her adolescence, there was a lack of communication about faith, and boundaries were not set. The missing influence from one parent might have affected her RS (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). We say 'might' here because we do not know whether her mother would have spoken more about her faith experiences and set clearer boundaries. Corine's case serves as an example of a possible relationship between the permissive parenting style and intrusive events. All the respondents raised in this parenting style were confronted with an intrusive event in their lives (Table 4.2).

Third, in all the families, conversations were mostly about religious practices. Affective aspects—what the parents felt and experienced in their relationship with God—hardly ever came up. The fact that knowledge of faith and church practices were discussed, rather than experiences of God, is consistent with the findings regarding transmission. Only the cognitive elements were transmitted, which meant that respondents could view faith as an expression of

a particular culture— ‘This is the way we think, live, and make meaning’.

Table 4.2. *Faith Conversations (Transformation) in Relation to Parenting Styles*

Parenting style	Faith conversations during childhood and adolescence*			Intrusive event during childhood or adolescence
	Respondent	Mother	Father	
Authoritarian	Ada	Sometimes	Never	
	Daphne	Never	Never	
	Frederique	Rarely	Never	
Authoritative + authoritarian for religion	Anje	Sometimes	Rarely	
	Anthony	Sometimes	Sometimes	
	Bea	Sometimes	Sometimes	Depression father
	Caroline	Yes	Rarely	
	Jamie	Yes	Sometimes	
	Philip	Yes	Sometimes	
	Elias	Yes	Yes	Illness brother
	Victor	Yes	Yes	Mental health problems brother
	Yoda	Sometimes	Yes	Business problems father
Permissive-indulgent + authoritarian for religion	Corine	Mv*	Sometimes	Death mother
	Elly	Yes	Yes	Mental health problems sister
	Gerrit	Sometimes	Yes	ASD, illness father
	Lisa	Yes	Yes	Mental health problems brother
	Robby	Never	Sometimes	Trauma father
	Jaap	Mv*	Mv*	Divorce parents

* Missing value.

Transformation

The transformation model involves significant others in addition to educators and children. Here, responsibility is shared. In addition to learning from parents and other educators, children also learn from their social environment. In our study, all the parents demanded that their children interact with fellow believers. This was achieved by participating in church activities and, in certain cases, choosing a church-affiliated school. In this regard, the degree of strictness varied, and was partly determined by the level of disagreement in the family. Strictness mainly concerned religious practices outside the family, such as church attendance, catechism, and participation in youth work.

This domain demonstrated differences between the families, which were connected to the different parenting styles. The three respondents raised in the authoritarian style were required to participate in church activities until the age of eighteen; afterwards, they were free to make their own choices. Out of the nine authoritatively raised respondents, only Anthony

continued to participate in all activities from full conviction until adulthood; six respondents continued to participate as long as they lived at home, conforming to their parents' wishes; and two respondents were allowed to quit church activities when the disagreements at home became too intense. Looking at the five permissively raised respondents, Corine participated only in the activities she liked, Lisa continued to participate from full conviction, and the remaining three conformed to their parents' wishes. Parental strictness regarding church practices can be viewed as a form of faith coercion and/or as an expression of parental psychological control (Dollahite et al, 2019; Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019).

4.4.3 Additional factors influencing RS processes

The results indicate the presence of some additional factors, which are not described in sections 4.1 and 4.2 because their impacts were unclear. We mention them here for the sake of completeness. These factors were differences between the parents, differences between the respondents, and the influence of grandparents.

First, the interviews demonstrated that although all the parents agreed on the goal of RS, the personality of each parent made them more or less influential. Three respondents (authoritative) mentioned only the role of one parent. For instance, Caroline only spoke about the influence of her mother. Ada (authoritarian) mentioned only her father. Although Ada's father rarely spoke about his faith, he was a prominent factor in her religious development. As mentioned above, Corine's case illustrates what can happen when one parent passes away.

Second, the personality of the respondent affected how they experienced RS. Some interviewees, such as Philip and Victor (both authoritative), were very rational; for them, it was difficult to accept that their questions were not answered convincingly. Others were more emotional in their reactions to RS.

Third, almost all the respondents did not see their grandparents as influencing their RS. The exception was Robby, whose grandfather had a dominant role over his parents. Although Robby appreciated his grandfather's commitment to his beliefs and the church, he did not see him as a role model.

4.4.4 Summary of the results

Reverting to our framework (table 4.1), we observe some *deviation* between what was expected and what was found. First, the authoritative and permissive-indulgent parenting styles included the authoritarian parenting style when it came to religion. The parents who used the former two styles were very demanding and strict in setting boundaries and rules concerning religion. Second, these two parenting styles included inconsistencies between doctrine and life, most likely due to the combination with the authoritarian style. Third, in all three parenting styles, the cognitive aspect of religion was dominant, while the affective aspect was neglected. Fourth, with regard to all three parenting styles, most parents were not experienced as role models by their

children, and there were no members in the church communities who could compensate for this. Fifth, the authoritative and permissive-indulgent parenting styles had faith conversations, but there was no mutual learning by the parents and the children; most conversations were about participation in church activities and rules. Sixth, the authoritative and permissive-indulgent parenting styles left little or no space for exploration, which could happen only within doctrinal boundaries. In Table 4.3, the expected and observed results are summarised.

1 Table 4.3. *Expected and Observed Processes in Relation to RS*

	<i>Expected processes</i>			<i>Observed processes</i>		
	<i>Transmission</i>	<i>Transaction</i>	<i>Transformation</i>	<i>Transmission</i>	<i>Transaction</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
Authoritative	Doctrine and tradition are central. Consistency between doctrine and life. Parents act as role models.	Mutual learning Open communication and faith conversations	Role models other than parents Not forcing participation Leaving space for exploration	Doctrine and tradition central: emphasis on cognition. Consistency and inconsistency between doctrine and life. Most parents did not act as role models.	Faith conversations: - about rules and obligations - less or more educator-centred	Lack of role models in the church community Forced participation in church activities up to a certain age or after considerable disagreement Exploration within doctrinal boundaries
	Respecting the child's autonomy			Not respecting the child's autonomy		
Permissive - indulgent	Doctrine and tradition are central. Inconsistency between doctrine and life. Parents do not act as role models.	No faith conversations	Role models other than parents Not forcing participation Leaving considerable space for exploration	Doctrine and tradition central: emphasis on cognition. Consistency and inconsistency between doctrine and life. Parents did not act as role models.	Faith conversations: - about rules and obligations - less or more educator-centred	Lack of role models in the church community Mostly forced participation in church activities up to a certain age or after considerable disagreement Exploration within doctrinal boundaries
	Respecting the child's autonomy too much			Inconsistency in respecting the child's autonomy		
Authoritarian	Doctrine and tradition central. Consistency between doctrine and life. Parents act as role models. Conformity and obligation.	No faith conversations	Role models other than parents Forcing participation Not leaving space for exploration	Doctrine and tradition central: emphasis on cognition. Consistency between doctrine and life. Parents did not act as role models.	No faith conversations	Lack of role models in the church community Forced participation in church activities until legal adulthood No space for exploration
	Not respecting the child's autonomy			Not respecting the child's autonomy		

2 Note: Bold indicates deviation from what was expected.

4.5. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we asked millennials who left the church after growing up in conservative Reformed church communities how they experienced their parents' parenting styles concerning RS. This question can be answered by drawing two conclusions, which are closely intertwined. First, there was ambiguity in the perceived parenting styles. Second, there was ambiguity in how the parents experienced their own beliefs. These conclusions are discussed below in light of relevant theory.

4.5.1 Ambiguity in parenting styles

The parents' combination of the authoritative or permissive parenting style with the authoritarian parenting style generated ambiguity for the children (except those raised in the authoritarian style). In general, the children's autonomy was respected, and they were allowed to make their own choices within the limits set by their parents. However, this was not the case with regard to religion, where they had to comply with their parents' requirements and rules. This led to one-sided perceptions of faith and the church. Faith was associated with being forced to do something and adhering to rules, and the church was associated with meeting expectations to belong. Among the respondents raised with the authoritarian style, there was no perception of ambiguity, and the outcome of RS was the same as for the other respondents: believing was a matter of having to do something.

The ambiguity in question might have been caused by differences between the time when the parents grew up and the time when they raised their children. The parents grew up inside the pillar of the conservative Reformed churches.¹ This meant that they were socialised in a (church) culture in which there was agreement on virtually all matters of ideology (Stoffels, 1995). At the time, society was divided into pillars, and belief in God was common. A child's socialisation was aimed at teaching them to endorse the ideas of a particular pillar and fulfil the obligations that this entailed. In the 1970s, the compartmentalisation of society began to disappear, and more emphasis was placed on autonomous choices and individual responsibility. However, the pillar of the conservative Reformed churches resisted until the turn of the century. As a result, when the parents were raising their children within this pillar, they lived in a virtually de-pillarized society. Due to increasing differences in ways of thinking between the pillar and the

¹ The term 'pillar' is used here to refer to a historical social structure in the Netherlands that was divided into separate pillars based on religious or ideological affiliation, such as Catholics, Protestants, and Socialists. Each pillar had its own institutions (schools, newspapers, and clubs), which allowed communities to live and operate largely independently while coexisting peacefully. See Hijme C. Stoffels, *Als een briesende leeuw: Orthodox Protestanten in de slag met de tijdgeest* (Kok, 1995).

society in which they lived and worked, many of the parents consciously or unconsciously came to value their children's autonomy more in the domain of primary socialisation (Groen & Vermeer, 2013). The focus on the child's autonomy is appropriate in the authoritative and permissive parenting styles. However, in the religious domain, they stuck to the expectations of the pillar and adopted the authoritarian parenting style.

The strictness this entailed might have been due to the promise parents made at their child's baptism. On that occasion, they made a commitment before God and the church congregation to lead their child into a life with God and the church. This commitment was not made in other areas of life, such as education, sports, and culture. Regarding faith and the church, the parents still held the values of conforming to and fulfilling obligations. However, their children experienced contrasting messages. On the one hand, they were allowed to make autonomous choices; on the other, with religion, they had to conform to the rules and meet the obligations of the collective. This ambiguity led to an image of God and the church as a system of precepts and expectations that had to be met. This did not suit the millennial respondents, as their autonomy was not valued when it came to religion, and they felt forced to make certain choices. Due to the combination of parenting styles explained above, an imbalance emerged between respect for the child's autonomy and the desire to support the continuity of the church (Barrow et al., 2020).

Interestingly enough, the ambiguity in parenting styles was not explicitly mentioned by the children. They reported that, concerning religion, the parenting style adopted was different from the one applied in other domains of life. They accepted the authoritarian style of upbringing as normal for religion, saying that their parents perceived the church as important, and this was as it should be. They were used to it and this situation was strengthened by other socialisation agents within the church community and, for some, the school community.

4.5.2 Ambiguity in the parents' beliefs

The second conclusion is that the parents' beliefs were ambiguous. At the cognitive level, the parents showed through their behaviours and communication what it meant to belong to God and the church; they described God as a personal being who is supportive and loving. However, at the affective level, they did not show in their behaviours how God affected their feelings, nor did they speak about this. When intrusive events (crises) occurred, their behaviour demonstrated, or they would mention, that they were not experiencing the love and support of God. In doing so, they sent two conflicting messages to their children. The first one concerned what they knew about God—that he is loving and supportive. The second message was that during difficult times, when they needed love and support, they did not experience this from God.

These contradictory messages influenced the processes of transmission, transaction, and transformation. The transmission of religious beliefs lacked the relationship with faith on the

affective level; as role models, the parents did not *show* the love and support of God. Their transactions lacked elements (e.g., regular faith conversations) that explicitly addressed what faith meant to them personally and for their daily lives (Smith & Adamczyk, 2012). They *told* their children about faith on a rational and cognitive level, which had little to do with affection and experience. The transformation process also lacked this showing and telling. In the supportive context—the church—the respondents did not find role models who showed them and told them about both the cognitive and affective aspects of faith. This lack of role models, the limitations to exploration, and the strictness applied to participation in church activities might have reinforced the perception that faith mainly pertains to cognition and behaviour.

A striking finding is that this ambiguity in the parents was expressed when difficulties arose. When this occurred, the parents experienced the tension between what they believed in and what they experienced. The conception of faith they developed while growing up was inadequate or only partially satisfactory for facing difficulties. This does not necessarily mean that the parents did not experience faith on an affective level. The results show what the children experienced—they did not see it, and the parents did not speak of it. It is possible that a few of the parents' experiences in other areas of life, such as sexuality, were visible and mentioned. Here, the difference in the *zeitgeist* during which the parents and the children grew up may also be influential. When the millennials were growing up, there was a greater emphasis on experiences and feelings (Root, 2017). Another possible explanation can be found in the stages of faith development described by Marcia. Armet (2009, p.281), referring to Marcia, distinguished four stages of identity formation regarding religion. The ambiguity in question can be linked to the stage of *foreclosure*: 'Identity foreclosure results when a commitment to an ideology is made without the benefit of crisis and exploration'. The parents committed themselves to the doctrine of the church; for them, there was little or no space for exploration. This was due to the time period in which they were raised. The authoritarian parenting style was normal at the time, and this was reinforced by the strict religious context to which they belonged (Alli, 2009). The parents probably did not reach the stage of faith development called the achieved stage by Marcia, in which 'individuals have experienced crisis and the subsequent exploration of alternatives, leading to commitment and a mature identity' (Armet, 2009, p. 280). Further research among parents is required to clarify this.

4.5.3 Concluding remarks and recommendations

The results show that, based on our working definition, the goal of RS was partially achieved: The knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms, and beliefs of the parents' religion were transmitted. However, the children only partially adopted these; as adults, they did not connect with the church community, and most of them did not connect with God. A possible cause of this is ambiguity in parenting styles and in the parents' faith, which created a one-sided image of

belief in God. The children experienced faith as an obligation to conform to the rules and customs of the church, which was not enough for them to remain affiliated.

These conclusions lead to recommendations for parents and church communities. Regarding transmission, it is necessary to 'show and tell' why parents do or do not do certain things. Merely demonstrating is no longer sufficient (Lanser- Van der Velde, 2000). With regard to transaction, in faith conversations, it is advisable not only to emphasise knowledge but also to connect it to the affective part of faith, namely, one's own experiences of God, the benefits parents receive from their relationship with God, and the state of their relationship with Him. Regarding transformation, there should be a balance between strictness and respect for the child's autonomy.

We join Dollahite et al. (2019) in recommending that parents and church communities should focus more on the process of RS than on the desired outcomes by 'providing an enriching environment that is consistent with religious teachings, that fosters religious expectations and responsibility, and that honours children learning and choosing for themselves'. We add that practising what one preaches is not enough; this should be complemented by telling others what one feels.

4.5.4 Limitations

This study has the limitation of being exploratory research with a small sample. The results indicate that combining parenting styles was not conducive to successful RS among the respondents. To better understand the influence of combined parenting styles on RS, further research is necessary. This is especially the case because, to the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted on this topic. To paint a fuller picture, it is also important to investigate the motivations of millennials who have remained in the church; after all, it is plausible that they, too, have had to deal with combined parenting styles. This type of research could provide more insight into how to achieve successful RS.

5 ‘Honestly, I think that my image of my parents and my image of God just really coincided’.

Millennial church leavers’ experiences of their parents’ influence on the God-image they developed and their ability to establish a relationship with God and the church.
(submitted)

Article under peer review by The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion.

5.1 Introduction

This article reports on one part of a qualitative exploratory study among parents and their adult children (millennials) from Conservative Reformed Church communities in the Netherlands on the causes of church disaffiliation. The first part of the study was conducted among parents from four involved church congregations. Through focus groups, the phenomenon of church disaffiliation was examined. This revealed that church disaffiliation is influenced by the cultural environment in which the millennials were raised. The parents grew up in a culture with values such as a sense of duty and conformity to the collective, their children with values like autonomy, authenticity and personal responsibility for their choices (Moesker, De Muijnck & Sonnenberg, 2025a).

The second part, individual interviews with eighteen millennials, revealed that their image of God was related to the image they had of their parents. This finding led to an additional literature review on God-images, parenting and attachment styles. Based on this review, the data were analysed again. Regarding the parenting style, a striking finding in this analysis was that parents employed a mixed parenting style (A/PI-AUR): an authoritative (A) or permissively indulgent (PI) on the one hand, and an authoritarian parenting style (AUR) towards religion on the other. As a result, the majority of millennials experienced ambiguity in their upbringing. Faith and church were perceived as an obligation, and this did not fit with their autonomous sense of life. Equally striking was that parents displayed ambiguity in how they conveyed faith. At the cognitive level, they demonstrated through their behaviour what it meant to belong to God and the church, and in their communication, they named God as a personal God, who is supportive and loving. What this knowledge did to them, on an emotional level, they did not show or name. This created a one-sided perception of belief in God among their children (Moesker et al., 2025, forthcoming).

The above does not fully address the impact of parents on their children’s religious socialisation. In addition to the influence exerted through parenting style, parents also shape their children’s development through the attachment style they foster. This attachment style

lays the foundation for the image children form of themselves, others and God in the early years of life, and how they relate to others, including God (Kirkpatrick, 1992; Proctor et al., 2009). In this article, we report our findings of the perceived parental influence through the attachment style. The leading question is: *What is, according to millennials who have left the church, the influence of their parents on the God-image they developed and their ability to establish a relationship with God and the church?*

The perspective of millennials can provide new insight into the relationship between attachment to parents and faith development outcomes, a relationship that has already been generally confirmed (Counted, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Schaap-Jonker, 2021). Yet little is known about this within the orthodox church denominations at stake, which are declining in membership due to church disaffiliation becoming apparent at the turn of the century. In other denominations in the Netherlands, church disaffiliation was already evident thirty years earlier, several studies having been conducted (Dekker, 2013). For parents, churches and church-affiliated schools, this knowledge is of practical importance. For parents, it is relevant to know what their influence is. Insight into their influence could make them sensitive to parenthood patterns that are ineffective or even unhealthy. For involved church communities and church-affiliated schools, it is important to be aware of this influence, so they can provide targeted support to today's parents in religious socialisation and their children. This study is an exploration of parents' influence on their children's religious socialisation within the denominations involved.

In the following, we first describe the different attachment styles and their relationship with parenting styles, as understood by the attachment theory (AT). Next, we summarised what is known about the God-image and its relationship with the attachment style. After outlining the methodology used, the analysis of the empirical data regarding the experiences of the millennials is presented. We interpret and discuss the data in the context of this theory. While this article refers to parents, the term may also apply to other primary caregivers.

5.2 One theory, two applications

To understand the influence of parents on a child's ability to establish a relationship with God and a church community, the AT is appropriate. This psychological theory posits that humans have a lifelong need for attachment and belonging to specific individuals (attachment figures), who provide *'a haven of safety and comfort to which the infant can turn in times of distress or threat and as a secure base for exploration of the environment in the absence of danger'* (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 317). Developmental psychology uses the AT to describe the relationship between parents and children. Parental behaviour influences the attachment style that children develop and consequently also influences the image children have of others and of

God (Counted, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Schaap-Jonker, 2021). Therefore, the AT is applied in religious psychology to clarify the relationship between people and God.

In our theoretical exploration, we first discuss the AT and the different attachment styles, and the relationship between attachment style and parenting style. Second, we briefly address whether God can be considered an attachment figure, and thirdly, we provide a conceptualisation of God-image and its relationship with attachment styles.

5.2.1 AT in developmental psychology

The AT is based on the work of Bowlby, who argued that the development of certain behavioural systems stems from the evolutionary fact that the individual is focused on survival and therefore needs caregivers (Van IJzendoorn, 1995, referring to Bowlby, 1973). The behaviour of individuals in early childhood is mainly determined by the attachment system, which can be seen as a *'complex constellation of emotions, behaviours, and cognitive 'internal working models' involved in the infant's efforts to maintain a comfortable level of felt security'* (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 317). This system is shaped by initial parental experiences. The child forms internal working models (IWMs) that determine how they see themselves and others, and how they form relationships, into adulthood. These IWMs are quite stable, but can be influenced throughout life by intrusive events, others such as friends and partners, and by one's relationship with God (Counted, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 1992). Parents, as part of attachment to their children, also exhibit caregiving behaviour: a behavioural system connected to and complementary to the attachment system with the same function, namely the survival of their children (Jones, Cassidy & Shaver, 2015). Both systems, the attachment system and the caregiving system, which mutually influence each other, work synchronically in a good parent-child relationship. The caregiving system directs parents' behaviour when their children need help, and the attachment system directs behaviour in situations where individuals (parents and children) are separated from their source of safety: attachment behaviour. When the parents' own needs for safety interfere with the child's needs, these systems may conflict.

Attachment styles

Several styles can be identified in attachment behaviour, and while there is broad agreement on this among various authors, the research outcomes of empirical studies differ in their specifics. Table 5.1 illustrates these differences. The table relates attachment styles to authors who, each in their own way, indicate how a style affects the child's self-image, the image of others, the extent of fear and avoidance, the behaviour of parents and the image of God. From the comparisons given in the table, we conclude that there are differences in terminology. This illustrates the point that this is a main classification, which can be further refined into subclassifications (Nicolai, 2001). For our research, this main classification is sufficient, because we classify the respondents based on their own narrative and not based on an attachment test.

The attachment process to parents can develop as ‘secure’ or ‘insecure’. If parents respond appropriately to the child’s needs, attachment to them will be ‘secure’ and act as a ‘safe haven’ and ‘secure’ base (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). A secure attachment style reinforces positive self-esteem and the child’s expectations of benevolence from others. Children who experience parental inadequacy develop insecure attachment styles. The *insecure-anxious* style appears to arise from inconsistent parenting, the child consequently developing dysfunctional perceptions of self and others, feeling unloved and worthless and seeking a lot of affirmation from others. The *insecure-avoidant* style is caused by unreliability and inaccessibility of parents and is characterised by the child avoiding intimate contact and exhibiting independent parental behaviour. The *disorganised* style is characterised by the child perceiving the parent as a source of both security and anxiety, and therefore exhibiting both anxious and avoidant behaviour. Self-esteem varies, as do perceptions of others (Counted, 2015). In this article, we apply these four main categories, aware that there are variations within them (Nicolai, 2001).

Table 5.1. *Possible Attachment Styles of Individuals, Characteristics and Differences by the Author*

<i>Attachment styles</i>	<i>Image of self</i>	<i>Image of the other</i>	<i>Fear</i>	<i>Avoidance</i>	<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>God-image</i>	<i>Source</i>
Secure	Positive	Positive	Low	Low	Positive	Available, caring, responsive	All the mentioned authors agree
Insecure-anxious fearful	Negative	Negative	High	High	Inconsistent	Punitive, disinterested	Hart et al, 2010; Ktistaki et al, 2014; Mc Donald et al, 2005; Nicolai, 2001; Schaap, 2021;
Insecure-anxious: preoccupied/ ambivalent	Negative	Positive	High	Low	Claiming	Sometimes available, inconsistent, sometimes responsive	Ktistaki et al, 2014; Nicolai.2001; Proctor, 2009; Schaap, 2021
Insecure - avoidant: dismissing	Positive	Negative	Low	High	At a distance	Unavailable, unapproachable, unresponsive	Hart et al, 2010; Ktistaki et al, 2014; Nicolai, 2001; Proctor, 2009; Schaap, 2021.
Insecure-disorganised	Positive/negative	Positive/negative	High/low	High/low	Inconsistent	Distant	Counted, 2015, Nicolai, 2001; Schaap, 2021

Relationship attachment style and parenting style

A relationship can be observed between 1) the attachment style of the parents, which they themselves developed in childhood, and their parenting style, 2) the parenting style of the parents and the attachment style of their children, and 3) intrusive events and the parenting style of the parents and the attachment style of the children.

Regarding the first, it can be said that parents who are themselves insecurely attached, are less able to respond appropriately to their children's needs (Ktistaki et al., 2014; Lange et al., 2019). This means that their attachment style influences their parenting style (including their caregiving behaviour). For instance, parents who were anxiously attached seem to have more difficulty in encouraging their children to develop social skills, autonomy and independence, or expect their children to meet their own unmet needs. Securely attached parents more often adopt an authoritative parenting style, anxious attached parents are more likely to adopt an authoritarian or permissive parenting style, and avoidant attached parents are more likely to adopt an authoritarian parenting style. Both Lange et al. (2019) and Ktistaki et al (2014) found that insecure attachment and caregiving behaviour of parents can negatively affect each other, and that this affects their parenting style.

As for the second, the relationship between parents' parenting style and their children's attachment style emerged from multiple studies (Dollahite et al., 2019; Granqvist, 2002; Tervo-Niemelä, 2021). It was found that children of authoritative parents were more often securely attached, whereas children of authoritarian and permissive parents demonstrated more of an avoidance and/or anxious attachment style. Children respond to their parents' style. When they receive little love, they can react either anxiously and claiming or avoidant: I will manage on my own.

As for the third, intrusive events affect both parents' parenting style and their children's attachment style. Depending on the type of event, it can lead to positive behaviour in parents, such as offering warmth and support, or to negative behaviour, such as over-anxiety, neglectful and/or critical behaviour. Lange et al. (2019) argued that offering warmth and support mitigates negative consequences. In contrast, excessive worry from parents limits the child's exploration space and leads to anxious attachment. Neglect and critical behaviour can lead to both anxious and avoidant attachment. When we connect these parental behaviours to their parenting styles, the positive behaviour is more often connected to an authoritative parenting style, the negative behaviour more to an authoritarian and permissive parenting style. And, as mentioned earlier, authoritative parenting provides more opportunities for secure attachment, whereas authoritarian and permissive parenting are more likely to lead to insecure attachment.

In summary, parents are a major influence on their child's attachment style, both through their own attachment style and their parenting style.

5.2.2 AT in the psychology of religion

In religious psychology, the AT is applied to gain insight into individuals' relationships with God. Research shows that the image children develop of their parents is influential to the image they develop of God (Beck, 2006; Proctor et al., 2009; Schaap-Jonker, 2021). First, we will discuss whether it is justified to describe the relationship with God from the attachment perspective, followed by a discussion on what is meant by the image of God, which can be described as the

personal experience of an individual with God (Schaap-Jonker, 2021). Lastly, we discuss the relation between attachment styles and the God-image.

God as attachment figure

The question of whether the attachment perspective is rightly applied to people's relationship with God is justified because, unlike parents, God is not visually and physically perceptible. Considering the definition of an attachment figure, the following characteristics of an attachment figure can be distinguished: approachability and proximity, a safe base for exploration, a source of security, and the experience of fear during separation and grief at loss (Beck, 2006; Proctor et al., 2009; Van Saane, 2010). Based on these characteristics, it is understandable why God can function as an attachment figure. In the Bible, especially in the book of Psalms, we read that God is experienced as a 'safe haven' and that the fear people experience when separated from God is experienced as a loss of a 'secure base' (Ps. 22, 73). Academic research also shows this. Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990, p. 318) argued, based on literature research, that '*people seem to turn to prayer, rather than to the church, in times of emotional distress*'. God is always approachable. There is more to say about applying AT to the relationship between God and people. There are aspects of God that are underexposed in the AT, such as: He is almighty, holy and righteous (Stulp, 2011). Due to the length of this article, it is not possible to elaborate on this. While acknowledging that the AT adopts a limited perspective on God, this article regards God as an attachment figure based on the above-mentioned characteristics.

God-image

As mentioned earlier, there is a similarity between the image of parents and the image of God that children develop. This affects people's relationship with God: there appears to be a relationship between the attachment style of the individual and attachment to God (Schaap-Jonker, 2021; Proctor et al., 2009). The question is, what do we mean by the image of God?

Although the general and scientific use of the term God-image is widespread, it is not always clear what exactly is meant by this. Schaap-Jonker et al. (2008, referring to the work of Rizzuto, 1979) use the term God representation, indicating that the term God-image, as often used, does not distinguish between two interacting dimensions, the affective and experiential, as well as the cognitive dimension. The affective and experiential dimension, called the God-image by Rizzuto, concerns the emotional or experiential understanding of God and is based on the IWMs that the child has formed from his first caregivers, and later also from significant others, such as family and church members (Counted, 2015; Schaap-Jonker, 2021). In a family with Christian rituals, the child experiences that besides the parents, someone else is important, bigger than the parents and not visually perceptible, namely God.

The child, initially unconsciously, develops feelings towards God, such as trustworthy or unreliable, approachable or not, a safe haven or a punishing God. These feelings are similar to

those towards its first caretakers. The cognitive dimension, called the concept of God by Rizzuto, concerns the individual's cognitive concept of God (Counted, 2015; Schaap-Jonker et al., 2008). This concept is shaped by the knowledge conveyed by parents, family and church, and is based on religious language, which suggests a relationship with God but does not necessarily reflect how the individual experiences God (Counted, 2015).

These two dimensions are distinguishable but not separable: they influence each other mutually, they can reinforce each other, but also conflict with each other (Counted, 2015). For instance, the God-concept can influence the God-image by providing the individual with coping mechanisms in dealing with intrusive events. On the other hand, God-image and God-concept can conflict, e.g. knowing that God is love, but based on developed IWMs, having difficulty or not experiencing this (Stulp, 2011).

Rizzuto's conceptualisation of God is criticised because of (among others) the sharp distinction between the dimensions. Several authors argue that these dimensions, cognition and emotion, are so deeply connected and that it is more accurate to consider them as aspects of the God-image rather than as dimensions (Balk- van Rossem, 2017; Frijda, 1999; Schaap-Jonker et al. 2008). Because of 1) this deep interrelatedness of the two dimensions and 2) the use of the term God-image as synonymous with God representation by several authors, which is confusing, Schaap- Jonker et al. (2008, p. 502) suggest using the term God-image instead of God representation. They conceptualise the God-image as *'a structure which comprises on the one hand one's emotional understanding of God, based on subjective experiences and on the other hand one's cognitive understanding of God, based on what one learns about God'*. Therefore, we use the term God-image in the sense of Schaap-Jonker et al. (2008) instead of the term God representation from Rizzuto, and will refer to the two dimensions as the affective aspect and cognitive aspect of the God-image.

Relationship attachment styles and God-image

As stated earlier, there is a relationship between attachment to parents and God-image. This is supported by several authors. Hart et al. (2010) and Dickie et al. (1997) concluded from their research that secure attachment leads to a more positive God-image than an insecure style. Kirkpatrick (1992) found 1) that an inconsistent God-image corresponds to the anxious attachment style, and a distant God-image to the avoidant style, and 2) that securely attached children are more strongly influenced by their parents' beliefs than children who are insecurely attached. Birgegård and Granqvist (2004) examined the relationship between attachment style and behaviour towards God when the attachment system was unconsciously stimulated. They found that in secure attachment, the individual turned to God and that with an insecure attachment, the individual turned away from God. This is consistent with Zarzycka (2018), who found that attachment style is a significant predictor of religious struggle and doubt, and difficulty with finding meaning. Avoidant and anxious attached individuals experienced pressure in their relationship with God more than secure attached individuals, had more anger towards

God and feared his disapproval.

Drawing on several authors, Proctor et al (2009) worked out the relationship between attachment style and God-image for the attachment styles secure, insecure-anxious and insecure-avoidant. In secure attachment, God is seen as available, supportive, and responsive to one's needs. The individual feels loved. In insecure-anxious, the individual sees God as not continuously available, inconsistent, and not always responsive, and the individual feels insecure. This can lead to clinging to God. In insecure-avoidant, God may be seen as distant, uninterested and not personal. The individual sees himself ranging from worthless to developing defensive self-confidence and experiences a sense of autonomy, not needing anyone. Insecure disorganised is not elaborated by Proctor. According to Schaap-Jonker (2021), it can be assumed that the disorganised individual associates God with threat, neglect and disinterest, which can lead to low self-esteem and self-condemnation.

In summary, children's attachment styles influence both the God-image they develop and how they experience God as an attachment figure.

5.3 Methodology

In the overall study, we followed a qualitative exploratory approach because, to our knowledge, the experiences of millennials regarding their religious socialisation in relation to church disaffiliation have not yet been researched. We will briefly describe the method we followed. For a more detailed description of the methodology, see Moesker et al. (2025b, accepted). Two research instruments were used: a questionnaire and an open-ended interview. The questionnaire comprised three parts (the disaffiliate millennial, the parental family and the current situation) and focused on religious socialisation and church involvement. The interviews inquired into the influence of family, church and school per life stage.

The millennials were recruited through parents of four church congregations, and through snowball sampling: three respondents gave names of peers whom they felt would also qualify for this research. Respondents were assured that no information about them would be provided to parents and/or third parties. To avoid recognition within the municipalities involved, 1) pseudonyms were used and 2) a thematic description was chosen in the results section.

The interviews were conducted after informed consent, recorded via audio and video. After verbatim transcription, member checking took place, which eleven respondents used. Only clarifications and/or additions were made.

Atlas.Ti was employed in the analysis. After analysing the initial interviews by coding and classifying by context and stage of life, the theme of 'parental influence' emerged prominently, leading to the formulation of the study's final research question, and additional literature

review on God-images and attachment theory. The role of theory, therefore, was abductive (Verhoeven, 2022). Analysis and data collection were conducted iteratively until saturation was reached.

To increase inter-rater reliability, a co-researcher coded two interviews, which helped clarify the themes. In addition, the researcher is a mother of church disaffiliates and a church member herself. She recognised many of the points they mentioned. To avoid bias, this was discussed in interpretive discussions with the co-researcher and co-authors.

5.4 Results

To address the research question, the results of the questionnaire and the interviews are presented in an integrated manner. First, the influence of parents on the children is presented with what is revealed about attachment style and, relatedly, parenting style. We also show how intrusive events influence both styles. Second, we report on the influence on the children's image of God and their ability to form a relationship with God. Finally, we confer the data about the children's capacity to form a relationship with the church. Table 5.2 summarises these results for each respondent.

5.4.1 Parental influence through attachment styles and parenting styles

Regarding the relationship between attachment style and religious socialisation outcomes, three points stand out, namely that 1) most of the respondents appeared to have an insecure attachment, 2) of which the majority appeared to be avoidantly attached, and 3) that the attachment style was influenced by intrusive events through parenting style.

First, it was notable that although all four attachment styles were recognised, all but one of the respondents displayed an insecure attachment style. This prevalence is high when compared to the occurrence of insecure attachment in a general sample (Madigan et al., 2024; Nicolai, 2001; Schaap-Jonker, 2021). Due to the small number of respondents, no statement can be made about representativity, but it is characteristic of our group of respondents.

Two respondents exhibited ambivalent behaviour, both avoidant and anxious. In the analysis, they were classified into the category which emerged the most. As for the one respondent with disorganised behaviour, it should be noted that he exhibited more avoidant than anxious behaviour. He lived a double life, on the one hand meeting his parents' demands to fit in, anxious to lose contact. On the other hand, he secretly went his own way. This is consistent with Madigan et al. (2024), who argue that in disorganised behaviour, one style is often prominent in situations not associated with an attachment figure: the avoidant style was prominent in his secret life.

Second, among those with insecure attachment, the avoidant attachment style was dominant. This could be a pattern related to church disaffiliation, but it also can be coincidental, given the small respondent group. It is also possible that this indicates more factors influencing the development of an attachment style than just the parents, such as the context of religious socialisation, church community and peers (Balk-van Rossum, 2017; De Roos, 2006; Granqvist, 1998; Madigan et al., 2024).

Table 5.2. Possible Attachment Styles and Parenting Style, God-image and Influence on Intrusive Events

Respondents	Attachment style	Parenting style	God-image as a child/ adolescent	Description of the current God-image	Intrusive event
Anthony	Secure	A**	Demanding God, personal God	Does not exist	
Ada	Avoidant	AU ***	It should	Makes me feel nice to know that if you do things right, and try to live well, it will also be worth something at the end.	
Bea		A- AUR****	God does not exist	Does not exist	Depression father
Corine		PI- AUR*****	No reminder	I believed what I was taught.	Death of mother
Elias		A-AUR	I wasn't doing it	God does exist, doesn't fit into my life now	
Lisa		PI-AUR	Love, forgiveness, creator, distance unpredictable	God does not exist, but I would like Him to exist.	Brother with disability
Jamie		A-AUR	God of conditional love, detached, but also a sense of gratitude	Don't believe there is a God	
Elly		PI-AUR	Safety, later fear that everything was seen. Yes, and got nervous about that and had to ask forgiveness again.	I would call myself agnostic; not everything can be answered through science.	Sister with disability
Gerrit*		PI-AUR	Found it hard to imagine. Faith and church were just part of it.	If they had said how to do this, I would have copied it	Illness father
Philip		A-AUR	God from the OT: terrible God	Does not exist	
Victor			If there is a God, I don't understand Him	Does not exist	Brother with disability
Yoda		A-AUR	God at a distance	Does not exist	Unemployment father
Jaap		PI-AUR	Loose person, like so many loose persons in your life	God does exist, but is not personally involved	Illness of mother, absent father
Anje		Anxious	A-AUR	God as punishing with hell	Does not exist
Carolien	No reminder			Something safe to fall back on	
Daphne	AU		No reminder	The safe thing I grew up with	
Frederique	AU		Was a story	Agnostic, it is too unlikely	
Robby	Disorganised	PI-AUR	No reminder	Does not exist	Parent with childhood trauma

* diagnosed ASD, **A: authoritative, ***AU: authoritarian, ****A-AUR authoritative, relative to religion authoritarian *****PI-AUR: permissive -Indulgent, relative to religion authoritarian

Third, there is the influence of intrusive events on parenting style and, consequently, the attachment style. All PI-AUR-raised and a few A-AUR-raised respondents experienced such an event. There seems to be a relationship between the intrusive event and the PI-AUR parenting style. These were events with long-term impact: death of a parent, a brother/sister with a disability, long-term illness of the mother in combination with an absent father, intergenerational transmission of trauma or a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Corine's story is illustrative. Her mother died suddenly when she was 10 years old. What her parents' parenting style was like before this event cannot be determined. What can be ascertained is that the father subsequently adopted the permissive parenting style, was inaccessible, set no boundaries and offered little or no support in coping with this trauma. It is possible that this is an appropriate parenting style for the father, given his own attachment style. It may also be that his attachment system conflicted with the caregiving system, making him incapable of offering support to the child and that this was the reason for the permissive parenting style. Here, the intrusive event may have affected the parent's parenting style as well as the child's attachment style. As for the A-AUR-raised respondents, a relationship with the parenting style did not emerge clearly. The reason is probably that these parents did offer sufficient support. That is what fits with the authoritative parenting style: lots of love and affection, and clear boundaries (Ktistaki et al, 2014).

5.4.2 God-image

With regard to God-image, it should first be noted that all respondents grew up in church-committed families and were raised within the Christian Protestant Orthodox doctrine. The doctrine emphasised a loving personal God, who has His children's best interests at heart, but also a punishing and fearful God. Therefore, little variation can be recognised in the cognitive aspect. However, this is not true of the affective aspect, which varies. First, we present the results of the parents' influence on the God-image of the children, through the doctrine they transmitted. Second, the influence on the God-image through attachment and parenting style. Third, the influence of the God-image on the respondents' ability to relate to God and the church.

First, the interviews reveal that the doctrine, which their parents transmitted, had a great influence on the God-image. It was notable that the negative characteristics of God in the cognitive aspect, as the respondents mentioned, had more influence on their affective aspect than the positive ones. The positive characteristics, such as God being a personal, loving, forgiving, providing security, to be thankful for, seemed to belong more to the cognitive aspect. The respondents knew God had these positive characteristics, but did not mention examples of how they experienced these: at least, they did not relate them to themselves. Jamie shared something about sin and God's readiness to forgive: *'I can remember very well sitting at church after service, a lady comes out and says: Are you sitting here contemplating your sins? I thought: Oh, I didn't know I was also sinful'*. She knew that God forgave sins, but not that it affected her, too.

In regard to the negative characteristics of God they mentioned, such as God is a demanding, aloof, all-seeing, incomprehensible, unpredictable and punishing God, the result was quite different. It clearly showed the influence on their affective aspect: *'how can you be a loving father and yet punish your children so severely?'* and *'you just couldn't do something sneaky'*, referring to a punishing and all-seeing God. Possibly, concerning the cognitive aspect, answers were given as Corine put it, *'I believed what I was taught'*. The affective aspect revealed how they experienced God, and this was strongly determined by characteristics of God, which they experienced as negative. This surfaces with Anje, who, based on the teachings of heaven and hell (cognitive), was afraid of the punishing God (affective). As a 13-year-old, she found the rules that came with a religious life too restrictive, so she asked God, *'Can I have a week off from faith, and do you promise if I die this week that I won't go to hell?'* During that holiday from faith, she thought, *'if I don't believe in God, then I don't have to fear hell either'*. Since then, she chooses not to believe. Second, the influence of parents, through the attachment style, on the affective aspect that the respondents developed was recognised, sometimes clearly so, sometimes less so. This was evident among respondents who suffered an intrusive experience as well as those who initially conformed to the expectations of parents and the church community.

With Jaap (avoidant), the influence of the situation in the family is evident: sick mother, absent father. He perceives God as a detached entity. For Him, God is *'a loose person, like there are so many loose persons in your life and of no use to you'*. The family had to deal with multiple caregivers, which damaged his trust in adults. His image of God matches the image he had of his caregivers. Lisa (avoidant), who as a young adult practised conformity with conviction, explicitly articulated that her image of God and that of her parents coincided. She experienced both God and her parents as unpredictable and unavailable when she needed them. Here, the relationship with parenting style (PI-AUR) emerges: the parents set too few boundaries, and God, acting as an attachment figure for her, did the same. This is evident in the grief she experienced during the God-disaffiliation process, and still does now: *'I miss Him so much'*. She wished God had stopped her by setting a boundary.

5.4.3 Capability to form a relationship with God and the church

Respondents' God-image influenced their relationship with God and the church community. All respondents left the church, and most parted with God. Most of the respondents distanced themselves from God and/or the church as adolescents, and a few indicated that they did not believe in God already in childhood. A few did initially conform to the church as young adults by professing their faith for various reasons, such as belonging to the group, thinking that faith would take more shape, meeting expectations, and also to be able to get married in the church. Breaking off the relationship with God and/or the church sometimes happened consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

Distancing from God

Distancing themselves from God was done based on both their cognitive and affective aspects of the God-image. Three variants can be identified in this: 1) God does not exist, 2) doubt whether God exists, and 3) God does exist.

More than half of the respondents consciously distanced themselves from God because they no longer believe that he exists. Strikingly, while some claim to have come to this conclusion on rational grounds (they concluded that their previous cognitive aspect was wrong), other statements reveal that, in the meantime, the affective aspect played a decisive role. Such as Philip referring to the God of the Old Testament as *'a terrible God you don't want to belong to'*. The tone in which he made this statement was one of disgust. With Victor, it emerges that the cognitive and affective aspects conflicted. Following Mark 16:16, he could not understand how God, as a Father, would require his mentally retarded brother to believe *'because he can't do that'*. On this, he says, *'I do not want to experience God, but to understand'*. These statements prove how closely intertwined both aspects of the God-image are. Gerrit is an example of someone who cannot believe. He says: *'If they had said how to do it, I would have copied it'*. Possibly because of his ASD, he could not picture a God that was not visually perceptible and appealed to his imagination (Schaap-Jonker, 2013). Most of these respondents consciously left the church as a result of their conclusion that God does not exist, except Jamie, who unknowingly slipped away from both God and the church.

Does God exist?

As for not knowing whether God exists, some respondents were afraid to say they did not believe because *'that is so definitive and faith is very important to my family'* (Carolien) and *'it does give a safe feeling that there is "something" at the end of this life, something from home'* (Daphne). This is where the attachment style relationship comes in: they both appeared anxiously attached, with a lack of self-confidence and are afraid to let go of what feels safe. Ada also does not completely let go of God: *'Gives me a nice feeling to know that if you do things right and try to live well, it will also be worth something at the end'*. She connects this to herself, which fits with her avoidant attachment style. The God-image shown by these respondents can be characterised as: God is someone who provides security and who you may need at times. Some of these respondents deliberately stopped attending church because they used to experience it as coercion. There were also respondents where the church gradually disappeared from the picture, due to working conditions or a disconnection from the church congregation.

God exists

The respondents who believe that God does exist each have their own reasons for leaving the church. For one, in church, you are not seen for who you are (Jaap). For another, God and the church do not fit into his life right now. Elias: *'I do believe in God, but right now my family takes precedence.'* In him, the same image of God can be recognised as with the

respondents who do not know whether God exists. With this addition: if I decide it is needed, I will turn to God again. Here we see his avoidant style: I will manage on my own.

In summary, the results show that the influence of parents on their children's faith development is strong, both through their own attachment style, through their parenting style and through the doctrine they transmit. These results are summarised in Figure 5.1. Please note that the arrows do not denote a direct causal relationship, but 'an increased likelihood of...'

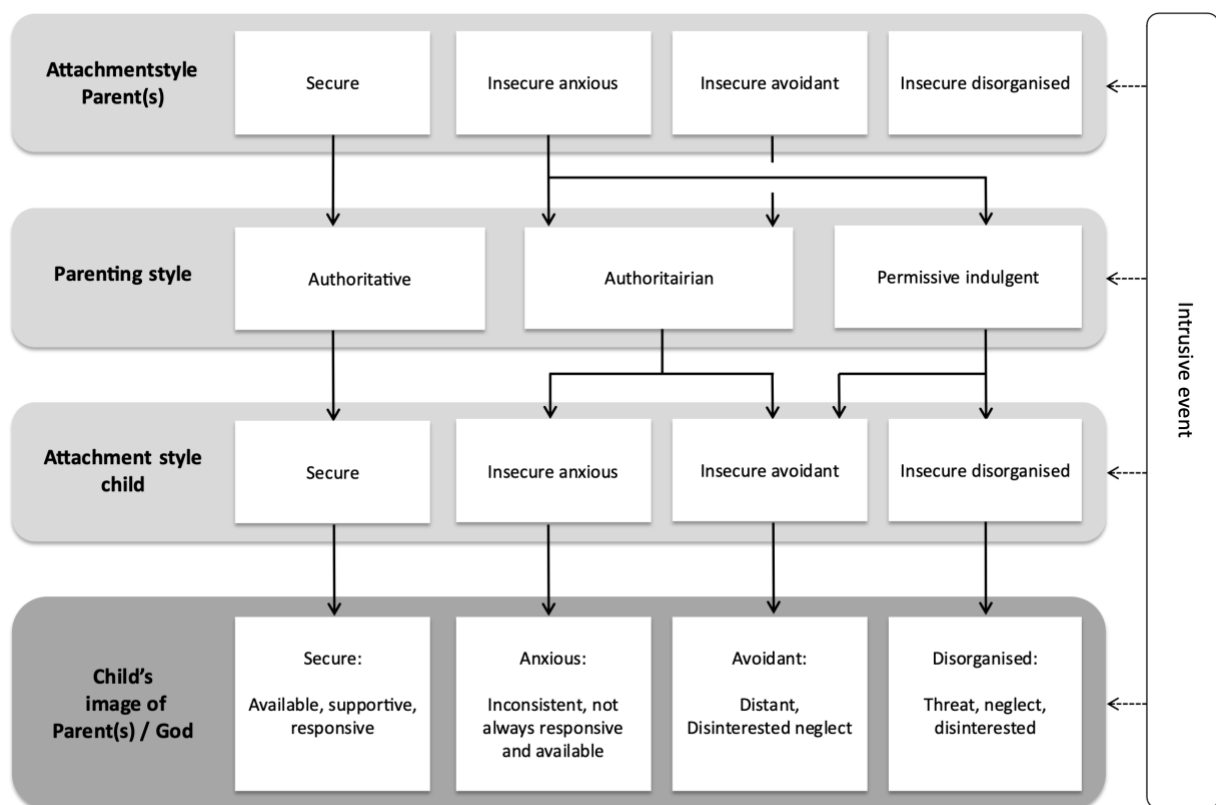


Figure 5.1: Influence of parents on their children's image of God

5.5 Conclusions and discussion

5.5.1 Conclusions

The results described provide answers to the question in this paper: 'According to millennials who have left the church, what is the influence of their parents on the image of God they develop and their ability to engage in a relationship with God and the church? As this is an exploratory study, these answers present an indication of factors that influence and offer a direction in which further research should take place. These factors are: there seems to be a relationship between 1) insecure attachment style and the ability to enter into a relationship

with God and the church, 2) the God-image and the doctrine transmitted, and 3) intrusive events seem to negatively influence the parenting style and therefore the God-image. Lastly, we discuss whether the AT is the most appropriate theory for describing the ability of relating to a church community.

First, the doctrine transmitted by the parents had a negative influence on the God-image their children developed: it was more influenced by the negative characteristics of God than by the positive ones they learned from the doctrine. This God-image seems to be a reason for them not to, or not be able to, enter into a relationship with God. But also a reason for some not to dare to let go of Him. Here is a mission for parents and churches, with two issues to be addressed. First, consideration needs to be given to the doctrine being conveyed in a balanced way: are all (as far as humans can know) characteristics of God discussed, is attention paid to one's own difficulties, and is it made clear that because God is the Holy One, people cannot understand everything? Secondly, for this reason, there may be a tendency to put more emphasis on the positive aspects of God. However, this may lead to a God-image as in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: God is not especially involved in human life, except when God is needed to solve a problem (Root, 2017; Smith & Snel, 2009). This view of God was observed among some respondents, who do not (dare to) let go of God. It is important to share one's own cognitive and affective aspects of the God-image with children, so that they can see how their parents (and community members) deal with this.

Second, insecure attachment seems to be a cause in complicating the development of a relationship with God. It is harder for an insecurely attached person to enter into a relationship with God than for a securely attached person, but not impossible. Stulp (2011, p. 193) argues that *'attachment to God is not entirely dependent on attachment to people'*. Concerning religion, the authoritarian parenting style probably made it even more difficult: God and faith were associated with coercion. Regarding religion, autonomy was not respected in the majority of respondents, while it was respected in other domains of life. And this partly determined relationship formation with God. It is also important that in the domain of religion, children and young adults are given the chance to explore (De Bruin-Wassinkmaat, 2021). From a developmental viewpoint, the process of religious socialisation is more important than the desired outcomes (Moesker et al., 2025a, accepted).

Third, intertwined with this, there seems to be a link between experiencing intrusive events and the permissive indulgent parenting style, and therefore on their image of God. Ganzevoort (1994a) points out that for faith development during a crisis, two factors are important, namely the personality of the person experiencing it and the social context for support. As for personality, this study did not examine the personality traits of the respondents. Regarding support, it can be said that this was lacking when they processed the event. This may have hampered their faith development and promoted their abandonment of God and the church. Here, it is important for parents and significant others to give prolonged support to the child/family who go through a difficult time. Church members and youth workers can perhaps compensate in some way for what parents cannot offer for a particular time (De Roos, 2006).

5.5.2 Discussion

The influence of the attachment style on children's ability to enter into a relationship with the church can only be indirectly explained through their God-image, not directly. Breaking off the relationship with the church does not mean that they were unable to enter into a relationship with the church. This is evidenced by the fact that several respondents first conformed to the church but disengaged later on. The reason for church disaffiliation may be caused by either not having entered into a relationship with God, or having broken off an existing and/or immature relationship with Him. Then, it is logical not to go to church anymore. Moreover, the AT provides insight into the relationship with attachment figures, who act as a safe haven and secure base. In addition, it gives some insight into the individual's attitude towards others. Therefore, it is questionable whether the AT is the most appropriate theory to determine the individual's ability to enter into a relationship with others who are not attachment figures. Several factors play a role in this ability, such as personality, family functioning and the culture in which one grows up.

In summary, parents' influence on their children's faith development is substantial and largely determines how the child sees and experiences God and whether they are able to enter into a relationship with Him. As for the ability to enter into a relationship with the church, they are partly a determinant, but several factors play a role in this, such as the influence of the church community and church-related education.

5.5.3 Concluding remarks

In this article, we have analysed the influence of parents on the God-image of millennials through their attachment style and their ability to relate to God and the church. Some limitations regarding the methodology and conclusions should be noted. First, it was exploratory research with a small research sample. Further research is needed to draw conclusions for larger groups. Secondly, research is also needed on the influence of mixed parenting styles towards religion, because this parenting style may still be happening within other orthodox protestant religious communities, and to the researchers' knowledge, no research has been done on this. This is in order to arrive at broader descriptions and interpretations as well as recommendations for parents and religious communities. Thirdly, it is also important to research the motives of millennials who have remained in the church. It is plausible that they were also raised with a mixed parenting style, with another outcome of religious socialisation. Further research is necessary to get a better picture of the influence of the parents on church disaffiliation.

6 'Behave like us. Then, you belong to us'.

Church disaffiliating millennials' experiences regarding the influence of church and school on their religious socialisation.

Article for consideration of the journal: *The International Journal of Christianity & Education.*

6.1 Introduction

The religious socialisation (RS) of children and adolescents takes place in multiple contexts, such as family, church and school (De Muynck, 2008). As expressed in the baptismal promise and promised by parents, the goal of this socialisation is for children to come to know God, enter into a relationship with Him and become members of a church community. Achieving this goal is becoming more and more challenging among Christian parents in the Western world. Every birth cohort since the 1970s has been less religious than prior ones (Vermeer & Scheepers, 2018; Voas & Crockett, 2005). For churches, it is a concern that many young people drop out, as this stagnates the transmission of faith and thus jeopardises their survival. They see RS as a mission, as evidenced by the fact that a great deal of time, money and energy is devoted to church youth work as well as the establishment of church-related education (Van Wijnen, 2016). Conservative Reformed churches, in particular, consider it important that schools offer protection from the influence of secular society and that there is unity regarding the professed doctrine within the family, church and school (De Muynck, 2008)

This article reports on one part of a qualitative exploratory study conducted among parents and their adult children (millennials) who were current or former members of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (Liberated) (GKv) or the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK) regarding potential factors within socialising contexts that promote church disaffiliation. The study comprises two parts. The first part of the study was conducted among parents who were members of the four church congregations involved. Through focus groups, the phenomenon of church disaffiliation was explored. One factor mentioned by all the focus groups was that contemporary time differs from the time in which these parents grew up, and that this affects RS (Moesker, De Muynck & Sonnenberg, 2025a). They implicitly referred to the difference in core values between generations and attributed church disaffiliation partially to external institutions.

The second part inventoried millennials' experiences with RS within the contexts of family, church and school. Regarding the family context, it emerged that parents' parenting style and children's attachment style are influential. The parenting style the parents used

was mixed: on one hand, it was authoritative or permissive-indulgent, and on the other, regarding religion, it was an authoritarian parenting style. As a result, most of the millennials had experienced ambiguity in terms of parenting (Moesker, De Muynck & Sonnenberg, 2025b, accepted). In terms of attachment style, most respondents appeared to be insecurely attached, and this affected their ability to engage in a relationship with God. The image of God they had developed was found to have similarities with the image they had of their parents. Added to this was the fact that the transmitted teachings harmed their image of God. No relationship could be demonstrated between attachment style and their ability to enter into a relationship with others, such as the church community (Moesker, De Muynck & Sonnenberg, 2025, forthcoming).

In this article, we examine which factors within church and school may influence church disaffiliation. These Conservative Reformed church communities in the Netherlands were chosen for two reasons. First, little research has been conducted on church disaffiliation within these communities, while it has been visible in church statistics (GKv) for several years and described for the NGK by De Boer (2009). This research could lead to greater awareness of this problem. Secondly, these churches are related: The NGK emerged from the GKv in 1968 after a schism because of a doctrinal difference over the interpretation of the Bible. This prompted the NGK to give local churches the freedom to chart their own course without letting go of each other as sister-churches, one example being women in ministry.

In 2023, these two churches merged again at the national level, but the differences in their doctrinal views may have influenced the RS of millennials. Their parents grew up in similar spiritual climates (GKv), but millennials grew up in different spiritual climates (GKv or NGK). It was an unwritten rule within the GKv that children of church members received church-related education (GKv education), while NGK children received Protestant Christian (PC) education. It is important to recognise that as a result, there may be differences in the religious socialisation of the millennials. The perspective of millennials is important for the newly formed church because it can provide insight into factors within the church and school that may influence future church disaffiliation. Churches can take this into account in their policies towards RS. Similarly, it is important for schools to know how students perceived their influence and whether they are achieving the goals they have set. The task for church and church-related schools is to prepare young people for a life within a secular, pluralistic, and individualised society as well as to enter into a relationship with God and the church (Vermeer, 2009).

The question central to this article is as follows: *How did millennials who grew up in and left a conservative Reformed church community perceive the influence of church and education on their religious socialisation?* Church disaffiliation is defined as leaving the church congregation to which one belongs, which manifests as no longer attending church services; reduced to no involvement in the church congregation; and not having transferred to another church congregation, home group, or small group. This shows that it is not assumed that these young people have left God and no longer believe, although there is

certainly a link between these and RS (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016; Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; Voas & Crockett, 2006). For RS, we use as a working definition ‘the process by which educators transfer their knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs about their own religion to the children and which aims to ensure that the children internalise these and establish a trusting relationship with God, and fellow believers within an organised community’.

First, in this article, we explore, based on the literature, what is known about millennials and the potential influence of church and school on RS, followed by a brief description of the methodology used, after which the results derived from the interviews are presented. This includes a perusal of the *what* and *how* of RS as well as the differences between the GKv and NGK. Finally, conclusions and a discussion are provided, as well as recommendations for churches and schools and for further research.

6.2 Theoretical exploration

The theoretical exploration describes the core values of millennials in relation to those of baby boomers and their educators, as well as the impact these core values may have on millennials leaving the church. This is followed by an exploration of the vision churches and schools have of RS and how they shape it.

6.2.1 Millennials and their core values

To determine why millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, feel less attracted to the church than prior generations, the core values of millennials must be investigated. Several core values can be recognised for each generation (Bontekoning, 2010). These include distinctive views of the self and the world and a distinct understanding of God, which lead to a certain way of experiencing and acting, which is taken for granted by much of society in social, societal, economic, political, and religious terms and referred to as the *zeitgeist* or social imagination (Taylor, 2007). This *zeitgeist* is not static; rather, it changes gradually due to social influences. The parents of the millennials, the late members of the protest generation (1940–1955) and the early members of Generation X (1955–1970), who are collectively referred to as the baby boomers in this article, grew up in the era when the core values of ‘conformity’ and ‘sense of duty’ were central. The collective was at the centre. Since the 1960s, the focus has shifted from the collective to the individual, leading to different core values.

Millennials’ core values are authenticity and autonomy, and these can lead to anti-authority, insecurity, doubt, and tolerance (Perrin, 2020; Root, 2017; Taylor, 2007). Authenticity means that an individual stays true to themselves, to their own values and beliefs, without adapting to external pressures or expectations. It means that the individual is at the centre. The choices they make should align with their own norms and values. Here, feelings play a major role. Phrases frequently heard in this regard are ‘It doesn’t feel right’, ‘I don’t recognise myself in this’, and ‘What does it get me?’ (Heitink, 2011, p. 206). Authenticity can lead to anti-authority sentiments, as authoritarian people and institutions can come into conflict with an individual’s values and beliefs (Hellemans, 2007). When the parents grew up,

these institutions had authority, imposed duties, and demanded conformity. An authentic person does not wish to comply with such external demands without questioning them. The second core value, autonomy, is related to this.

Autonomy can be described as independence or psychological freedom (Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2013, pp. 151-152). This means that the individual decides which choices to make and what they are responsible for. In today's pluralistic society, there are many choices to be made, especially regarding one's worldview. Uncertainty and doubt arise if these choices are not perceived, immediately or gradually, as appropriate or if they are considered in relation to fellow human beings who make different choices. This can lead to choice stress and choice compulsion. Autonomy is not unlimited. When the individual claims autonomy for themselves, the autonomy of others should also be respected (Heitink, 2011; Smith, 2014). Autonomy, therefore, requires tolerance for two reasons. First, the individual lives in a society with a collective framework of values, norms, rules, and agreements (Hellemans, 2007). Second, there are multiple truths, which may differ from one individual to another. For churches, this core value means that in the present era, they can only assert their authority in the societal domain of religion, rather than in all societal domains.

The above may give the impression that all millennials are authentic, autonomous, tolerant, and anti-authoritarian. This is not the case. Rather, it is an ideal-typical description, the characteristics of which can be recognised by everyone to a greater or lesser extent. Regarding autonomy, according to Van der Meulen and Krabbendijk (2016, p. 138), the degree of autonomy achieved by an individual depends on identity development, and few individuals achieve a level of autonomy that allows them to tolerate and even value the differences between people. So these core values are also culturally determined. This is particularly true for millennials in Western cultures (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018).

6.2.2 Contexts of school and church

The notion that churches and schools can be considered religiously socialising contexts, as mentioned above, is widely accepted. Within the literature, we explore what factors are important in these contexts for RS, such as the vision of RS and related modes of faith transmission. Table 6.1 summarises the views on and implications of RS as well as the chosen interpretation framework.

Vision of RS within the church and school

The working definition of RS provided in the introduction leaves space for various conceptions, or visions, of RS. Several authors describe visions, some of which agree and some of which differ in terms of terminology and level of detail. Vermeer (2009) distinguishes between two, namely the traditional view and the modern view. The traditional view considers RS to be passing on beliefs and traditions to the next generation, with responsibility lying with the educators. The modern view endorses this notion but assumes

that children should be supported in their personal development of religious identity. The responsibility is a shared one.

Schwartz (2006) describes three views on primary RS (family), which can nevertheless be applied to secondary RS (church and school) because the views on the process are the same: parents participate in church, and some parents are involved in education. Schwartz names these the transmission, transaction, and transformation models. The *transmission* model aligns with the traditional view and emphasises the exemplary behaviour of the educators. The *transaction* model concerns the transmission of faith in which there is open communication and mutual learning between the child and the educators. This is in line with the modern view. As a third model, Schwartz adds the *transformation* model, which involves 'significant others' in addition to educators and children. Here, responsibility is shared. In addition to learning from parents and other educators, children also learn from their social environment. Both Vermeer and Schwarz focus on the transfer of knowledge and associated behaviour. De Kock et al. (2011) also mention 'significant others', but explicitly point to the influence of participation in short-term groups that change over time. They call this model the tribal view. This view assumes that the formation of personal religious identity is partially influenced by the groups in which individuals live, with the experimental experience and feeling of faith being central. They point, more strongly than Schwartz, to the influence of changing short-term group contacts, such as festivals and events in which the emphasis is on the communal experience. This stands in contrast to the traditional and modern views, which emphasise cognition and behaviour.

In RS, a shift from the traditional view to a more tribal view has been observed since the 1980s (De Kock et al., 2011). This shift varies by church denomination, depending on the degree of strictness used within RS and contextual influences, such as the degree of pillarisation (Dollahite et al., 2019). Harris (2012) characterises this shift as a paradigm shift. Whereas, previously, the paradigm was 'behave, believe, belong' (the traditional/modern view), today, it seems to be shifting towards 'belong, believe, behave' (the tribal view). By this, he does not indicate that RS is a linear process. Rather, it is a question of which part is emphasised. For the older generation, 'behaving', or conforming to the collective, was key, and this was a precondition for 'belonging'. RS was considered finalised when one was confirmed in church (fulfilling obligations). Today, the emphasis is placed on 'belonging'. One can belong regardless of whether one believes and/or behaves like the collective. This view can be seen as more inclusive (tolerant) due to its unconditionality, and therefore, it is more appropriate for millennials. Their core values of autonomy and authenticity are respected.

From a vision of the socialisation process to a design for it

Visions have a guiding influence on how one shapes RS. Based on learning theories such as behaviourism, constructivism, and developmentalism, De Kock and Sonnenberg (2012) identify three learning models: the behavioural, the developmental, and the apprenticeship models. The behavioural model fits within the traditional view. Educators act as knowledge carriers and role models, and the child should internalise the transmitted tradition and

knowledge. RS is unidirectional. The core values of conformity and obligations are central. The developmental model fits within the modern view. Both the educator and the child are responsible for RS, which respects the autonomy of the individual. The model is bidirectional. There is mutual learning. Both the behavioural and developmental models focus on the transmission of knowledge and tradition, whereas in the developmental model, there is room for the child to place their own emphasis on the learning process. The tribal view leads to the apprenticeship model and assumes transformation: interaction between educators, the child, and (changing) groups. The core value here, in addition to autonomy, is authenticity. Learning, both cognitive and affective, takes place through doing and social interaction and can be characterised as intersubjective. Various experiences are mutually shared, and the affective aspect of belief is therefore in focus. The apprenticeship model seems to suit millennials because of their core values.

In summary, the way in which churches and schools shape RS is determined by their view of RS and the learning model they adopt. One should keep in mind that the boundaries between the views and models are diffuse. The differences and similarities between the views and models are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. *Views of RS and characteristics of learning models by the author*

Vision	Traditional	Modern	Tribal	De Kock et al., 2011; Vermeer, 2009; Schwarz, 2006.
Model of	Behavioural	Developmental	Apprenticeship	De Kock et al., 2011
Core process	Transmission of knowledge	Transaction and individualisation	Transformation, intersubjectivity	Schwartz, 2006; De Kock & Sonnenberg, 2012; Vermeer, 2009
Authority	Educator and tradition	Educator and child	Educator, child, and (various persons/groups)	
Core values	Conformity and obligation	Autonomy	Autonomy and authenticity	
Paradigm	Behave, believe, belong		Belong, believe, behave	Harris, 2012

6.3 Methodology

We chose to perform a qualitative exploratory study because, to the researchers' knowledge, no research has been conducted on millennials' experiences with church disaffiliation. An exploratory study is therefore appropriate (Baarda et al., 2005). Two research instruments were used: a questionnaire and an open-ended interview. The questionnaire focused on the

characteristics of religious socialisation and church involvement. The interviews focused on faith development during life stages within the contexts of family, church, and school.

The recruitment of the millennials was accomplished through parents who attended the churches involved, and two respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. The respondents had grown up in church-going families and did not belong to any other church community. Regarding birth year, we considered the fact that the boundaries of a generation are diffuse, and birth years ranged from 1976 to 1994 (Bontekoning, 2010). During the interviews, it became apparent that four respondents had partially grown up as members of other church communities. Their parents had switched churches during adolescence. They were included in the study as it can be assumed that their parents joined the communities in question because their spiritual climates appealed to them more than that of their churches of origin, and that, therefore, their primary RS matched that of the other respondents. No information obtained from the respondents was shared with parents and/or third parties, and the results for the two groups (parents and children) were not compared individually. The use of pseudonyms prevented any recognition of the respondents within the churches involved.

The interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes, and after informed consent was obtained, these were recorded via audio and video. The respondent narrated their experiences of faith using the life stages (childhood, adolescence and adulthood) and the three socialising contexts (family, church and school). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, after member checking, thematically analysed. The role of theory in the analysis was abductive. Themes, such as views on religious socialisation, emerged from the data. The literature review, analysis, and data collection were performed in an alternating manner until saturation was reached. Atlas.Ti was used in the analysis. Inter-rater reliability was ensured, as a co-researcher analysed and coded two interviews at random. Based on this, no additional themes emerged. The researcher herself grew up within the GKv and is currently a member of the NGK and therefore recognised many of the experiences narrated by the respondents. To avoid interpretation bias, the researcher's background was discussed in conversations with a co-researcher and the supervisors of the study.

6.4 Results

Based on the respondents' experiences of RS at church and school, two main themes emerged. These themes are interrelated and influence one another mutually. The first theme is the teachings of the church, or the 'what' of RS. The second theme was the learning model used, or the 'how' of RS. It should be noted that the results regarding the school only concern GKv schools. The NGK respondents described school as not affecting their RS. This is discussed in more detail in the discussion and conclusion. Table 6.2 provides an overview of respondents regarding the churches they grew up in, the educational institutions they attended, and whether respondents were professed church members.

6.4.1 The 'what' of RS

Regarding church doctrine (belief), the respondents experienced arbitrariness and exclusivity regarding the church's interpretation of the Bible, which clashed with their core values. Some initially conformed (*behave*) to those teachings. Core values are very important for millennials, but the price of authentic and autonomous choices can be perceived as too high.

Belief

In the churches' interpretation of the Bible, several respondents experienced arbitrariness and exclusivity. Regarding arbitrariness, certain sections of the Bible were considered to be culturally determined, while others were universally valid. For example, the rule that one must have one's head covered to attend church was judged to be culturally determined and did not have to be followed. Others, such as not having sex before marriage, were judged to be universal, applying at all times and in all places. This led Philip to believe that the Bible was being used to confirm one's own point of view. Regarding the interpretation of the Bible, churches have adjusted some doctrinal points, such as the position of women (GKv) and gender diversity. On what Biblical basis these adjustments were made was not clear to all the respondents. Some found this change to be positive, but it was also sometimes questioned. Jamie asked, 'Now they have adjusted their teaching on this, but who tells me that in a few years they won't adjust this again?' This connects with Philip's comment and reflects the fact that adjustments to doctrine can be experienced as arbitrary.

Second, the interpretation of the Bible led to formal exclusivity. Certain groups within the church were excluded from holding some offices and participating in the sacraments. For example, women could not enter the ministry within the church (GKv), and GBLT+ individuals, who lived together unmarried, were excluded from the sacraments (GKv and NGK). Only the GKv respondents mentioned the position of women. This was not surprising, as within the NGK it is accepted that women serve in the church. Both GKv and NGK respondents felt that GBLT+ people not being accepted for who they were and therefore excluded from the sacraments and the ministry within the church represented intolerance. What they experienced as normal in everyday life was perceived as a problem within the church and its associated schools due to doctrine, resulting in a feeling of alienation.

Influence of belief

Church doctrine influenced the social climate in the church and school. It sometimes led to social exclusivity, hypocrisy, and a lack of role models. Deviant views and behaviours were not accepted. Respondents experienced this as contrary to the teachings of the Bible (Matt 7:1–2). Thus, according to some respondents, this exclusiveness led to hypocrisy. They experienced a difference between the professed doctrine and behaviour in daily life. A few respondents mentioned this explicitly, but it emerged implicitly because no one named a role model within the church or school. Lisa said the following about school: 'I think I had to get it a lot more from home and people in my immediate environment when it came to examples of faith. I find, yes, I find that very sad because you go to school for a very large part of your

life.’ They experienced this exclusivity themselves when churchgoers said to them, ‘I will pray for you.’ They interpreted this as meaning ‘You made the wrong choice’. And to them, this indicated a lack of tolerance and respect for the autonomous choices they made. The influence of belief on behaviour manifested as the exclusion of dissenters and, negatively, hypocrisy. Doctrine and life were not in harmony, which was perceived as an indication of inauthentic belief.

Tension between belief and belonging

Several millennials experienced a tension between their own core values and those of baby boomers. This emerged from the reasons they gave for doing their public Profession of Faith. Profession of Faith can be seen as entrusting oneself to God, conforming to the teachings of the church and meeting the expectations of the church community. The reasons offered for doing this were diverse: some did so out of full conviction, others to remain with their peer group, or because it was expected by the congregation at a certain age, or to be able to marry into the church, or simply to acknowledge that God existed. Except for the first, these reasons, accompanied as they were by doubts, can be interpreted as follows: the respondents implicitly indicated that professing their faith was not an authentic and autonomous choice to embrace God. Rather, they wanted to belong, and therefore, they conformed to the collective and fulfilled their obligations. The price of not conforming was possibly greater than the benefits derived from an authentic and autonomous choice. However, these reasons for conforming did not endure. In adulthood, they withdrew from the church community. It was striking that the respondents who conformed out of full conviction were the only ones who spoke of a very painful religious disaffiliation process. They experienced it as a loss of identity. As Anthony put it, it was ‘a painful relief’, like a coming-out for a homosexual. It was also noticeable that the majority of the GKv respondents did their Profession of Faith, and the majority of the NGK respondents did not. This may indicate that the spiritual and social climate within the NGK and PC schools did more justice to their need to act autonomously and authentically.

Behaving as a condition for belonging

The churches’ policies on people leaving the church are a demonstration of behaving being a condition for belonging: how to deal with church disaffiliates, the arguments put forward for disengagement, and the way disengagement was communicated to the congregation. In their dealings with church disaffiliates, some church councils/ministers had multiple conversations with respondents before disengagement. The respondents appreciated this because they were able to share their doubts, but they did not experience open communication and respect for their autonomy. They were required to start conforming to the church’s teachings to remain members. Some respondents experienced a lack of attention: ‘You only heard from the church when you started withdrawing.’ Others were contacted annually: ‘You got the idea that they were completing their annual checklist.’ The respondents felt that they had

received obligatory attention because they had behaved differently than the church expected, not because of who they were.

The church's reasoning for promoting deregistration varied. Some churches felt they could no longer take responsibility for church members with whom they had no contact, and others did so for financial reasons. The latter argument on the part of the church council, in particular, which was used with Elias, was perceived as a factor that pushed the respondents away from the church: 'But I was not really mentally ready to unsubscribe at that time. What held me back was that the way back is more difficult than if you stay put somewhere, because what do you get afterwards? [I] guess the threshold just gets bigger because I don't rule out ever going again, just not to this church.' In the case of two adult respondents, the implementation of the policy could be said to involve transgressive behaviour. These respondents took the initiative to withdraw themselves. The deregistration of one respondent was refused because the church council felt she was too young. In the case of the other, the parents were informed without the respondent's knowledge. This was experienced as a violation of their autonomy. Having to inform the church council of their deregistration deterred some respondents. They felt it would be embarrassing for their parents, and they feared that the congregation members would judge their parents. This policy reveals the 'Behave, believe, belong' paradigm. If the individual did not behave as expected, they did not belong and were better off leaving the church. Behaving was a prerequisite for belonging.

Table 6.2. Summary of respondents by church community, type of educational institution attended, and whether they did their Profession of Faith.

Respondents	Church	Education			Profession of Faith
		Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	
Anje	GKv	GKv	GKv	State	No
Anthony		GKv	GKv	State	Yes
Bea		GKv	PC	State	No
Elias		GKv	GKv	State	Yes
Elly		GKv	GKv	State	Yes
Jaap		GKv	GKv/PC	PC	Yes
Gerrit		GKv	GKv/PC	State	Yes
Lisa		GKv	GKv	State	Yes
Jamie		GKv	GKv	PC	Yes
Yoda		GKv	GKv	State	No
Ada		NGK	PC	State	State
Caroline	PC		PC	State	Yes
Corine	PC		PC	State	No
Daphne	PC		RK	State	No
Frederique	PC		State	State	No
Philip	PC		PC	State	No
Robby	PC		PC	State	Yes
Victor	PC		RK	State	No

6.4.2 The 'how' of RS

The practical implementation of the RS revealed what vision churches and schools had regarding faith transmission. For both contexts, 1) the emphasis was on cognition, and 2) this limited the space for exploration. Regarding the churches, 3) the expertise of church workers was questioned, and concerning the schools, 4) the unwritten rule of the GKv was mentioned.

Cognition is central

In both church and school, the emphasis was on the transmission of knowledge. This was apparent in the church because knowledge was transferred in an educational manner in catechism classes. One respondent said, 'Then, sometimes, you had to learn a bit of catechism. Then, I had not done so and had to see the pastor again to recite it.' Regarding school, this emphasis on cognition was evident in the subject of religion: 'I remember that the religion teacher would dictate the answers, and it did not matter whether it was a fact or an opinion that you had to fill in.' The teachings had to be transmitted correctly, and the transfer of knowledge was mainly unidirectional.

The emphasis on the right knowledge limited the space for exploration. Although conversation was possible in both contexts and doubts could be expressed, the respondents did not experience an open faith conversation, and there was no mutual learning. At school, this limitation was formally expressed in the Dutch language subject. The reading list was censored, and students were not permitted to read certain books. These examples show that autonomy was not respected (independent thinking was allowed within the limits of doctrine) and the discussion of different perspectives was omitted.

Expertise and authenticity

Regarding the church, the expertise and authenticity of the educators were questioned by some, especially the rational respondents with critical questions. A lack of expertise was reflected in educators' inability to answer these questions and their attempts to exercise psychological control. Philip, who had many questions, wondered, in relation to youth workers, 'And you have to teach me? And you don't know yourself?' This increased his doubts, as the following quote indicates: 'Why can't these questions be answered satisfactorily? I can't do it myself, and then, you think those people over there might [be able to], but they can't do it either.' Questions remained unanswered, or unconvincing answers were provided. This did not increase the plausibility of what was conveyed.

The social pressure exerted by some youth workers in the church could be seen as a form of 'psychological control'. Respondents were addressed several times if they did not participate in all activities. Some experienced this as a form of manipulation, such as Victor, who wanted to go home early from school camp: 'At one point, I was just done with it. I wanted to go home. And then, there was a counsellor who said, "Yes, but did you not say

yourself, I will try again (with faith). And why do you think you want to go home now? Now, the devil is pulling you. You are looking, and the devil is now pulling you away from God again.” And then, I thought, no, no, you are not going to manipulate me to stay here now. This is not a devil at all, I just want to go home.’ This form of psychological control was perceived as an encroachment on the respondents’ autonomy.

Not all teachers at school were perceived as authentic by everyone: ‘And I felt that that day opening, that was a compulsory item ... You just sense something like that as a teenager, that you think this is not coming from yourself, [or] whatever.’ This comment shows that this respondent assigned the core value of ‘fulfilling obligations’ to teachers and found it inauthentic.

The unwritten rule

Regarding school, an unwritten rule within the GKv surfaced: all children of church members had to attend GKv schools. This sometimes occurred at the expense of the best interests of the child, and it affected the perspectives of dissenters and led to a difference between GKv and NGK respondents. Regarding the child’s interests not being met, Elly can serve as an example. Due to the long travel time to the GKv school, she was unable to attend secondary school there. However, her parents did not dare to choose a school in her hometown, fearing the judgment of other church members.

This unwritten rule restricted respondents from interacting with dissenters and influenced their perspective on them. Several respondents described it as eye-opening when they met dissenters: ‘I think I did have, I think, a kind of culture shock because what I actually knew from primary school (GKv) was that all people go to church and believe in God. Well, then I came to that secondary school (PC), and so much happened there that I thought, wow, a whole world opened up for me there, and it was all at once very different’ (Bea). The protective influence of the GKv schools resulted in the respondents being insufficiently prepared when they came into contact with dissenters, such as during their student years or when they left the parental home. The arguments that were valid in their own circle did not convince in the secular world outside of that circle. Anthony, who wanted to convince others that God existed, experienced this and was ultimately convinced by those others that God did not exist, after which he left the church.

The consequence of this unwritten rule was that a difference could be observed between the GKv and NGK respondents. Only the GKv respondents considered school to have influenced RS. Almost all of them received their education at church-associated schools (GKv education), which had a homogeneous population in terms of church background. All NGK respondents attended Protestant Christian education (PC education). Such schools have a heterogeneous population regarding church background, and none of the respondents mentioned that the school had an influence. Two points emerge from this, and Gerrit provides an example of one. First, the GKv school, aimed at protecting students from outside influences, met that goal. Gerrit switched from GKv to PC education during his secondary

education: *'And, suddenly, I also met people who were not religious. That's when I think I was really aware for the first time that faith, well, that there was also another world.'*

The second point that emerged was that the PC school broadened his perspective on other beliefs. It can, therefore, be assumed that although the NGK respondents felt that PC school had not influenced them, it likely did, although in an indirect way. By living and working together with dissenters, reflective skills regarding one's own and others' beliefs could be developed. Whether there is a link to church disaffiliation did not emerge from the results.

In summary, based on these results, a mixed view of RS emerges. It is traditional in its emphasis on correct knowledge and modern in that doubts were accepted and discussed. As a result, the learning model was also mixed. Certain religious views were explored (developmental), but the outcomes had to fit within the boundaries of the doctrine (behavioural). The old core values prevailed, and the individual's need for autonomy was not sufficiently addressed.

6.5 Conclusions and discussion

Based on the results, three conclusions can be drawn to answer the following research question: How did millennials who grew up in an orthodox church community and left the church experience the influence of the church and education regarding their secondary religious socialisation? The first relates to the paradigm assumed within the RS; the second relates to the learning model, which leads to clashing core values; and the third relates to the tension between old and new church values within the millennials themselves.

6.5.1 Conclusions

First, it can be concluded that the *Behave, believe, belong* paradigm was not appropriate to the respondents' beliefs about life. The emphasis on *behave* and *believe* caused the respondents to experience faith as a culture, a way of life. The perceived hypocrisy and lack of role models reinforced this. They did not experience faith as authentic. They belonged if they conformed to the collective and fulfilled obligations. It can be argued that these churches responded too late to the changes in the *zeitgeist*. Harris (2012) argues that in the current era, it is more appropriate to begin from the 'Belong, believe, behave' paradigm, emphasising 'belong'. This expresses a sense of unconditionality. One can belong, even if one does not yet believe and behave as we do. This indicates inclusiveness, which aligns with the core values of millennials.

Secondly, it can be concluded that by adopting a mixed behavioural/developmental learning model, churches and schools paid too little attention to faith experiences. For millennials, for whom faith needed to feel good, this was alienating. The strong emphasis on cognition and the protective effect of church and school left little space for exploration. The fact that one reason for doing the public Profession of Faith was 'belonging to the group' shows that connection with the group is important. It is therefore recommended that

churches and schools change their vision and adopt a more tribal one. Within such a vision, faith experiences are exchanged within groups, leading to mutual learning and strengthening connections with the group (Van Wijnen, 2016). The apprenticeship model, therefore, seems most appropriate for current times. Two observations should be made here. First, there are no known long-term results for this model regarding RS. Second, this model seems to align well with millennials, who are the educators of Generation Z (the coming generation), whose specific needs/characteristics are not yet known.

Third, the core values of authenticity and autonomy came at a price for millennials. Tensions can arise between authenticity and autonomy, both within the individual and between the individual and his networks. People, and certainly adolescents, are relational beings who like to be connected to others (Van Wijnen, 2016). The question is to what extent belonging to a group and making autonomous and authentic choices relate to one another. Authenticity requires choices that feel right for the individual, but if the individual is in an environment where certain norms and values dominate that are different from theirs, this may influence the autonomous choices made. Belonging may be more important to the individual at that moment than authentic choice.

There is also a question regarding the extent to which the individual is willing to tolerate differences and not conform to their own authenticity. This may explain the phenomenon of millennials seemingly easily switching from one religious institution to another or simply leaving one (De Kock et al., 2011; Root, 2017). Regarding connection with the church, several reactions are possible, with the extremes being conforming to the old core values at the expense of authenticity, accepting that it may not feel right, and choosing belonging as opposed to conforming to the new core values, and accepting that the need to belong will not be met. Both responses occurred, as evidenced by whether the respondents conformed to church doctrine or not.

6.5.2 Discussion points

Finally, there are two discussion points regarding the schools' influence on RS. First, the extent to which the NGK respondents are right in stating that the PC school did not influence their RS is debatable. They were more likely to come into contact with dissenters due to the heterogeneous population in their schools, and this environment may have influenced them. Specifically, it may have made them more resilient when facing other beliefs. In the NGK, church disaffiliation became visible later than in the GKv. Some GKv respondents, who had attended primary and/or secondary education in a sheltered environment, found the experience eye-opening when they switched to PC secondary and/or tertiary education. They met dissenters and non-believers there for the first time and experienced that these were normal, well-meaning people, despite their not believing in God. The NGK respondents had already experienced this. It is also possible that NGK respondents viewed school as not influencing their RS because the PC schools only transmitted the liberal values of today's society and failed to explore multiple perspectives on religion, although present in the

school, given its heterogeneous population. Liberal values can also be elevated to orthodoxy (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Further research could shed more light on this.

Secondly, we can ask to what extent the GKv schools fulfilled their legal mandate (applicable to all state-funded schools) to prepare pupils for life in a secular society and teach the values that prevail within it. The fact that GKv respondents stated that it was an eye-opener when they came into contact with dissenters implies that the GKv schools were not focused on exploring multiple perspectives. Being focused on imparting traditional doctrine may have limited the schools' ability to complete this task. Further research into this area is recommended.

6.5.3 Some closing remarks

Due to the exploratory research design, the conclusions drawn in this study are not generalisable, but they do provide clues for future research and reflection. Churches and schools must realise that the church, as an institution, is not a natural fit for millennials and the generations to come, and that other forms of church may be more suited to the core values of the current generations. It is also advisable that churches involved in youth work identify the specific qualities and competencies of each youth worker and ensure they are suited for their task. This can be challenging for small churches, but in terms of accomplishing this goal, the 2023 national reunion of Reformed Churches in the Netherlands offers opportunities. At the local level, congregations can collaborate and improve competencies and skills, increasing expertise.

Finally, the changing core values come at a price. Many have left the church, and many have left God. The respondents' experiences prove the importance of a paradigm change so that churches and schools can provide a home for future generations. In the old 'Behave, believe, belong' paradigm, the core values of a bygone era prevailed. The new 'Belong, believe, behave' paradigm provides believing parents and congregations with opportunities to stem the tide of church disaffiliation, as well as leaving God, allowing the next generations to grow up with the Lord of the church.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to understand factors contributing to church disaffiliation among millennials who grew up within the GKv and the NGK. The central research question was: *Why do millennials from the GKv and the NGK leave the church they grew up in without joining another church, group or community, according to their parents and themselves?* This line of questioning led to a qualitative, exploratory and interpretive research among millennials, as few, if any, studies have been conducted on the experiences of millennials themselves.

This study specifically examined the influence of the socialising contexts of family, church and school on religious socialisation (RS), as well as parents' experiences of their children's church disaffiliation. In this chapter, we first summarise the results of each sub-study, as described in Chapters 3 to 6, followed by our final conclusion. This conclusion is then discussed in relation to the literature, followed by practical recommendations for parents, churches and schools, as well as for further research. Finally, the researcher's self-reflection on the entire research process is described.

7.2 Summary results

Chapter 3 examined the question: *How do parents from two conservative Reformed church communities in the Netherlands experience their children's church disaffiliation, and what did they see as influencing factors?* The results showed that their children's church disaffiliation is experienced as a crisis by the parents and that they deal with it in different ways. As a coping mechanism, they often used external attribution: attributing the causes/factors perceived for their children's church disaffiliation, such as the social climate and the church doctrine, to the church. The reason for this appears to be that most parents, because of the consequences for children and grandchildren, find the burden of church disaffiliation too heavy to bear if they themselves were to blame. From the emotions experienced, such as shame, jealousy and disappointment, and the coping mechanism external attribution, it became apparent that, concerning religion, the modern core values of 'fulfilling obligations' and 'conforming to the collective' prevailed for the parents. In RS, they are worried that they did not fulfil their baptismal promise, and that this may be observed by others. The external attribution of factors to the church also indicates that they accept the authority of the church: the church, as an authoritative institution, is held partly responsible. One strategy can be added to the coping strategies of Folkman and Lazarus (1988), namely, relying on a transcendent power: for the parents involved, this is God. The way of coping with this crisis affects the parents' faith development. Ganzevoort (1994a) named three consequences: problematisation, transformation and stimulation. All three were recognised.

Chapter 4 focused on the question: *How did millennials, who grew up in a conservative Reformed church community and left this church, experience the role of their parents regarding their religious socialisation?* It became apparent that most parents used ambiguous parenting styles, authoritative or permissive in socialisation on the one hand, and authoritarian concerning religious socialisation on the other. Because of the double messages they sent out: on the one hand, respect for the child's autonomy, and on the other hand, regarding religion, no respect for autonomy, a one-sided image of the meaning of faith and church was transmitted. This does not fit in with the life sense of millennials, with their core values of autonomy, authenticity, and responsibility for one's own individual choices. In addition, some parents showed ambiguity in their own perception of faith: by emphasising the cognitive aspect of believing, and naming and showing little to nothing of the affective aspect. Again, two messages were transmitted: on the one hand, they taught their children that God is loving and caring, helping the people He created; on the other hand, most parents did not demonstrate this experience, nor did they share it in troubled times. As a result, the children experienced faith as a way of life, a culture.

Chapter 5 discussed the question: *What is, according to millennials who have left the church, the influence of their parents on the God image they develop and their ability to establish a relationship with God and the church?* Four findings emerged. First, parents influenced their children's image of God mainly negatively through the knowledge about God that they passed on. Second, there was evidence that respondents may have been insecurely attached, which could have adversely affected their ability to establish a relationship with God. Thirdly, there seems to be a link between a permissive parenting style and intrusive events in the family, which in turn also affects the view of God. Fourth, millennials' ability to enter into a relationship with a church community cannot be explained using attachment theory, which focuses on the ability to have a relationship with specific attachment figures, such as parents and God. The ability to enter into a relationship with other attachment figures, such as church members, can be influenced by several factors, such as the child's personality and the (cultural) context in which they grew up.

Chapter 6 discussed the influence of church and school through the question: *How did millennials who grew up in and left a conservative Reformed church community perceive the influence of church and education on their religious socialisation?* The results firstly showed that church and school assumed the paradigm 'Behave, believe, belong' in which mainly behaviour, but also belief as professed in the church, were the conditions for belonging. This traditional paradigm, resulting in a combined learning model (modern/traditional) characterised by the core values of 'conforming' and 'meeting obligations', chafes with the core values of authenticity and autonomy that characterise millennials. Second, millennials experienced that the interpretation of the Bible and the social climate within church communities led to arbitrary interpretation as well as exclusivity and intolerance towards dissenters and the LGBT+ community. Millennials experienced this as contrary to their own core values, and this led to alienation from the church as an institution. Thirdly, it emerged that the GKv-schools, due to their protective and

homogeneous environment, did not adequately prepare students for the pluralistic, secular society, resulting in a culture shock upon contact with dissenters later in life. Fourth, a difference was observed between the GKv and NGK millennials regarding core values. Two-thirds of GKv millennials conformed to the church by doing their public Profession of Faith, while two-thirds of NGK millennials did not conform and did not do their public Profession of Faith. This may be due to the different spiritual climates they grew up in.

In summary, parental influence on RS was high, due to the combined parenting style adopted by the parents and the attachment style their children developed, as well as introducing their children into supportive contexts suitable to their own beliefs. The ambiguity displayed by parents both in parenting and in their own experience of faith in God stemmed from, on the one hand, adopting the core values of the modern era and, on the other, adopting the core values of the postmodern era in socialisation. But also, from the influence of the doctrine they professed and the strictness with which they were brought up concerning religion. This affected the image millennials developed of believing in God and forming relationships with God. It became difficult for them to enter into, maintain and/or have a relationship with God, and so entering into a relationship with the church was/remained unnatural for them. In the family context, no differences could be observed between the experiences of millennials from the GKv and NGK. This is possibly due to their parents growing up within a similar spiritual climate, i.e., in the GKv pillar. However, there was a difference between GKv and NGK millennials concerning the church context. This was evident from whether or not they did their public Profession of Faith in church.

7.3 Final conclusion and discussion

Based on the results and sub-conclusions from chapters 3 to 6, an answer can be given to the central research question of why millennials from the GKv and NGK leave the church they grew up in without joining another church, group or community, according to their parents and themselves. Within the three described contexts in which their RS took place, several factors facilitated this. It is emphatically not stated here that these factors were the cause of church disaffiliation, which often also led to abandonment of God. That was not the purpose of this research; it was an exploratory study, seeking to clarify possible facilitating factors which need to be further investigated among both church disaffiliates and those who remained church members. Besides, church disaffiliation is a complex problem with many possible causes: each church abandoner has their own story and life history.

The final conclusion, which can be drawn based on the sub-conclusions from chapters 3 to 6, is that the paradigm 'behave, believe, belong' was paramount in all three socialising contexts, and that the emphasis on behaviour and belief promoted church disaffiliation. It led to ambiguity in education and religious experience, to the perception of faith as a culture, to the development of a one-sided image of God and to the lack of role models within the faith community. This was perceived as alienating by the millennials and did not promote the RS's goal of establishing a relationship with God and the faith community.

This final conclusion will now be explained and discussed in relation to the theory and results described in Chapters 1 and 3 – 6. First, the paradigm will be discussed, and a proposal for a new paradigm will be presented. This is followed by a reflection on the working definition and a discussion of the influence of ‘significant others’, and of the postmodern time on church disaffiliation. Finally, a possible cause for the difference in the time of leaving the church between the GKv and NGK is sought.

7.3.1 An old and new paradigm

The ‘behave, believe, belong’ paradigm (Harris, 2005) emerged in the view of RS, which, for the churches involved, can be described as traditional with modern influences (6.5.1). This traditional/modern view meant that with regard to religion within the transmission, transaction and transformation process, the emphasis was on the transmission of knowledge, values and faith (*believe*) and habits, norms and behaviours (*behave*). Within this paradigm, responsibility for the RS lies with the educator, leaving little or no respect for the child’s autonomy and little room for exploration. This view of parenting was not in line with the prevailing view of today’s society (the social imagination), in which the child’s autonomy and authenticity are respected. The educators themselves came into contact with these socially prevailing views by living and working in this society. And, as Groen and Vermeer (2013) argue, they were possibly more influenced by it than they themselves realised. However, concerning religion, the following remained true for them: ‘behave, believe, belong’. This was evident in their parenting style and religious beliefs, which their children perceived as ambiguous. Although RS is not a linear process, and the sequencing within the paradigm can be seen more as naming what is most emphasised in RS, within this paradigm, behaving and believing can be experienced as conditional for belonging.

Saroglou (2011), based on a literature review, describes these concepts (behave, believe, belong) as components of religion and adds a fourth component, ‘bond’. These components of religion are linked to psychological dimensions and can explain *why* people do/don’t believe, but also influence *how* people become believers. The latter means that putting more or less emphasis on one or more dimensions influences the RS and the reasons for becoming a believer, or, conversely, a non-believer (Saroglou et al., 2020). The components are linked to the cognitive, emotional, moral, affective and social dimensions/aspects of believing and are conceptualised as follows (Saroglou, 2011, pp. 1323-1327).

Believe concerns a set of beliefs, based on knowledge, and aimed at finding meaning and truth, and it concerns the cognitive dimension (also called belief by Immink [2003]). *Behave* concerns specific norms and moral arguments as to why something is right or wrong from the religious perspective, and concerns the moral dimension. *Belong* concerns belonging to the community and satisfies people’s need to belong to a group with which one can identify, with shared values and beliefs: this concerns the social dimension. *Bond* concerns the emotional or affective dimension of religion, the self-experience of a relationship with the transcendent, making the individual feel connected to it. This

dimension is called 'faith' by Immink (2003). Saraglou (2011) argues that religious groups and churches often emphasise two or more of these dimensions to a greater or lesser extent and that this has implications for the why and how of believing. Viewed from the perspective of the GKv and NGK respondents, the emphasis within the GKv and NGK was particularly on *behave* and *believe*. Regarding *behave*, there were differences between the norms and moral arguments of secular society and those of the church community they grew up in. Examples include dealing with people with a different sexual orientation and cohabitation before marriage. *Behave* set standards, which respondents perceived as intolerant or difficult to follow, and old-fashioned. This made acceptance of the professed faith difficult. As described in 1.4.2, regarding belief, it can be said that within the GKv, the emphasis was on the cognitive dimension, the knowledge of the Bible and the confessional scriptures, the true doctrine, and this, according to Saraglou, has the risk of becoming dogmatic. Within the NGK, people thought more broadly about this, but knowledge of the Bible as the word of God was guiding, and the emphasis was also on cognition. The results showed no difference between the GKv- and NGK respondents regarding the cognitive aspect. Bonding was not mentioned in the paradigm described by Harris (2005), and this aspect, as emerged from the respondents' experiences, was missed by most of them. As concluded and discussed in 4.5.2 the respondents did not observe the affective aspect in their parents and congregation members. It can be argued that, due to the emphasis on *behave* and *believe*, the *belonging* and *bonding* dimensions fell into the background.

Yet, as argued in chapter 6.2.2, a shift within this paradigm can be observed. De Kock et al. (2011) pointed out the importance of the affective aspect of belief and added to the two views of RS (traditional and modern) the tribal view, which emphasises the importance of shared rituals, sharing experiences in 'loose' groups (such as at a particular event) and a shared lifestyle and/or interests. Authenticity is key, and responsibility within this vision is intersubjective. In doing so, they effectively added the *bonding* dimension to the paradigm.

This is partly in line with the proposal by Harris (2005) that a paradigm change would be more appropriate for the current times. Harris' proposal concerns the sequence of the dimensions, thus indicating a difference in emphasis. He calls this paradigm: 'Belong, believe, behave', with the emphasis on belonging. This meets millennials' need for connection, participation and relationality (Dekker & Stoffels, 2011; Heitink, 2011; Perrin, 2020). The emphasis on *behave* is reduced, which may be perceived as less conditional for belonging. However, within the paradigm proposed by Harris (2005), the focus may remain on the cognitive aspect of believing, leaving the affective aspect underemphasised. This paradigm lacks *bonding*, while according to Saraglou (2011) this fulfils an essential psychological function, namely a unified experience of the affective aspect of belief (faith) as also emphasised in the tribal view of De Kock and Sonnenberg (2012). Harris (2005) himself also recognises this, arguing that the paradigm he proposes is missing something: namely, transformation. Transformation, as described in 4.2.2, is the process that promotes successful RS through open communication, mutual learning and shared responsibility between educators and children/young people, which connects to the bonding dimension.

New paradigm

A new paradigm can, therefore, be devised, namely, to '*belong, bond, believe*', in which the affective and the belonging aspect receive more attention. *Behave* is missing in this new paradigm, because, as will be argued, emphasising this may not be necessary to achieve the RS goal of establishing and developing a relationship with God and fellow believers. *Behave* can also be seen as *a result* of reaching the goal of RS. Two points should be kept in mind here. First, that the RS is not a linear process, and that the four different aspects (behave, believe, bond, belong) are distinguishable but inseparable. These aspects influence each other mutually. Second, that emphasising one or two aspects more or less than the others has both positive and negative consequences (Saroglou, 2011).

In this new paradigm, *belonging* is paramount, emphasising that everyone can belong to the faith community, whether from outside the church or, in the case of our respondents, raised in this group from childhood. The assumption is that people join or orient themselves towards groups to which they feel attracted, in other words, feeling more or less related to the group climate. This fulfils people's basic need to connect with other people and to experience joint rituals (Van Wijnen, 2016). In *belonging*, exploration is key, and the outcome is open (short or long-term, formal or informal), respecting the autonomy of the individual. *Bonding* is mentioned second, because through shared experience and living, faith can germinate and grow, and mutual learning can take place. Central here are communication, the encounter with the other and with God, and authenticity. The hope is that this leads to the third aspect, namely belief. *Believing*, meaning: adopting beliefs and convictions, and focusing on finding meaning and truth. This also implies that within this adoption of beliefs, there is room for making changes or shifts in emphasis. The possibility exists that new insights and/or changes take place during the bonding process through mutual learning. Indeed, it is characteristic of new generations to place different emphases than previous generations and to add or change something to the existing (Bontekoning, 2010). These three components/aspects fulfil a purpose to reach the goal of RS, namely to develop a relationship with God and fellow believers. *Belonging* creates the opportunity to know other believers, and by *bonding*, group members can share experiences and learn together. *Believing* fulfils a purpose because knowledge of God creates more understanding. Also, through the shared experiences in the *bonding* process, a deeper understanding can be developed. This paradigm shows that the three components can be distinguished but not separated, each fulfilling a function in developing a relationship with God and fellow believers.

What about 'behave'?

Based on the results of this research, two questions regarding the *behave* aspect need to be answered. First, is emphasising *behaviour* necessary to achieve the goal of the RS? And second, is *behave* a necessary component for faith development in itself or is it the result of faith development? Some modesty is required here, as this is an exploratory study involving

a small group of respondents. We can only say that the results of this research point in this direction. *Behave*, as described by Saroglou (2011), means a set of specific norms and moral arguments as to why something is right or wrong from the religious perspective.

To answer the first question, if emphasizing *behave* is necessary for reaching the goal of RS there are some considerations regarding emphasising the *behave* component. Firstly, from a religious psychological perspective, the emphasis on *behave* hindered the achievement of the RS's goal for our respondents. They experienced *behave* in the old paradigm as a condition for belonging. It was experienced as 'exclusive': if you don't behave like us, you don't belong to us. As a result, faith was experienced more as a culture, a set of rules and beliefs. In order to belong to the group, it was important to endorse these rules and beliefs to a greater or lesser extent. This cultural aspect was reinforced by the lack of an affective aspect in belief. Due to the emphasis on *behaving* and on the cognitive aspect of *believing*, there was little room for *bonding*, which is aimed at developing a relational bond with God and fellow believers.

As a result, the emphasis on *behaving* did not contribute to achieving the goal of the RS. Secondly, from a religious educational perspective, the consideration is that *behave* is subject to change over the years and varies considerably depending on the church denomination and possible influences of the social imagination of society. This is what some respondents mean when they say: interpretation of the Bible is arbitrary, it is used to confirm one's own point of view, so how reliable is the Bible, then? The church is adjusting *behave*, such as in the case of the position of the LGBT+ community, for example.

By making such adjustments, the church community implies that *belief* can be interpreted in different ways. This can be the result of renewed insights into the Bible, or it can change under the influence of the postmodern era, by aligning more with generally held views in society. In both cases, it can remove a barrier for individuals to start believing, as there are fewer abrasive core values but, on the other hand, it can increase the barrier to believe, by affecting the credibility of the biblical narrative. As one respondent remarked, 'Who's to tell me they won't change this again in a few years?' Or another one, who stated that the Bible was being used to confirm one's own point of view. *Behave* is subject to change, and if too much emphasis is placed on it, it erodes the credibility of faith.

Concluding, to answer the question if emphasising *behave* is necessary for faith development, the results suggest the answer can be *no*. Emphasising *behave* hindered the faith development of *these* respondents: they were raised by parents who grew up in the Gkv-church in which there was a strong truth claim on the cognitive aspect of belief. Therefore, these parents were strongly committed to transmitting the knowledge of faith and the corresponding behaviour correctly. Thereby, in general, *behave* can be seen as a matter of adapting to the group, a natural process.

Within each group, certain norms and values prevail, and if an individual is attracted to that group (or belongs to that group from childhood) they will adapt to a greater or lesser extent to these norms and values. Maybe not fully out of conviction, but paying the price to belong to that group. Later on, when belief and faith grow through *belonging* and *bonding*, there can be a development to *behave* out of complete conviction. Only when there is belief/faith, can one expect individuals to be willing to behave according to the values and norms set by the Gospel from an inner conviction. Giving the individual time and space for

faith development enables them to grow into a relationship with God. This growth process is facilitated by satisfying the need to belong (belonging) and by shared experiences (bonding). By placing more emphasis on *belonging* and *bonding*, in which autonomy and authenticity of the individual are respected, there is room for exploration and internalisation of certain beliefs of what is right/wrong, together with peers. By not including *behave* in the paradigm, the individual is given time and space to grow in faith, together with peers, while respecting autonomy and authenticity.

The second question if *behave* is a necessary component for achieving the goal of faith development in itself, or the result of faith development, can first be answered from religious psychological and - educational perspective. From these perspectives, as described above, emphasising *behave* can be harmful. Even though this is the case, the answer to this question, based on the work of Saroglou, seems to be yes. All components can be harmful through overemphasis or underemphasis (Saroglou, 2011), so this is not an argument for rejecting *behave* as an influencing component to becoming or not to becoming a believer.

Yes, *behave* is important, because it can be seen as part of developing a relationship with God and other believers, and it fulfils a psychological dimension of religion. Through *belonging* and *bonding*, the shared experiences lead the individuals to a deeper understanding of what God's Word can mean for their daily life: how can we follow Jesus? Jesus told and showed his followers what is right and wrong.

So, *behave* is a necessary component of faith development: it is inextricably linked to the other three components, but it is not the first component to emphasize for reaching the goal of RS. By placing more emphasis on *belonging* and *bonding*, in which autonomy and authenticity of the individual are respected, there is room for exploration and internalisation of certain beliefs of what is right/wrong, together with peers. By not including *behave* in the paradigm, the individual is given time and space to grow in belief and faith. By respecting autonomy and authenticity, the individual grows to behave out of full conviction.

Second, from a theological perspective, this brings us to the consideration that *behave* can also be seen as the fruit of faith, namely through the work of the Holy Spirit within believers (Galatians 5:22, 23, NBS). Entering into a relationship with God and entrusting oneself to Him triggers a process of transformation. Transformation in this context can be interpreted as: the changes that faith can bring about in people's behaviour under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The new paradigm, by placing more focus on 'belong, bond and believe', provides space for the development of faith, with the fruit being *behave*. *Behave* in the sense of living in imitation of Jesus: His behaviour is the example for the behaviour of people who believe in Him. In this way, *behave* can be seen as the result of faith development. This result is not the end phase, but the beginning of lifelong growth in faith.

Possibly the weightiest consideration for the new paradigm is that in Jesus' calling of the disciples, the outlines of this new paradigm can be discerned, both emphasising *belonging* and *bonding*. As with Levi the tax collector (Mark 2:14), the first thing Jesus said was: Follow me! This refers to *belonging*. In the calling of Nathanael (John 1: 43-51), we see both bonding and belonging: he experienced that Jesus had exceptional gifts and went to follow Him. 'Believe' emerges when some disciples, through what they experience with Jesus, come to the confession, as Peter does: You are the Lord (bonding and believing). After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they grew towards an understanding and insight into the

teachings of Jesus and lived according to His will (behave), as described in the book of Acts. The faith development of the disciples, briefly articulated here, shows that faith development is not a linear process: it involves trial and error. It also shows that emphasising *belonging* and *bonding* are probably more effective than emphasising *behaving*.

To answer the second question, whether *behave* is a necessary component of faith development? The answer is Yes. *Behave* is part of the whole process, because all four components are influential to RS, but there is no need to emphasise it. Adapting to a group is a natural process when a person wants to belong to that group. Besides this, the individual needs time and space for exploration without pressure.

In conclusion: In the new paradigm, *behave* is not mentioned because this component does not require emphasis. *Belong, bond* and *believe* need more emphasis. Overemphasising *behave* provides constraints for faith development (time and space), can threaten the plausibility of faith and is unnecessary if enough attention is given to *belong* and *bond*. Thereby, *behave* can be interpreted as the fruit of the Spirit within believers, also because the Lord Jesus shows the new proposed paradigm in the calling of his disciples. For practical theology, it could be insightful to examine the disciples' faith development and arrive at a further understanding of the RS of youth and young adults. Taking this new paradigm within RS as a starting point, three aspects of faith, the social, affective and cognitive aspects, are given the emphasis necessary to establish a relationship with God, and the fruit will be *behave*.

7.3.2 Reflection on the working definition

In 1.2.2, the following working definition for RS was formulated based on the work of Bebiroglu, Sherkat and Boyatzis as '*the process by which educators transfer their knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs about their own religion to the children (Bebiroglu/Sherkat) and which aims to ensure that the children internalise them and establish a trusting relationship with God and fellow believers within an organised community (Boyatzis)*'. As a motivation for this formulation, it was argued that this definition allows for different views of RS and is therefore functional for various religious beliefs, enabling comparison of research results between different religious movements.

Reflecting on this study, it can be argued that this definition has a limitation, namely that it does not allow for the autonomy of the child. This limitation concerns both the first part of the definition (the construct being transmitted) and the second part (the purpose of the RS). The first part of this definition places the responsibility entirely on the educator, therefore offering little room for the tribal view of RS, in which the apprenticeship learning model is key. It was argued in 6.5.1 that this model may be more appropriate to the postmodern era, as it allows more space for the process of transformation. Transformation, in which responsibility is intersubjective, entails respect for the child's autonomy, and is an interplay between educators, children and their social environment, focused on shared experiences. In this study, it emerged that in the RS of respondents, not enough attention was paid to this transformation process. Second, regarding the purpose of the RS (internalising the construct), this also does not create enough room for the child's own input,

whether in relation to others or not. According to the working definition, the transferred construct should be internalised.

Based on these considerations, I arrive at the following reformulation:

'Religious socialisation is the process by which educators transfer their knowledge, behaviours, values, habits, norms and beliefs about their own religion to the children, in a way that involves mutual learning, and whose goal is for the children to believe in God and to establish a relationship with fellow believers within an organised community.' In this modified working definition, *mutual learning* has been added, creating room for the transformative process of both educators and children. This is reinforced by removing 'internalising'. Indeed, this can give the impression that it is all about one's own tradition, and therefore leaves little room for ownership, which is peculiar to a new generation. Using the word *believe* instead of 'internalise and enter into a trusting relationship with God' aligns with Immink's (2003, p.31) description. As was concluded in 1.2.3, believing is seen as 1) knowing God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, 2) wanting to be involved with God based on this knowing, and 3) experiencing God in the encounter with Him. Internalising is implicit in this. In this reformulation, 'engaging in a relationship with fellow believers within an organised community' has remained, although as described in 1.2.3., this is not part of the concept of believing but can be seen as an influencing factor for 'continuing' to believe (De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 97).

7.3.3 Influence of 'significant others'

The results regarding the God Image revealed that respondents developed a one-sided image of God. God was associated with 'having to' and 'following rules', a culture. This was attributed to the parents' parenting style and the attachment style the children developed, but also to the teachings transmitted and the social climate within church congregations (Chapter 6). The point being discussed here is whether the influence of church congregations on the development of this one-sided view of God exists and, if so, what this influence is.

As described in Chapter 5, the child forms internal working models based on initial experiences with caregivers, which partly determine how the child sees himself and others, including God, and enters into relationships. According to Counted (2015) and Kirkpatrick (1992), these IWMs, although stable, can be influenced by life events, others, such as friends and partners, and by the relationship with God. De Roos (2006) illustrated this in her study on the influence of parents and teaching staff in younger children (4-6 years) on the development of their God Image. Two of De Roos' conclusions are relevant to our study, the first of which is that not only children's attachment influences the God Image they develop, but that the RS also plays a role in this. Second, she concluded that there can be compensation between the influence of the parent(s) and the teacher on the God Image. This means that 'significant others can influence the development of the image of God. Schwartz (2006) also emphasises this by pointing to the transformation process: the process in which others than those primarily responsible for the RS play a role, by example and open communication. The authors mentioned agree that not only does attachment style to the

parents influence the God Image, but that 'significant others' also play a role in this, such as grandparents, youth workers, teachers, and church members.

The results among millennials showed that a positive influence of significant others was absent in the contexts of family, church and school. Moreover, they did not notice, or perhaps deliberately did not mention out of loyalty to their parents, that there was a difference between professed faith and lived faith: hypocrisy in the context of the church. This damaged their developing God Image. The credibility of doctrine was compromised: why should I believe in a God if what we believe is not important enough for everyday behaviour?

Where a compensatory influence relative to the parents' parenting style and attachment style could be expected, there was a negative influence on the God Image of the potentially insecurely attached respondents. The perception that faith was a culture was reinforced. The difference between culture and faith is thin and largely overlapping. According to Saroglou (2011), the difference is that within faith there is a relationship with the transcendent, and with culture this is not necessarily so. If behaviour is not consistent with professed beliefs, whether within a religious or secular context, it is perceived as inauthentic. The non-credibility of belief and the lack of authentic belief affected the God-image. This confirmed some respondents' belief that faith was not plausible.

7.3.4 Influence of time: from collectivism to individualism

In the view of RS as espoused by the GKv and NGK, the influence of the time in which the baby boomers grew up can be recognised. The emphasis was on the cognitive aspect of believing, and the core values of *conformity* and *fulfilling obligations* can be recognised in it, with the emphasis on the collective. In the postmodern era in which the millennials grew up, other core values prevailed, namely *authenticity* and *autonomy*, with an emphasis on the individual. In this section, we explore the question of whether emphasis on the individual dimension (postmodern) de facto leads more to church disaffiliation than emphasis on the collective dimension (modern). After all, in today's postmodern era, more people leave the church than in the past.

As concluded, the GKv and the NGK maintained the traditional/modern vision in the RS of millennials. This view reflects the core values of the baby boomers, as described in 1.4.1, and, as the results showed, was influential in the perception of religion within family and church (Chapters 3 and 6). Religion is a complex concept, in which several dimensions could be identified. In 7.3.1, this was viewed mainly from a psychological perspective. Regarding the influence of time, we look more from a religious sociological perspective at two dimensions of religion, namely the collective and individual dimensions of religion in relation to church disaffiliation (Park & Paloutzian, 2005, p. 554). In the further description, the terms collectivism and individualism are used to denote these dimensions.

Starting from these two dimensions of religion, it can be argued that the core values of modernity, conformity and obligation, lead to more attention and emphasis on the collective dimension of religion than on the individual. The values of the postmodern era,

autonomy and authenticity, lead to more attention and emphasis on the individual dimension, and less on the collective (De Kock et al., 2011, p. 330). Church disaffiliation began to accelerate after the transition from the modern to the postmodern era.

For the baby boomers, this meant growing up within a family and church community where groupthink and a cognitive perception of faith dominated, and behaviour was mainly norm-driven (Veenhoven, 2000). Collectivism was central. Millennials grew up within a family and church community where socialisation was influenced by postmodernism on the one hand and modern thinking towards religion on the other. Groupthink and a cognitive perception of faith chafed with the core values prevailing in the overall society and influenced the faith development and experience of millennials. The focus was on individualism. This brings us to the question of what is meant by individualism and collectivism.

In common parlance, individualism is often equated with 'thinking of oneself' as used by the church member quoted in the preface of this thesis. This description does not do justice to the concept because, as with many concepts, multiple forms and dimensions can be discerned, and it has various definitions (De Keere et al., 2013). Without entering into this within this framework, we look at how the concepts of individualism and collectivism are defined by Veenhoven (2000, p. 12). Individualism, according to him, is 'the inverse of collectivism' within cultural psychology. In individualistic societies, people develop a strong self-awareness and are less guided by standard rules. In collectivist societies, group consciousness plays a greater role and actions are more determined by fixed rules of behaviour. De Kock et al. (2011, p. 330) distinguish a structural and cultural aspect to the process of individualisation. In structural terms, individualisation can lead to the weakening or loss of connectedness between individuals.

In cultural terms, individualisation refers to the loss of authority of shared meaning-making. Individualism and collectivism can be seen as values that can be typified by extremes, a continuum with several variants. Individualism in its extreme form, where for the individual it means 'I do what I want, and do what feels right for me,' can lead to narcissism, self-centredness and a society with little or no social cohesion. However, individualism in its moderate form can do justice to the individual and give room for independent thought and making one's own choices different from the group. Collectivism in its extreme form can lead to a disregard for individuals, to group coercion and manipulation.

Collectivism in its moderate form, however, can offer certainty and firmness, as demonstrated by the beliefs of the baby boomers in this study: they knew what truth was and affirmed it. However, individualism and collectivism are not the only dimensions of religion that shape our thinking and actions. Van Wijnen (2016, p. 166) indicates the value of connectedness between people. A human being is a social being who seeks to connect with others in connection with a collective. This points towards a middle position on the individualism/collectivism continuum.

Applied to church disaffiliation: individualism has left its mark in Dutch society (Veenhoven, 2000). This is evidenced by the fact that long-term attachment to institutions, such as the church, is less common than in the past and that for many, the church as an authoritative institution has lost its value: the choice to leave the church and to believe in God has become an option in an individualistic society (Taylor, 2007). With so many choices an individual can make in life, these choices are likely to be more deliberate, as they must be authentic and feel right, and choice compulsion and groupthink are less prevalent. This ability to choose has a downside: being responsible for one's own choices—and there are many to be made in the religious field—can lead to stress and uncertainty. This uncertainty is observed among young people in the society of 2025 and may explain the increasing longing for religion among young people, as described in Chapter 1. It seems that the next generation Z is returning towards more stability, a larger story of meaning, rather than uncertainty and being responsible for one's own choices.

In conclusion, a church (and society) is probably best served by a balance between individualism and collectivism. This can be characterised as a church where individual choices are respected and where there is an eye for and responsibility for others. This perspective offers opportunities for Christian churches. Church and individuals are not bound by the core values of the times in which they live: these can and may be questioned (De Muynck & Kunz, 2021). Core values of a particular time, if they become predominant in the church, can lead to a community in which love grows cold and the law of the jungle prevails, both in the individualist and collectivist perspectives.

The church is bound by the core value of the time in which the church finds itself: the time between Pentecost and the Second Coming. Christ gave a double commandment, which can be typified as a core value in Matthew 22:37-40 (NBG): *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. That is the greatest and first commandment. The second is equal to it: love your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments are the foundation of everything in the Law and the Prophets.'* *The core value of time given to Christians is love. Love in union with Christ produces the fruit of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). The core value of love is a value that applies to people of all generations and all times. This core value protects against the excesses of both individualism and collectivism.*

Baby boomers, looking at the times they lived in and the experiences within the RKK and GKN, may have wondered whether RS should continue to be shaped in the way they themselves had been brought up. There is, to the author's knowledge, no literature examining this question within the GKv and NGK in the last decades of the 20th century. *Resisting*, the strategy of the GKv, delayed church decline by about 30 years compared to the GKN (Dekker, 2013).

With regard to the NGK, it can be said that, as stated earlier, they occupied a middle position in this. The reason for the church split, which took place during the developments mentioned above, was, on the one hand, an opposition to the strategy of the GKv; on the other hand, it can be said that they did not fully endorse the adjustments of the GKN. Church

members who left the GKv founded their own denomination and did not join the GKN.

In conclusion, both the strategy of adapting and resisting were not sufficient to prevent church disaffiliation. Possibly the reason for this lies in the motive for the choice of strategy: fear of loss. Adapting led to a reduction in the plausibility of belief. Resisting delayed church disaffiliation, but did not hold water for church members because there was a clear separation between thinking in society and in church, and for many, there were no satisfactory and clear arguments as to why this thinking in society was not accepted within the church.

7.3.5 Difference in church disaffiliation within the GKv and NGK.

In 1.3.2, a difference in the timing of church disaffiliation was noted within the GKv and NGK. Church disaffiliation within the NGK only became visible in declining membership numbers around 2018. From their inception in 1967, the NGK was more open to society; in other words adapted more than the GKv, with less resistance to changes in thinking in society. It might have been expected, based on the patterns of church attrition within GKN and GKv, within which the NGK held a middle position, that the NGK would follow the pattern of the GKN over time rather than that of the GKv.

To find an explanation for this, differences in RS within the contexts of GKv and NGK respondents, as revealed by our survey, can be examined. With regard to the family, the primary socialising context, no differences were observed between the parenting style and religious experience of the parents of GKv and NGK respondents. Concerning the church context, a difference between respondents could be observed (6.4.1). Two-thirds of GKv respondents did their public Profession of Faith, conforming to the church's teachings; two-thirds of NGK respondents did not. So, more NGK respondents chose not to do their Profession of Faith because it did not feel right to them. In terms of the school context, a difference can also be observed. As described and discussed in 6.5.2, the NGK respondents were more likely to come into contact with dissenters through the PC schools than GKv respondents, and regarded the school as not affecting their faith development. The GKv respondents did regard the GKv school as affecting their faith development.

Can it be inferred from conforming less to the church that NGK respondents acted more according to postmodern core values than the GKv respondents? Possibly yes, by coming into contact with other beliefs earlier, they had more opportunities to develop their critical dialogical skills, which allowed them to build resilience towards other beliefs on the one hand, and make more of their own choices on the other (Exalto & Bertram-Troost, 2019). Possibly also not, as described in Chapter 6, the reasons for doing their public Profession of Faith showed that the price of not doing so was too high for some GKv respondents to prioritise their own choice of doing what felt right. They weighed the interests against each other. This may also apply to the NGK respondents: here, too, a balancing of interests may have taken place. They may have had more contacts outside the church community through the PC schools, and belonging to that group may have influenced their choice. The cautious formulation of an answer to this question already shows that, based on these results, it

cannot be said that the NGK respondents were more autonomous and authentic. Several factors also play a role there, such as the respondents' personality and their own life history. Thus, it does not seem likely that differences within the secondary RS were the cause of later church disaffiliation within the NGK.

The cause of church disaffiliation not being visible within the NGK can also be interpreted from the spiritual climate within these churches. Dekker (2016, p.108) places the GKv and NGK, together with the GKN, under the heading of 'modern-reformed grouping' and argues that in terms of location (doctrinal view, degree of orthodoxy, attitude towards society), the NGK is in between the GKN and the GKv. Stoffels (1995) characterises the GKv as orthodox reformed and the NGK as evangelical reformed. By orthodoxy, he understands a *'belief system which, with reference to a sacred scripture or supernatural revelation, contains an exclusive, absolute and universal truth claim concerning the ultimate salvation and dishonour of man and the world, in which the loyalty of adherents is considered vital'* (p.18). Based on this definition, the GKv could be characterised as strictly orthodox until about the turn of the century. As described earlier, orthodoxy protects against church disaffiliation for a period of time, as shown in quantitative studies (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2017, p. 22; De Hart & Van Houwelingen, 2018, p. 43). From the turn of the century, the GKv more or less abandoned the absolute truth claim and began to adapt more to the changed thinking in society. The protective effect of orthodoxy fell away, and church disaffiliation became visible.

The NGK, on the other hand, had more room for different views from the beginning of their church formation (1.3.2) and did not assume an absolute truth claim. Based on the lesser degree of orthodoxy, it would be expected that the NGK would show earlier church decline than the GKv. In addition to orthodoxy, the spiritual climate within the NGK was also defined by a more evangelical faith experience. Stoffels (1995, p. 144), who characterised the NGK as evangelical reformed, describes the term 'evangelical' using a number of characteristics: more attention to personal faith experience and to the work of the Holy Spirit, focused on proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, and looking forward to the return of Christ. Although this did not emerge from the results of our study, it could be that within the NPC there was more focus on the affective dimension of faith, meeting the need for faith experience of millennials more than within the GKv, which strongly emphasised the cognitive dimension. This possible explanation cannot be substantiated from the quantitative surveys described in 1.2.2, given the composition of the category of small Protestant churches, with no breakdown by church, so it is not clear whether evangelical churches show less church attrition.

The answer to the question of why the NGK faced church disaffiliation later is difficult to interpret from these studies. However, Vermeer and Scheepers (2018) do argue from their research that evangelical Orthodox churches are growing in the Netherlands. An explanation for the lack of statistical visibility of church disaffiliation within the NGK may lie in the more evangelical character. Further research into the influence of the evangelical character of churches on RS in relation to church attrition may shed more light on this.

In summary, the faith development of young people is partly determined by the vision of RS. The vision, used within all three contexts, was based on the paradigm ‘behave, believe, belong’, and this led to a traditional/modern model of RS within the GKv and NGK. Influenced by the times in which parents were raised and the strong pillar of the GKv, this led to ambiguity in the parenting and faith experiences of parents and church members. An imbalance could be identified between the time in which the baby boomers grew up and they raised their children, the millennials. If the core values of the modern age and the postmodern age are balanced and not lived out in their extreme forms, then the Christian core value of love can flourish. This core value is not of a specific time, but of all times and all generations. The conditionality (as experienced by some respondents) of the paradigm ‘behave, believe, belong’ is then exchanged for the less conditional paradigm ‘belong, bond, believe’.

7.4 Recommendations and reflection

The conclusions and discussion of this study lead to some recommendations both for practice and further research, as well as self-reflection by the researcher. Although the conclusions and discussion are based on the research among baby boomers and millennials, lessons can be drawn from it for the current generation of educators, the millennials. In 7.4.1, practice recommendations are formulated for those responsible for the primary and secondary RS of Generation Z: parents, youth workers, teachers and pastors. This is followed in 7.4.2 by some specific recommendations for churches and GKv schools. These recommendations are followed in 7.4.3 by points for further academic research. Although recommendations have already been given in Chapters 3 to 6, there are some additions where overlap with those chapters is avoided as much as possible, but cannot be entirely avoided. This chapter concludes in 7.4.4 with a reflection on the role of the researcher himself.

7.4.1 Recommendations for practice

As mentioned earlier, RS takes place in three contexts: family, church and school. The recommendations listed below primarily concern all those responsible for RS. Parents are church members and may, after all, be teachers and/or involved in youth work in the church. However, it also concerns the church congregation. The congregation as a whole is responsible for the young people growing up within the congregation. In dealing with each other as believers, it emerges what is most emphasised in the culture of the congregation and which paradigm is assumed.

Reflecting on one’s own moral compass.

For all within the congregation, it is important to reflect on one’s role as a religious educator. The results showed that the plausibility of faith came under pressure as authenticity was missed. They taught at a cognitive level what to believe, but they did not see the impact of

that cognitive knowledge on the educators' experience of faith, and signalled a difference between doctrine and life in some church members. In other words, an authentic faith was missed, which lowered its plausibility. Therefore, to pass on faith to the next generation, each congregation member needs to reflect on themselves and answer the question: *What am I like? What values drive me to do what I do and how I do it?* Van Dijk-Groeneboer (2020) points out that if an educator wants to generate accessibility to faith in young people, it is important for an educator to know what drives them, in other words, *what is the moral compass on which I sail in my thinking, doing and acting?* To this end, Van Dijk-Groeneboer (2020) describes a methodology aimed mainly at professional religious educators, but very useful for groups of parents, youth workers and church members. It makes educators aware of their own values and motivations for youth work. It opens dialogue and provides opportunities to share faith experiences with others based on one's own life history. Knowing 'how you are' can lead to a more conscious, authentic faith and create openness and receptivity in dealing with others. It is recommended for youth workers to do this together with young people. For them, developing a moral compass is part of their faith development and sharing their own story with them increases the credibility of their faith. This development of a moral compass among all church members is essential for the RS of future generations.

Reflecting on the vision of RS

It is also important for the whole congregation to know the implicit or explicit vision of RS. For parents to become aware of their parenting style, for the church council and youth workers to reflect on their implementation of youth work. The central question here is: *Why do we do youth work the way we do it? What paradigm is assumed, and why do we find it desirable or not?* The results from the study are based on millennials, born between ± 1980 and 2000 and will be between 25 and 40 in 2025. Now, at the time of this study, a shift can already be observed within youth work at the congregations involved. The congregations may currently already be assuming a paradigm that is better suited to the times. Nevertheless, it still makes sense to reflect on this, as culture changes slowly, and points may emerge that had not been thought of before or that need improvement upon reflection. Church councils and youth workers can enter this reflection process using the appreciative perspective. A methodology that values what is going well within the congregation and creates energy because it starts from people's desire towards RS and is not focused on what is not going well.

7.4.2 Recommendations for church and school

While these recommendations mainly concern the church context, the recommendation God Image also concerns the school context.

Church council policy on church leavers

For the church, although, as mentioned in youth work, a shift towards 'belong, believe, behave' can already be observed within some church congregations, this does not apply to the policy of the churches involved in our study towards church disaffiliates. The results

showed that the manner in which this policy is implemented was perceived as not being involved and acting out of duty or financial motives. It can be stated that respondents did not experience it as an invitation to return. The recommendation is that church councils reflect on this, the main question being: why do we do what we do and how do we do it? Keeping in mind that the way to return to the church is made more difficult if the person is no longer a member and was asked by the church council to unsubscribe. Den Hertog (2011) therefore advises that the request to deregister an uninvolved church member should preferably not come from the church council. Emphasise 'belong' rather than 'behave' in the policy and let love for the church disaffiliate be leading in this policy.

Pastoral care and support

As a church, it is also important to have an eye for the parents and family members of church disaffiliates. They experience a taboo on church disaffiliation and, therefore, a certain degree of loneliness. The subject can be brought to their attention in prayer and baptismal services. Baptism services usually mention parents who have not had children, but little or no attention is paid to parents who have not been able to fulfil their baptismal promise and to their feelings. Reflect on the congregation's own role in this. This research indicates that the topic is not discussed enough within the congregation, possibly out of reluctance to act, and because of the social climate within the church congregation.

God Image

It is also advisable for the pastor, church council and congregation (and teaching staff) to reflect on the image of God that is propagated. Let it be a multifaceted image: God has many attributes, and the question is whether these are addressed in a balanced way. As emerged in Chapter 5, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which unilaterally emphasises a 'God who wants you to be happy and is present on call', is already present within the churches involved. Conversely, an overemphasis on the attributes of God that can be perceived as more negative is also not advisable. In preaching and youth work, show God in all His versatility (as far as humans can) as He has made Himself known in the Bible.

Know the times

Millennials and Generation Z know better than anyone what times we live in and are eager to participate in the community in which they are involved. Give them room within the church to take on responsibilities and use their creativity. In doing so, also use the knowledge, life experience and creativity of the older generations. This allows changes to take place within the congregation that some, especially older people, may find difficult. However, if we bear in mind and draw attention to the fact that the older generations already know Christ (and can still grow in this), and Generation Z still has to get to know Christ, we can expect that they will be prepared to accept these changes out of love. It bears witness to the core value of love if all generations give each other space, with the older generations being expected to lead in this.

7.4.3 Points for further research

This exploratory study sought to identify factors that may influence church disaffiliation. Because of this exploratory nature, it is necessary to conduct further research on certain factors that emerged, such as parenting style, attachment style and the proposed paradigm.

Parenting style

The influence of mixed parenting on RS, as revealed in this study in relation to church disaffiliation, was not conducive to successful RS. Here, further research is needed to better understand this influence. Dollahite et al (2019) researched the influence of strictness in faith education, but this did not relate it to the influence of a mixed parenting style. To get a fuller picture, this research will have to take place among church stayers and church leavers. For example, some respondents in our study had siblings who had established a relationship with the church. So the influence of mixed parenting style may be perceived differently. It is recommended to include other denominations in this study, also characterised as conservative Reformed, such as the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland*).

Attachment style

From our research, there was evidence that the majority of respondents showed characteristics of an insecure attachment style, and this was, therefore, considered a possible influencing factor for church disaffiliation. Several studies mentioned in this thesis established a relationship between attachment to people, attachment figures, and God. These showed that an insecure attachment complicates a relationship with God and also affects expectations towards other people. No relationship was established with church disaffiliation in those studies. Similarly, our study found that the AT was not sufficient to explain this relationship. Two points should be kept in mind here. The first is that the study did not focus on this relationship: the exploratory nature of the study found indications of a possible influence. The second is that for the classification of respondents into these categories, no more than clues were found: characteristics of respondents emerged that referred to characteristics of a certain attachment style. These characteristics of the respondents may also refer to certain personality traits. It is therefore recommended to investigate whether there is a relationship between an insecure attachment style and church disaffiliation and, if so, whether this can be seen as a promoting factor for this.

Practical theological research on the proposed paradigm

The proposed new paradigm 'Belong, bond, believe' is based on the results of this study among millennials who have passed their formative years and are the educators of the new Generation Z. The experiences of the millennials within this study were interpreted based on generational characteristics and religious-psychological and religious-pedagogical insights. For the generation of Millennials, there was too much emphasis on the cognitive and too little on the affective aspect of believing, and this had consequences. According to Saroglou (2011), too much emphasis on certain dimensions affects faith development and can lead to

a certain one-sidedness. Too much emphasis has consequences; too little, as our research showed, likewise. In the proposed new paradigm, *belong* is put first, and *behave* omitted. It is advisable to conduct research into the possible long-term consequences of this. This could include looking at faith communities with different emphases within RS. In addition, while this has been related to biblical insights within the discussion, practical theology can contribute to arriving at a broader biblical underpinning of this new paradigm. This can provide insights for RS scholarship and practice.

Scientifically, it is important to know what the consequences might be of omitting this dimension within the paradigm. As stated, a shift within the paradigm has been signalled—so there are church communities within which this can be examined. Therefore, it is important to know what this paradigm shift means for Generation Z's RS and their educators. Does this paradigm change fit the new generation and the times we live in today? It is important for practice because if more understanding is gained, practice can be adapted based on these insights. However, it should be kept in mind that this paradigm change, which can be characterised as a culture shift, needs time to sink into the hearts, heads and hands of the whole congregation.

7.4.4 Self-reflection

Coming to the end of a long and intensive process, I would like to look back on this period and my role as a researcher. I do this through the following points. Firstly, the motivation for the research, and secondly, a reflection on the influence of this motivation on my role as a researcher. Third, I look at what this project has brought me personally.

Personal motivation

In the research proposal for this study, concerning my motivation, I wrote the following, somewhat abbreviated:

Church disaffiliation touches me personally. For several reasons, namely pastoral concern for (1) the young people who leave the church, (2) their parents and grandparents, and (3) the beloved church communities of which I am (have been) a lifelong member and to which I owe much. First of all, it concerns me that many young people do not know the Lord and go about their lives in their own way. If the faith community can no longer do anything for young people because they leave that community and possibly eventually leave God, what does this mean for their future and that of their children?

Secondly, church disaffiliation of children and/or grandchildren causes grief to many parents and grandparents. Most parents and grandparents wish from the bottom of their hearts that what is most important to them in life, faith, will be important to their (grand)children and give meaning to their lives.

Thirdly, if the churches are gradually declining, then the gospel will be passed on to future generations to a lesser extent, and their survival is at stake. The church of the Lord Jesus is dear to me, and I would like to contribute to understanding the 'why' of church disaffiliation, so that congregations can develop tools to break the trend of church disaffiliation.

This was the motivation that led me to conduct this research. This personal involvement can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. An advantage is that a project like this research requires strong motivation to carry it out and sustain it. It is a long-term and often lonely journey. The disadvantage of being too committed to the topic and contexts in which this research was conducted can be bias. Therefore, I will now reflect on my role as a researcher.

Reflection on my role as a researcher

In qualitative research, the interviewer himself is the main research tool (Braun & Clarke, 2020a; Finlay, 2007). This can be seen as an advantage: the researcher, together with the respondents, interprets reality as it emerges, incorporating their own experiences and beliefs. Too much involvement has the disadvantage that bias can occur: seeing what you want to see. For the researcher, this means that there must be an awareness of involvement in the research at all stages of the study. As stated in 2.1, this requires a reflective attitude on the part of the researcher. My life history reveals an interconnectedness with the reality under investigation. Therefore, briefly, some remarks about my background. I grew up in a strictly Reformed (Liberated) family, in a village in Groningen. The family consisted of four daughters, the youngest of whom had a mental disability. My father died four days after my 5th birthday, after a six-month illness. My childhood was influenced by these intrusive events, as well as by the church, within which the construction of the GKv pillar was in full swing. I attended GKv schools until the age of 16, then PC higher and public academic education. In my early adolescence, I was fully convinced of the correctness of the Reformed doctrine. When I was about 16/17 years old, the perils of church division were playing out in our village, although no division took place. Yet it did involve members of our family. This was my first encounter with the (judgmental) nature of some church members, and it made me decide in my heart that I felt more at home within the NGK. Nevertheless, I remained a member of the GKv until after my studies in Wageningen. It cost me too much socially to leave the GKv and join the NGK in Wageningen, a balancing of interests, in other words. After my studies, I met my husband, who was a member of the NGK. This was the opportunity for me to leave the GKv with some legitimacy. Within the NGK, I experienced the broader climate and enjoyed the fact that I was allowed to think independently and did not have to express the church's opinion in advance. I am grateful that I was able to make this step. The four beautiful children my husband and I had together belong to the category of church disaffiliates.

So, my involvement is threefold: I experienced intrusive events in my youth, as several respondents did, I am familiar with the context of both GKv and NGK, and I am a mother of church disaffiliates. I experienced this involvement as an advantage: I recognised much of what respondents shared and could place it within the contexts of family, church and school. On the other hand, it was a disadvantage. During the research process, I noticed that the perils surrounding the church split had emotionally damaged me more than I realised. I discussed this with a fellow researcher, who, to avoid any bias, listened to some recordings of interviews and co-analysed the transcripts. I did not notice this while

conducting the interviews, because I was focused on getting as much data as possible. I was engaged in my work as a researcher and was able to maintain a professional distance. This was different during the transcription process: then the respondents' stories really made an emotional impact, and I regularly needed to take some distance to process what was heard.

For the analysis process, the involvement was an advantage, as I was quicker to recognise certain themes. But the data sent me in a theoretical direction I had not envisioned beforehand: towards religious psychology, such as the relationship, God Image and attachment styles. So there were surprises throughout the process: pleasant and confrontational surprises. As a scholar, I found it fascinating to see that the research led me to study certain theories I had not thought I would need beforehand. And to make discoveries I had not come across in the literature before, such as the combined parenting style.

On the other hand, as a human being, there were confronting surprises: as a mother, it was confronting to discover what the effects of a combined parenting style might be on children's faith development, and as a sister, to experience why certain patterns in our family function the way they do. This brought me to a greater understanding of myself, and, through conversations with my children, in particular, has taught me much and benefited me greatly. As a church member, I was also unpleasantly surprised: at meetings with church members about my research, I felt uncomfortable as the messenger of 'bad' news. Raising this explicitly at the beginning of each meeting removed that embarrassment and allowed me to talk openly about my research and discuss it with congregants: I was one of them. These surprises illustrate that, in addition to a natural subjectivity, there was sufficient objectivity present to conduct this research.

As stated earlier, in qualitative research, the researcher him/herself is the research instrument. Besides awareness of involvement in research, it is important to master certain competencies to conduct reliable and valid research. In my working life in vocational education, I developed several skills that I was able to put to good use as a researcher. My roles within education were: teacher, mentor, policy officer and study supervisor of students of education who either needed to obtain their teaching qualification or were pursuing a higher vocational education master's degree. This taught me the following skills: listening, questioning, critical analysis, reporting, receiving feedback, and being open to others. This was particularly evident during the interviews: almost every respondent soon reacted to the open atmosphere and felt a degree of trust. Looking back, I had the right competencies to carry out this research. This was reflected in an email sent to me by Victor, one of the respondents, after member-checking the results:

'First of all, I would like to thank you immensely for conducting this survey. Although we spoke a long time ago, I remember that I found the conversation very pleasant. It is very special to read back my experiences as a child in a comparative and academic study. It gives a sense of recognition to read how others in similar situations experienced the church, God and their upbringing. Indeed, I don't know many people who came from a family where faith

was transmitted authoritatively and then left the church. In a way, participating in your survey gave me a reason to reflect again on my religious upbringing and my choice to leave the church. Precisely the pleasant conversation and now also the enlightening texts you have written about this give me a certain inner peace and self-acceptance.'

However, there are also competencies in which I can still grow. The first one I would have to mention is the competence in digital skills. I turned out to be a difficult learner in dealing with Atlas-Ti and the digital submission systems of international journals. For Atlas-Ti, I attended a training course, but in the end, after open and axial coding, I mainly did the process manually: it was faster than with Atlas-Ti. Second was the reporting competency. I found writing the articles difficult because within an article, a particular component was core; however, that component was closely intertwined with other parts of the study. This required a strong focus on the research question of the article, taking into account the allowed word count.

Concluding

All in all, I learnt a lot from this project. To be honest, I discovered along the way that I may have entered this process somewhat unthinkingly. But I am glad I did, because it has taught and brought me a lot: insight into myself and others. I have grown as a person through it, including in my relationship with the Lord of the Church. And for that, I am grateful.

Samenvatting (summary in Dutch)

Dit proefschrift heeft een titel met een dubbele betekenis: Gefascineerd door de tijd? 'Gefascineerd' kan verwijzen naar iemand die in de ban is van de tijdgeest, er onlosmakelijk mee verbonden is, maar eveneens naar een fascinatie in de zin van geboeid zijn door de kansen die de huidige tijd biedt. Door gemeenteleden in de kerken die deel uitmaakten van dit onderzoeksproject werd het verlaten van de kerk vaak verklaard door 'de tijd waarin we leven' of toegeschreven aan de onverschilligheid van jongeren. Dit kan echter worden gezien als een simplificatie: de tijd heeft weliswaar invloed op mensen, maar is niet doorslaggevend. Er blijft ruimte voor ouders, kerken en scholen om op een manier te handelen die het geloof op een voor deze generatie en dit tijdperk passende manier overbrengt. Onverschilligheid als gevolg van het individualistische perspectief van jongeren wordt in de literatuur weerlegd. Persoonlijk ervaar ik de tijd waarin we leven als een grote kans en verantwoordelijkheid om het geloof op een voor dit postmoderne tijdperk passende manier door te geven.

Introductie

Ontkerkelijking is van alle tijden, maar is sinds de jaren zestig in westerse culturen in een stroomversnelling geraakt. Deze versnelling heeft ook invloed gehad op de conservatieve gereformeerde kerken in Nederland, zoals de Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt (GKv) en de Nederlands-Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK). Dat kerkverlating plaats vindt is een feit, het waarom is echter niet geheel duidelijk. Voor ouders is het kerkelijk afvallig worden van hun kind(eren) een probleem: zij hebben het gevoel dat zij hun doopbelofte niet hebben kunnen nakomen. Voor kerken zelf is het probleem dat de toekomst van de kerk voor de komende generaties op het spel staat. Het is belangrijk om opheldering te zoeken over dit punt. Voor zowel ouders als kerken om te weten wat hun eigen invloed is, en de invloed van het christelijk onderwijs. Met andere woorden, welke factoren waarop de ouders en kerken van invloed zijn dragen bij aan het niet behalen van het doel van de religieuze socialisatie (RS) en mogelijk aan kerkverlating?

Deze dissertatie presenteert een kwalitatief en exploratief praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar kerkverlating onder millennials binnen de GKv en de NGK. Sinds 2000 wordt kerkverlating zichtbaar in de kerkelijke statistieken van de GKv en sinds 2018 eveneens in die van de NGK. Uit literatuurstudie komt naar voren dat de ouders de meest bepalende factor zijn voor het slagen van de RS van hun kinderen. Daarom is gekozen voor een onderzoek onder de millennials zelf, waarin geluisterd wordt naar het verhaal van hun geloofsontwikkeling in de contexten gezin, kerk en school, om zo het 'waarom' achter kerkverlating te proberen te begrijpen.

Kerkverlating wordt gedefinieerd als het formeel of informeel verlaten van de kerk, zonder dat dit noodzakelijk betekent dat men ook God verlaat. Het fenomeen wordt benaderd als mogelijk falen van de RS, het proces waarin ouders hun geloof, waarden en praktijken overdragen met het doel dat kinderen deze internaliseren en een

vertrouwensvolle relatie ontwikkelen met God en de geloofsgemeenschap.

Een belangrijk theoretisch uitgangspunt is het spanningsveld tussen generaties. Babyboomers werden gevormd door de moderne tijd, met nadruk op plichtsbesef, conformiteit en het collectief. Millennials groeiden op in een postmoderne context, waarin autonomie, authenticiteit en subjectieve ervaring centraal staan. Deze discrepantie in kernwaarden vormt een sleutel tot het begrijpen van wederzijdse misverstanden.

Daarnaast wordt aandacht besteed aan verschillen tussen GKv en NGK. De GKv ontwikkelde een sterk beschermde zuil (met eigen scholen en instituties), terwijl de NGK een opener houding ten aanzien van de maatschappij aannam. Deze verschillen beïnvloeden de mate waarin jongeren voorbereid werden op een pluriforme samenleving.

Onderzoek naar kerkverlating kan worden uitgevoerd vanuit verschillende disciplines, zoals religieuze pedagogie, - psychologie, - sociologie en praktische theologie. Deze studie kiest voor het perspectief van de praktische theologie omdat het wordt uitgevoerd vanuit een christelijk perspectief, betrekking heeft op het geloofsleven in de praktijk en zich richt op het versterken van de kerkgemeenschappen. Het voordeel van deze praktische theologische benadering is dat er ook empirische gegevens uit de andere, bovengenoemde disciplines in kunnen worden meegenomen. Er is namelijk geen eenduidig antwoord op deze onderzoeksvraag. De praktische theologie biedt de mogelijkheid om een holistisch perspectief op dit complexe fenomeen te verkrijgen.

Onderzoeksvragen

In dit onderzoek werden zowel het perspectief van de ouders als de millennials op kerkverlating onderzocht. De volgende onderzoeksvraag stond centraal: *Waarom verlaten millennials (geboren tussen ± 1980-2000) uit de GKv en de NGK volgens hun ouders en henzelf de kerk waarin ze opgegroeid zijn, zonder zich aan te sluiten bij een andere kerk, groep of gemeenschap?* Door vier deelvragen wordt getracht een antwoord te vinden op deze onderzoeksvraag:

1. *Hoe ervaren ouders uit twee conservatief gereformeerde kerkgemeenschappen in Nederland de kerkverlating van hun kinderen?*
2. *Hoe hebben millennials, die zijn opgegroeid in een conservatieve gereformeerde kerkgemeenschap en deze kerk hebben verlaten, de rol van hun ouders ervaren met betrekking tot hun religieuze socialisatie?*
3. *Wat is, volgens millennials die de kerk hebben verlaten, de invloed van hun ouders op het beeld dat zij van God hebben en hun vermogen om een relatie met God en de kerk op te bouwen?*
4. *Hoe hebben millennials die zijn opgegroeid in een conservatieve gereformeerde kerkgemeenschap en die kerk hebben verlaten, de invloed van de kerk en het onderwijs op hun religieuze socialisatie ervaren?*

Door middel van twee deelonderzoeken (studies) wordt een antwoord gegeven op deze deelvragen, en daarmee op de centrale onderzoeksvraag.

Onderzoeksdesign

Er is gekozen voor een exploratief, interpretatief en kwalitatief onderzoeksdesign met als doel om mogelijke oorzaken/factoren te identificeren die bijdragen aan het fenomeen. Het voordeel van een kwalitatief design is dat het flexibel is, hierdoor is het mogelijk om de onderzoeksvraag gedurende het proces aan te passen als de data daartoe aanleiding geven. Vanuit kritisch realistisch perspectief wordt kennis benaderd en de onderzoeker is onderdeel van de onderzochte werkelijkheid. Dit vereist van de onderzoeker een reflectieve houding.

De dataverzameling vond plaats via drie onderzoeksinstrumenten: een vragenlijst, groeps- en individuele interviews. Voor de data-analyse werd gebruik gemaakt van Reflectieve Thematische Analyse (RTA).

De eerste deelstudie is een onderzoek onder ouders om via focusgroepen het fenomeen te verkennen en om hun ervaringen te delen. Er is aan de ouders gevraagd wat zij zien als factoren die bijgedragen hebben aan de kerkverlating van hun kind(eren). Ook werd hen gevraagd hoe zij het zelf hebben ervaren en wat het met hen deed. In hoofdstuk 3 wordt hiervan verslag gedaan. De tweede deelstudie vond plaats onder de millennials. Door middel van open interviews werd met hen gesproken over het 'waarom' van de kerkverlating. Wat heeft hen bewogen om deze stap te zetten? In de hoofdstukken 4 tot en met 6 worden de resultaten hiervan uitgebreid beschreven. Hieronder volgt een korte samenvatting.

Het Perspectief van de Ouders

Uit focusgroepen met ouders blijkt dat kerkverlating van hun kinderen wordt ervaren als een diepe crisis. Centrale emoties zijn schuld, schaamte, teleurstelling en verdriet. Ouders vragen zich af wat zij anders hadden kunnen doen en ervaren falen ten aanzien van hun doopbelofte. Als coping strategie leggen ouders de oorzaak van kerkverlating vooral buiten zichzelf, met name bij de kerk. Zij noemen een kil sociaal klimaat, weinig ruimte voor twijfel en diversiteit, onbegrijpelijke of niet-relevante geloofstaal, en een gebrek aan rolmodellen en passende peergroups. Tegelijkertijd vinden zij houvast in hun eigen geloof en vertrouwen in God, wat een spanning blootlegt tussen hun plichtsbef en de autonomie van hun kinderen.

Het Perspectief van de Millennials

Interviews met millennials tonen een fundamentele ambiguïteit aan in hun religieuze opvoeding. Enerzijds was de algemene opvoedingsstijl vaak warm en dialogisch, anderzijds was de religieuze opvoeding autoritair: kerkgang en geloofspraktijken waren verplicht en niet onderhandelbaar. Dit leidde tot een associatie van geloof met dwang en regels, in strijd met hun behoefte aan autonomie.

Daarnaast ervaren millennials ambiguïteit in de geloofsbeleving van hun ouders. De nadruk lag sterk op cognitief geloven (kennis van leer en regels), terwijl het affectieve aspect

– wat het geloof persoonlijk betekende, vooral in moeilijke tijden – nauwelijks zichtbaar was. Hierdoor werd geloof ervaren als cultuur en traditie, en niet als een levende relatie.

Deze opvoedingsdynamiek beïnvloedde het Godsbeeld van de millennials. Met behulp van hechtingstheorie laat het onderzoek zien dat velen kenmerken van een onveilige, vaak vermijdende hechtingsstijl ontwikkelden. Het beeld van God weerspiegelde regelmatig het beeld van de ouders: veeleisend, afstandelijk en normatief. Ingrijpende levensgebeurtenissen versterkten dit, vooral wanneer ouders zelf weinig ruimte boden voor het laten zien van hun kwetsbaarheid.

De kerkelijke en schoolse context bevestigden dit beeld. Het dominante paradigma ten aanzien van RS kan worden samengevat als ‘behave, belief, belong’: correct gedrag en juiste overtuigingen waren voorwaarden om erbij te horen. Dit werd ervaren als exclusief en veroordelend, met weinig ruimte voor existentiële vragen en diversiteit. GKv-jongeren ervoeren daarbij vaker een cultuurshock bij confrontatie met de seculiere samenleving dan NGK-jongeren, doordat zij voornamelijk GKv-scholen bezochten.

Conclusie en discussie

De centrale conclusie luidt dat de visie op RS, die gekenmerkt werd door het paradigma ‘behave, belief, belong’ overheerste binnen deze kerkgenootschappen en van invloed was op de geloofsontwikkeling. Het cognitieve en het gedragsmatige aspect werden benadrukt, het affectieve aspect werd gemist. Dit leidde tot ambiguïteit in opvoeding, een eenzijdig Godsbeeld en een ervaring van geloof als een cultuur. Dit werd als vervreemdend ervaren en hierdoor werd het doel van de RS, een relatie met God en medegelovigen ontwikkelen niet gehaald.

In de discussie wordt op basis van de resultaten een nieuw paradigma voorgesteld en wordt ingegaan op wat de mogelijke oorzaak kan zijn van het later zichtbaar worden van kerkverlating binnen de GKv en NGK ten opzichte van de RKK en PKN.

Wat betreft het nieuwe paradigma, kan er gedacht worden aan: ‘belong, bonding, belief’ voor. Onvoorwaardelijk erbij horen (belong) vormt de basis, gevolgd door affectieve verbinding en hechting, waaruit een persoonlijk en authentiek geloof kan groeien. Behave wordt hierin niet genoemd, omdat dit gezien kan worden als ‘de vrucht van de Geest’ die tot uiting komt als men Christus heeft leren kennen (belief). Dit vraagt om gezinnen en geloofsgemeenschappen die niet alleen het cognitieve, maar eveneens het affectieve benadrukken. En die niet ‘behave’ voorwaardelijk stellen voor ‘belong’ maar uitgaan van het voorbeeld dat de Here Jezus ons laat zien in de wijze waarop Hij zijn discipelen oproept om Hem te volgen.

Wat betreft het later optreden van kerkverlating binnen de GKv en de NGK ten opzichte van de Gereformeerde kerken (de voorloper van de Protestantse Kerken in Nederland) kan de oorzaak gezocht worden in de wijze waarop kerken omgaan met veranderingen binnen de maatschappij, en het meer of minder aandacht hebben voor het affectieve aspect van geloven. Hiernaar zal echter nader onderzoek plaats moeten vinden om volledige helderheid te verkrijgen.

Als laatste volgen een aantal aanbevelingen voor praktijk en nader onderzoek voor ouders, kerkelijke werkers en scholen.

Afsluitend kan gesteld worden dat 'Geboeid door de tijd' niet betekent dat kinderen van God vastzitten aan de kernwaarden van de tijd waarin ze geplaatst zijn. Voor hen geldt dat ze gebonden zijn aan de kernwaarde Liefde. Deze kernwaarde is van alle tijden en plaatsen, en geldt tot de wederkomst van Christus.

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Appendixes

1. Call for parents in the church magazine
2. Letter from church disaffiliates
3. Construction questionnaire parents (3A) and millennials (3B)
4. Focus group programme
5. Consent form
6. Topic list for individual interviews

Appendix 1: Call for parents in the church magazine



Why are millennials leaving the church?

Since 1976, 10,000 members of the GKv and 7,000 members of the NGK have left the church with their destination unknown.

Shocking figures, yes, but what does this statement do to us? Do we do something about it? Or do we care and move on?

Those who do care and do not just move on are the parents, grandparents, and relatives. They are left with a grief that is difficult to discuss within church congregations and to which little attention is paid. But the church leavers themselves are also troubled: they have not met the expectations of their parents/family, and it pains them to have caused them grief.

High time to ask the question: why do young people leave the church they grew up in without joining another church or group, and what can the church do to reverse this trend? Now this question has been asked several times, yet there is still no clear explanation as to why it is happening so massively in our time. Especially among young people, but also among older members.

In order to answer this question about church disaffiliation among those in their twenties and thirties within the GKv and NGK, a survey has been launched that would like to hear, above all, the **story** of church abandoners and their parents. What do they themselves say about this decision? Why do they no longer feel at home within the community in which they grew up? What was the process of leaving like?

The first step within this research is to listen to the parents' story. Why do they think their child, grandchild or family member left the church or is on the way to leaving the church? Then the parents' story becomes our story: the story of the church.

If you are a parent of children in the 20-40 age group and would like to share your story on this topic, you are cordially invited to our church building **on 21 January 2020**. The meeting starts at 7.30 pm and will conclude around 10 pm. To know how many people will attend, it is important that you sign up by 18 January 2020 with the researcher, Anja Moesker, by e-mail, mentioning Research Church Abandonment. Should you, after 18 January, realise that you forgot to respond, you are just as welcome.

Just so you know: you will be taking part in research conducted under the supervision of Theological University Apeldoorn. Certain rules apply. If you have registered, you will receive

a questionnaire with some short informative questions, which you can fill in and return in advance. Your answers to the questions will be processed confidentially and anonymously and will only be available for inspection by the researcher. You will also receive a form, which, by signing, gives you permission for the anonymous use of your data and the recording of video and audio fragments. These recordings can only be listened to and viewed by those involved in the study and will be destroyed after the study is completed.

The church council sincerely hopes that you will cooperate in this. Sharing our stories is very valuable in finding answers to this question.

For more information about this research, please contact Anja Moesker by email: a.a.moesker@gmail.com or tel: 06 47768009.

Appendix 2: Letter to church disaffiliators



Apeldoorn, January 2020

Dear

Wanted: young people who grew up in the GkV or NGK and no longer go to church.

According to statistics, there are many of them. But since statistics do not show why people leave, nor how that process happens, I would like to talk to you about this. I am doing research on church disaffiliation and am therefore curious to know why you no longer go to church and how the process of letting go went.

By church disaffiliation, I mean:

Some church leavers speaking:²

- *It was not what you felt that mattered, but what you were supposed to feel!*
- *More and more often I found it difficult to sit through a service and actually wanted to leave halfway through, or get up to give a rebuttal to the man in the pulpit...*
- *And then all this fuss about church fringe issues: all this focus on people with too small a world.... Surely we should have focused more on Jesus!*
- *As a child, I noticed little passion. It seemed like churchgoers thought they were carrying God neatly folded up in their Sunday pocket.*

Do you recognise yourself in this? Or did you stop going to church for other reasons?

I would love to hear your story.

This survey is being conducted among parents and children. The first meeting with one or both of your parents has already taken place, and it is through them that I am now trying to get in touch with you.

By interviewing people in their twenties and thirties, I would like to find out why young people like you have lost contact with the church. It is a scientific study, under the supervision of Apeldoorn Theological University. This means that certain rules apply.

The first, possibly very important for you: there is no hidden agenda. My interest is genuine and respectful. To put it very clearly, it is not my intention to talk you back into the church. I

² These quotes are from the booklet: *Vrijgemaakt? Dertigers over het leven in een gereformeerde zuil* (People in their thirties on life in a Reformed pillar, Lammert Kamphuis).

just want to know what motives have led to why you no longer attend church. Of course, I do want the church to do something with your comments in the future, and for congregations to learn from them.

A second rule is that the results from the interview will be processed entirely according to the General Data Protection Regulation (i.e., anonymously). Nobody but me and a co-researcher has access to what you say. During the study and after the study is over, all data and files are kept securely and destroyed after 10 years.

My question to you is:

Are you willing to participate in this? If so, I would love to hear from you or your parents.

I will be delighted if you participate!

Kind regards, Anja Moesker

Tel: 055 -8441914 or 06 47768009. E-mail: a.a.moesker@gmail.com

Appendix 3: Structure of questionnaire for parents (a) and millennials (b)

A questionnaire will be presented to parents and millennials before the group interview or interview. Its purpose is to collect name and address data and to take stock of characteristics of the church leaver, of the parental family and, if applicable, their own family.

The questionnaire is structured as follows:

Annex 3a: Parents

Section	Topic	Dimension	Question
Personal	Name + some general information	Age	1–9
		Church congregation	
		Children's details	
	Education	Type and identity of education followed	
	Generational characteristics	Intrusive event and its impact on worldview and faith.	
Parental family	Church involvement	Membership, Church attendance, activities	10–20
	Faith education	Own choices, talking about faith	
	Generational characteristics	Intrusive event and its impact on relationships	
	Church split	Its impact on family, relatives, friends	
Own family	Church involvement	Membership, church attendance, activities	21–31
	Faith education	Own choices, talking about faith	
	Influence of church disaffiliation by children on relationships	Influence of church disaffiliation on relationships within the family, with family, friends and church members	

Annex 3b: Millennials

Component	Theme	Dimension	Question
Personal	Name + some general information	Age	1-6
		Last Church congregation	
		Number of children in the parental family and your place in the family	
	Education	Type and identity of education followed, student association membership and identity of student association	
	Generational characteristics	Intrusive event and its impact on worldview and faith.	
Parental family	Family composition	Biological parents	7-15
	Church involvement	Membership, Church attendance, activities, tasks in the church	
	Faith education	Own choices, talking about faith	
Own family and situation now	Church involvement	Formal Membership, believing/not believing	16-26
	Partner	Church upbringing, faith	
	Values in upbringing	Values and norms	
	Influence of church disaffiliation by children on relationships	Influence of church disaffiliation on relationships within the family, with family, friends and church members	

Appendix 4: Focus group programme and rules for dialogue

	Section	Content	Who
19.30 u	Introduction	Welcome, and explanation of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of the meeting; • Rules for dialogue; • Video and audio recording, AVG; • Questionnaires and consent forms. 	Researcher
19.45 u	Expectations round	What do you expect from this evening? Possible adjustment of expectations.	Researcher
	Question 1	When you talk to another person about church disaffiliation and what is related to it, what themes, topics and thoughts do you share?	
20 u	Brainstorm about the theme	Write these in keywords on the Post-it notes and stick them on the flaps on the wall.	Researcher and assistant
20.25 u	Discuss flaps	Organise: Do we see certain themes in these?	
	Question 2	'What are your own experiences with your child's church disaffiliation?'	
20.45 u	Individual preparation storytelling	For this, there was first individual reflection, taking as an instruction: also think about what you <i>don't</i> want to tell and take into account your child's privacy.	Respondents
21 u	Telling stories	Everyone told their personal story	
21.45 u	Overall summary	Discuss yield in relation to expectations, report back, Request parents to ask their children to participate. An invitation letter for the children is available for this purpose (Annex 2).	Researcher and assistant
21.50 u	Debriefing and Prayer	Need a follow-up to this evening? Ideas are written down on a flap by the assistant.	Researcher and assistant
		Praying for each other	All
22.00 u	Closing	Thanks for the participation and trust	Researcher

Rules for dialogue

Rules are taken into account during the conversation:

- It is pleasant if we do not talk when another is talking: i.e. one person speaking at a time.
- All comments and answers are good.
- Tell your story in your own words.
- Feel free to respond to each other through clarifying questions, such as: Did I understand correctly that you mean this? Can you tell me more about...?
- As participants, we tell each other personal things. We therefore agree that what is said stays within the group.
- Please turn off phones.
- We keep the meeting informal, grab coffee or tea if you feel like it.

Appendix 5: Consent form

Participant consent form

Church disaffiliation among millennials from the GKv and NGK

Theological University Apeldoorn

Researcher: Anja Moesker MSc, Boswachtersveld 202, 7327 JS Apeldoorn.

Tel: 06 47768009/055-8441914

Supervisor: Prof. A. de Muynck

Co-supervisor: Dr P. M. Sonnenberg

Name:

- I have been sufficiently informed about this research by means of an oral explanation and a letter. My questions have been adequately answered.
- I know that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw my consent at any time during the study. I do not have to give a reason for doing so.
- I know that if I withdraw, my data can be used until then, unless I also ask for the data already collected to be deleted. This can only be done if it does not harm the research.
- I consent to the collection, retention and use of my data to answer the research question in this study.
- I know that some people may have access to my collected data, only to check the scientific integrity of the research.
- I can access my data and have full access to how my data is processed and stored.
- I know that video and/or audio recordings will be made of the meetings necessary for the study. These will only be used for the study, will be kept securely for the duration of the study and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

I give

yes

no consent to the making of image and/or sound recordings to be used solely for this study

- I wish to participate in this study and know that my data will be processed in the report completely anonymously.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date: __/__/__

I, the researcher, declare that I have fully informed this participant about the said study.

If any information becomes known during the study that could affect the participant's consent, I will inform them in a timely manner.

Name of researcher (or their representative): Anja Moesker

Signature:

Date: __/__/__

Appendix 6: Topic list for individual interviews

	Stage interview	Content
1	Introduction	<p>Explanation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who am I? • Why am I doing this? • How do I do this: image and audio recording, AVG, Data Management; questionnaires and consent forms. • Explanation of life stages and contexts.
2	Interview	<p><i>'Tell your story about your experiences with faith and church as a child, adolescent and young adult?'</i></p> <p>You can tell your own story about your experiences with faith and church. If you start with an event you remember as a child related to faith and church, what do you think about?</p> <p>Just talk, I'll make sure all three contexts and life stages are addressed.</p>
	Topics	Family: family relationships, communication, parenting style, church involvement, intrusive events, God-image, faith experiences.
		Church: Sunday, youth work, activities, role models, communication
		Influence of school on faith development, communication, role models, friends, and intrusive events
3	Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pseudonym • member checking • if I want to know anything else, I can call/mail you • thank you for your trust

Dankwoord (acknowledgements in Dutch)

Terugkijkend op een langdurig project als dit onderzoekstraject beseft ik dat ik heel veel te danken heb aan de mensen die tijdens dit traject op mijn pad kwamen. Hoewel vrijwel iedereen die met een PhD-traject bezig is, zal erkennen, en zeker de buitenpromovendi, dat het een eenzaam traject is, toch zijn er meer mensen bij betrokken dan je soms ervaart en voelt. Ook hier is verschil tussen het cognitieve en affectieve aspect te bespeuren.

Ik typeer dit traject vaak als een verrassingstocht. Er waren zoveel momenten dat ik verbaasd en verrast was over datgene wat ik ervaren had, over onverwachte ontmoetingen en gesprekken.

De eerste grote verrassing was dat ik ervaarde dat mensen binnen de Theologische universiteiten van Apeldoorn en Kampen en de Protestantse Universiteit open stonden voor een informatief gesprek met een oudere dame over een mogelijk onderzoekstraject zoals dit. Ze trokken er tijd voor uit, ze gaven me ideeën en deden alsof het heel normaal was dat ik dit graag wilde doen. Terwijl ik hen zelf soms met enige schroom benaderde. Ik denk nu aan Benno en Berdine van den Toren, Bram de Muynck en Ronelle Sonnenberg. Ze zagen het belang in van dit onderzoek en gaven me het zelfvertrouwen om dit aan te pakken. Heel hartelijk dank daarvoor.

De tweede verrassing was dat ik tijdens de Covidpandemie dit onderzoek als een geschenk ervaren heb. Niet vanaf het begin, maar gaandeweg ervaarde ik dat ik alle rust en tijd had om literatuurstudie te doen, om alvast wat concepten en gedachten te beschrijven. Dus het gebrek aan sociale contacten en de vertraging die hierdoor in de planning van het onderzoek optrad, werden gecompenseerd doordat ik de rust en de tijd had om te kunnen studeren.

Een volgende verrassing was dat dit kwalitatieve onderzoek zijn eigen 'loop' ging. Het project stuurde zichzelf: de data stuurden zowel de onderzoeksvragen, de literatuurstudie, als de keuze voor analysemethodiek. Ik zal niet zeggen dat ik 'erbij stond en ernaar keek', maar het verloop was heel verrassend en ik heb er veel van geleerd. Vooral ten aanzien van de literatuurstudie. Het bracht me verblijdende, maar ook confronterende verrassingen.

Verrassend waren ook de conclusies: bijvoorbeeld de ambiguïteit in de opvoeding, de mogelijke invloed van een onveilige hechting, de invloed van indringende gebeurtenissen op de opvoedingsstijl. Dit zijn punten voor nader onderzoek, maar ze verrasten me. Aangenaam als wetenschapper, omdat ik dit nog niet was tegengekomen in de literatuur. Minder aangenaam als moeder van kerkverlaters, die veel van haar eigen gedrag hierin herkende.

Wat eveneens verrassend was, waren de contacten met andere promovendi van de TUA. Ieder met zijn/haar eigen 'aardigheden'. De ontmoetingen tijdens de graduate week met zijn inspirerende bijeenkomsten, maar eveneens hilarische momenten. Het waren momenten om nooit te vergeten. De gesprekken met al die verschillende collega's, ieder zo enthousiast over zijn/haar onderzoeksonderwerp. Onvergetelijk is ook de verkleedpartij onder leiding van Rosy Samuels: voor de afsluitingsbijeenkomst van de graduate week werden Fianne de With en ik in Indiase sari's gehesen, en Rianne Binnenmars ging in Nepalese kleding. Wij, vrouwen van de TUA, vonden zelf dat we daarmee een kleurrijk contrast vormden met de vele keurige kostuums. Ondanks dat we de enigen waren die dit in dit kader plaatsten, verschaftte het ons veel genoeg. Fantastische herinneringen.

Verrassend is, zoals ik in de intro al benoem, dat er zoveel mensen betrokken zijn geweest bij dit traject. Het is onmogelijk allen te benoemen, zonder iemand te vergeten. Daarom beperk ik me tot een paar die me geholpen hebben op wat voor manier dan ook.

Allereerst de respondenten, ouders als volwassen kinderen, die meededen aan dit onderzoek. Uiteraard was zonder jullie belangeloze medewerking dit onderzoek niet mogelijk geweest. Maar jullie hebben me veel gebracht. Ik herinner me dat ik na afloop van de eerste focusgroep naar huis reed en helemaal onder de indruk was van wat er gebeurd was op die avond. Ik voelde me gezegend dat ik door dit onderzoek voor jullie een mogelijkheid gecreëerd had om over een kwetsbaar onderwerp als dit te spreken met elkaar. De behoefte eraan was groot en ik vond het bijzonder dat ik daaraan mocht meewerken.

Dan Elnathan Schaeffer en Wietse Lamberink. Elnathan, die mij hielp met het bemeesteren van het programma Zotero. Hartelijk dank daarvoor Elnathan. Ik bemeester dit programma nog steeds niet, maar samen hebben we wel het doel bereikt dat de artikelen voorzien werden van de juiste citeringsstijl. Daarbij eveneens geholpen door Wietse Lamberink, die ik zie als de Zotero-specialist van de TUA. Wietse, je stond altijd klaar bij een noodkreet, en hielp me als het maar even kon. En je vond een luisterend oor bij mij, als oma, voor de verhalen over je prachtige dochter! Voor beiden geldt: ik bewaar goede herinneringen aan onze ontmoetingen.

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Afsluitend, ik heb dit traject als een verrassingstocht ervaren. De verrassingen waren soms bemoedigend en verblijdend, soms confronterend. Van beide heb ik geleerd. Ik hoop met heel mijn hart dat de uitkomsten van dit onderzoek ten goede mogen komen aan de jongeren binnen de gemeenten, en dat wij allen, oud en jong binnen de gemeenten, mogen onderscheiden waarop het aankomt in dit leven, namelijk de liefde voor God en de medemens. Liefde, de enige kernwaarde die van waarde is.

Curriculum Vitae

Following secondary education, Anja Moesker (Uithuizen, 1952) took a teacher training course N12 in Groningen, after which she obtained her MO-B certificate N18 in Wageningen. After two years working as a teacher of nutritional science at the Dietetics course in Groningen, she left education for several years to devote herself to her family and missionary work. In 1990, after a 9-year stay in South Africa, where her husband did missionary work in KwaZulu-Natal, she returned to education, teaching Health Education at the VMBO in Hattem. In 2000, she started teaching at the MBO in Ede as a Health Education teacher at the Pedagogical Work programme. In 2006, she became an education officer with the task of professionalising teachers. For herself, this led to a Master's degree in Educational Design and Consultancy at Utrecht University, where she obtained her Master's Degree of Science in 2011. Since 2019, after retirement, she followed a PhD track at Apeldoorn Theological University.

Anja Moesker is married to Piet Busstra, and together they have three daughters and a son, four children-in-law and seven beautiful grandchildren. They live in Apeldoorn.