

Surprised by Abundance

*A Study of Prevalent Theological Views on the Missional Calling
of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands
in Intercultural Dialogue with the Underpinning Theology of the
Missional Community of St.Martin-in-the-Fields in London*

Master Thesis

Author: Ruth Six

Student number: 1700529

Missiology

Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam

17 June 2023

Supervisor: Benno van den Toren

Wordcount: 24611 words

Preface

As long as I can remember, I have felt the calling to share with others the faith in the transformational presence of Christ. It was the reason I started studying Theology and why I got involved with the missional movement of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. However, I struggled and stumbled on how to speak and act in such a way that the people around me could understand and see how the presence of Christ also touches their life. And to be honest, I also struggled to explain myself why this transformation of Christ was so important and what it entailed.

In Autumn 2022, I did an internship at St.Martin-in-the-Fields in London, which deeply influenced my theology and faith. I was moved by the inviting testimony of faith that emanated from the various practices of this church. The way the systematic-theological reflection and these practices were interrelated in an enriching conversation, showed me how a theological understanding of the missional calling can contribute to a practice that entrusts and relies on God's activity. I was moved by the living faith in Christ, the importance attached to His coming into the world, and the confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit. I was also struck by the spirituality and prayer life, which constantly sought God's guidance. It resonated with my own desire to live so close to the living Christ that my arms are wide open for the whole world.

In contrast to my experiences in Dutch churches, my time in London was noticeably different. In this light, I noticed in the Dutch church a reluctance to formulate coherent theological principles on the missional calling of the church in context. Furthermore, I observed hesitation to root the missional practices of the church in a living faith in the transformation of Christ.

In my thesis, I aimed to theologically develop my intuition that the insights I received in London can be of relevance for the reflection and practice of the missional calling of the church in The Netherlands. In the process of writing, my intuitions and thoughts were indeed deepened, and new insights arose. To offer a glimpse of what is yet to come, it was only at the end of the writing process, I realised how the tension I observed in the context of the Dutch Protestant Church between trusting in God's movement in the context on the one hand, and the desire to proclaim the transforming power of Christ to the context on the other hand, does not have to be perceived as a tension at all. In fact, I realised in conversation with the theology of SMITF how these two dimensions can be perceived as inherently relating in the dynamic of the same Trinity. This insight has deepened my first intuitions in a surprising way.

I would have never accomplished writing this thesis without all the living conversations with friends, family, teachers and strangers in which my theological insights could be questioned and developed. Furthermore, it was a remarkable opportunity to collaborate with Tim Vreugdenhil to create an Amsterdam Version of the Being With course, underpinned by the theology of SMITF. It moved me how in this course the theological insights I researched for this thesis, became a reality during the conversations with the people of Amsterdam who dared to experimentally explore the role of Christianity in their lives. I am thankful for everything that I received on my journey that made the writing of this thesis not a lonely road, but embedded in communal life.

I would like to conclude with the words of a sermon delivered by Sam Wells on the calling of the church, preached during my internship at St.Martin-in-the-Fields¹:

“One theologian calls Jesus the impossible possibility. I believe we follow Jesus by together seeking to become an impossible possibility – impossible because no one ever sees a community that combines commerce, culture, compassion and congregational life, impossible because everyone right now has their head down looking sad, impossible because we’re human beings who get things wrong and annoy one another and shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves; but a possibility because Christ was raised from the dead, a possibility because the Holy Spirit transformed the dispirited disciples at Pentecost, a possibility because nothing is impossible with God.”

¹ Wells, Sam. “What Are We Really Trying to Do?” 6 November 2022. <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/what-are-we-really-trying-to-do/>

I believe this community is called to be an impossible possibility. We're called to soar up amid disillusionment and despair like Job saying, 'I know that my Redeemer lives.' We're called to be a living, breathing miracle. Let's do it together. Let's live into that dream. Let's be a community of resurrection. Let's embody the impossible possibility."

This hope and trust in God's impossible possibility, deeply touched me. It is this hope and trust which has grown in me, while writing this thesis. It is a foundation that has transformed my desires to express the Christian narrative right, into open eyes for Gods company in the people and world around me and has deepened the belief that Jesus Christ is alive. It was a gift along my journey, I was surprised by the abundance of God.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Chapter One Introduction: The Theological Underpinning of the Missional Calling of the Church | 6 |
| 1.1 Introduction to the Research | 6 |
| 1.2 Justification and Purpose | 7 |
| 1.3 Research Question and Sub-questions | 7 |
| 1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework..... | 7 |
| 1.3.1 An Intercultural Approach..... | 7 |
| 1.3.2 A Contextual Perspective: Missional Engagement as a Prophetic Dialogue..... | 8 |
| 1.3.3 A Soteriological Perspective: The Why of Mission | 9 |
| 1.3.4 The Theological Discourse on the Missional Calling of the PKN..... | 9 |
| 1.3.5 The Underpinning Theology of the Missional Community of SMITF..... | 10 |
| 1.4 An Initial Exploration | 12 |
| Chapter Two The Theological Discourse on the Missional Calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands | 13 |
| 2.1 Introduction..... | 13 |
| 2.2 An Evaluation of the Vision Document of the PKN..... | 13 |
| 2.3 Three <i>Basic</i> Missiological Themes..... | 14 |
| 2.3.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context..... | 14 |
| 2.3.2 Underpinning Soteriology..... | 14 |
| 2.3.3 Missional Engagement..... | 15 |
| 2.4 A Missional Analysis of Stefan Paas | 15 |
| 2.5 Roest’s Proposal of a Contextualized Gospel for the West | 18 |
| 2.6 Soteriological Beliefs amongst Dutch Protestants Ministers | 21 |
| 2.7 An Initial Exploration of the Theological Questions around the Missional Calling of the PKN ... | 22 |
| 2.7.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context..... | 22 |
| 2.7.2 Soteriological Perspectives | 22 |
| 2.7.3 Missional Engagement..... | 23 |
| Chapter Three | 24 |
| The Contextualized Soteriology of St.Martin-in-the-Fields | 24 |
| 3.1 Introduction..... | 24 |
| 3.2 A Heart on the Edge..... | 24 |
| 3.3 The Theological Work of Wells | 24 |
| 3.3.1 Four Modes of Engagement..... | 25 |
| 3.3.2 The Human Predicament | 25 |
| 3.3.3. Being With as the Essence of the Trinity..... | 26 |
| 3.3.4 Jesus as the Purpose of the Universe | 26 |
| 3.3.5 The Work of the Holy Spirit | 27 |
| 3.3.5 The Missional Calling of the Church..... | 27 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 3.4 The Being With Course | 29 |
| 3.5 Conclusion | 30 |
| 3.5.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context..... | 30 |
| 3.5.2 Soteriological Perspective..... | 31 |
| 3.5.3. Missional Engagement..... | 31 |
| Chapter 4 The Unfolding of an Intercultural Conversation..... | 33 |
| 4.1 Introduction..... | 33 |
| 4.2 An Initial Exploration of the Intercultural Conversation..... | 33 |
| 4.3 An Intercultural Perspective on the Missional Calling of the Church | 34 |
| 4.3.1 The theological appreciation of the context..... | 34 |
| 4.3.2 The Soteriological Underpinning of Missional Engagement..... | 35 |
| 4.3.3 What Missional Engagement Enfolds out of the Theological Underpinning? | 38 |
| 4.4 Moving to a Conclusion..... | 39 |
| Conclusion | 40 |
| Works Cited | 44 |
| Declaration Sheet Master’s Thesis | 47 |
| Data Management Plan..... | 48 |

Chapter One

Introduction: The Theological Underpinning of the Missional Calling of the Church

1.1 Introduction to the Research

In post-secular Western Europe, churches are seeking (new) forms of missional engagement with their surrounding context. These practices vary greatly, both in terms of the concrete form of engagement as the theological reflection upon it.² This also applies to perspectives on the missional calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Broadly shared is the conviction that the church must play a role in the surrounding context. Less clear is what this role should entail and how it can be motivated theologically.³

This thesis aims to enhance the theological discourse on the missional calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (hereinafter referred to as PKN). Employing an intercultural approach, I seek to introduce a perspective from another context to provide a contrasting experience that sheds light on the PKN context. This will be the contextualized soteriology of the missional community St. Martin-in-the-fields (hereinafter referred to as SMITF), a church situated in Central London. Last year, I did an internship at this church. My experiences there contrasted with my former experiences in my church context in the PKN and have deeply influenced my theological thought. It has deepened my understanding of Christ and has influenced my perspective on the missional calling of the church.⁴

SMITF's missional practice is informed by a systematic-theological reflection on the missional calling of the church. In short, it is grounded in the theological assumption of God's reconciling work in the world, driven by the divine desire to be *with* us. The theological notion of the incarnation, as God's eternal longing to become part of human existence, has a central role.⁵ This incarnational theology, mostly developed by their vicar and academic theologian Samuel Wells, informs the view on the church, on its relationship to the context and, in consequence, the formulation of the missional calling.

The theology and practices of SMITF has gotten attention in the broader church. Therefore, SMITF initiated HeartEdge, an international and ecumenical church renewal movement that seeks "to galvanise churches in their own contexts to reimagine themselves and society".⁶

In the Netherlands, HeartEdge is getting attention in various parts of the church, and a Dutch branch of the movement is emerging. Alongside enthusiasm to seek how the ideas of HeartEdge can renew Dutch churches, there seems to be some unclarity on how this renewal in the Dutch church could look like.⁷ In my opinion, this has to do with an insufficient understanding of the theology underpinning HeartEdge as well as an unclear insight into the typical theological and contextual characteristics of the Netherlands. When a church wants to engage with HeartEdge and let it shape its theological vision on missional engagement with the context, the aforementioned problems have to be addressed.

² Paas, Stefan. "Missional Christian Communities in Conditions of Marginality: On Finding a 'Missional Existence' in the Post-Christian West." *Mission Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2021, 145.

Paas, Stefan, Sake Stoppels, and Karen Zwijze-Koning. "Ministers on Salvation: Soteriological Views of Pioneers and Pastors in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands". *Journal of Empirical Theology*.

Dijkstra-Algra, N., and S. Stoppels. *Back to Basics: Zeven cruciale vragen rond missionair kerk-zijn*. Boekencentrum, 2017.

³ Stoppels, "Heil zien in missionaire initiatieven. Een zoektocht naar de theologie achter nieuwe vormen van geloofsgemeenschap," *Lezing CHE 'Zingeving in (geloofs)gemeenschappen'*, 2019, 30-32.

⁴ In the report of this internship, I reflect more extensively on my experiences, in the fourth chapter I will shortly come back to this report. The report is available on request.

⁵ Van Driel, Edwin Chr. "Sharing in Nature or Encountering a Person: A Tale of Two Different Supralapsarian Strategies." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2022, 205.

⁶ Wells, Samuel. *A Future That's Bigger than the Past: Catalysing Kingdom Communities*. Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019, 3-23.

⁷ Zonnenberg, Chaim, Vermeulen, Wim. "HeartEdge krijgt voet aan de grond". *Woord en dienst*, januari 2023, 12-13.

1.2 Justification and Purpose

In this study, I aim to gain a deeper comprehension of the underpinning theology of the missional calling of the PKN through an investigation of the theology underpinning the missional community of SMITF.

The present study aims to be relevant for the PKN since this study will provide a better understanding of the theology informing the local missional engagement with the context. This will be relevant especially for those churches already interested in HeartEdge. Furthermore, the study will be of use in broader field of intercultural research to the missional calling of the. Moreover, this thesis will be of use to the wider society, since the theological issues of this thesis concern precisely the message and the value of the church for the wider society.

1.3 Research Question and Sub-questions

In which ways can the contextualized soteriology of the missional community of St.Martin-in-the-Fields enhance a prevalent theological discourse on the missional calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands?

1. Which theological questions arise from a critical evaluation of the theological discourse on the missiological calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, as prevalent in the work of Stoppels, Roest, and Paas?
2. How do the theological appreciation of the context and the soteriological assumptions of St.Martin-in-the-Fields shape their missional engagement with the context?
3. In which ways can the research on the underpinning theology of the missional community of St. Martin-in-the-Fields offer new insights and deepen the theological discourse concerning the missional calling in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands?

1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

1.3.1 An Intercultural Approach

As introduced, this study can be placed in the discipline of intercultural theology. The project of intercultural theology has developed from a growing awareness of the cross-cultural dynamics which emerge out of the reciprocal interaction between diverse local churches and their theology all over the world.⁸ Intercultural theologians underline the paradigm of contextual theology, which reveals that all aspects of theology are inherently contextually shaped.⁹ However, it is assumed that, although contexts are plural, a Christian centre or a transcultural truth can still be found. Although this centre cannot be formulated in a once-and-for-all form, it is claimed that an intercultural transformation process can bring about a surplus of meaning in the understanding of this centre.¹⁰

This claim is not equally evident in all expressions of intercultural theology. Furthermore, it is debated how a trustworthy understanding should be formulated.¹¹ This thesis, however, aligns with the claim that it is possible to get in an intercultural conversation a deeper understanding of the transcultural reality of God.¹² In this intercultural approach, the hermeneutical community of the one universal church is seen as a transformational space, in which a reciprocal process of negotiating the differences among different contexts can lead to a surplus of meaning. This surplus of meaning does, in the words of Van

⁸ Gruber, Judith. *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018, 41.

⁹ Van den Toren, "Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation: Beyond the Western Dominance of Intercultural Theology." *Exchange* 44, 2015, 2.

¹⁰ Van den Toren, "Three-way Conversation", 4.

¹¹ An alternative approach, in which language is formulated in relativistic terms, focused on the interaction of stories, including the Christian story: Küster, Volker. "Het project interculturele theologie: Een analyse en plaatsbepaling in het debat over christelijk geloof en cultuur". In: *Wereld en zending*, no. 3, 2004, 70-83.

¹² See the interpretation of Van den Toren and Gruber: Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 45-50; Van den Toren, Benno. "Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?" *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, edited by Rob Haskell and Matthey Cook, WEA, Pasadena, California, 2010, 91-108.

den Toren, refer to the “supra-cultural reality of God which revealed himself in the trans-cultural Christ”.¹³

So, in doing theology interculturally, Christians and theologians can, in conversation with other contexts, receive a different perspective on their contextual theology.¹⁴ To indicate this intercultural encounter, Van den Toren coined the term ‘contrast experience’, understood as “a trigger that prompts us to explore certain aspects of cultural, social, or religious settings to work out how they shape, enrich, and possibly distort the theological understanding and religious practices of ourselves and others.”¹⁵ This concept aligns with the intercultural approach. Furthermore, this concept of contrast experience aligns with my own experiences in another cultural context, during my internship at SMITF.

Schroeder and Bevans, influential authors in the academic discipline of missiology, talk about six constants in mission to understand the constitutive theological assumptions among different forms of mission in different contexts.¹⁶ The six constants are: (1) the centrality of Christ and implicitly the centrality of Trinitarian faith; (2) the importance of the communal or ecclesial nature of mission; (3) the connection between missionary reflection and practice and a person's or community's eschatological vision; (4) a person's or a community's conviction about the nature of salvation; (5) the perspective on the nature of humanity, or anthropology; and (6) the appreciation or suspicion of culture.¹⁷ The theological interpretation of these constants varies amongst cultural contexts.

In this thesis, I will group these constants in two perspectives which structure the theological debate on the missional calling of the church as prevalent in this thesis. The first perspective is the question how a missional practice is informed by a certain theological appreciation of the context, mostly connected with the second, third and sixth constant of mission. The second perspective centres around the soteriological assumptions which inform the purpose of missional engagement in a context, mostly connected with the first, fourth and fifth constants.

1.3.2 A Contextual Perspective: Missional Engagement as a Prophetic Dialogue

The concept of Prophetic Dialogue, coined by Bevans and Schroeder, proves to be a helpful approach to reflect on different theological appreciations of the context. In their book *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Prophetic Dialogue is presented as the underlying framework for the understanding and practice of every form of Christian mission today.¹⁸ In this concept, two important aspects of the *Missio Dei* come together in their complementary interrelatedness. On the one hand, the *Dialogue*, which emphasizes the relational aspect of mission and refers to the importance of openness to discover another perspective in missional encounters. On the other hand, the concept of *Prophecy*, indicating the communication, with or without words, of a transformational perspective to redirect life into God or a denunciation of something contrary to the reign of God.¹⁹

According to Schroeder, building on the same trinitarian theology as intercultural theology, the concept of *Prophetic Dialogue* clarifies the necessary interplay of (1) the seeds of God's word in all cultures, and (2) the prophetic acknowledgment of those elements contrary to God's reign and blindness of God's movement in all cultures. In this way, he argues, the concept of *Prophetic Dialogue* can provide a framework for the practice of interculturality, in which the contextual tensions of missional engagement can become clear.²⁰

¹³ Toren, “Can We See Naked Theological Truth?”, 107-108.

¹⁴ Gruber, *Intercultural Theology*, 48.

¹⁵ Van den Toren, Benno. “Openness, Commitment, and Confidence in Interreligious Dialogue: A Cultural Analysis of a Western Debate.” In: *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2023, 3.

¹⁶ Bevans, Stephen, and Roger Schroeder. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. New York: Orbis Books, 2014.

¹⁷ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 22-24.

¹⁸ Bevans, Stephan, and Roger Schroeder. *Prophetic Dialogue: reflections on Christian Mission Today*, New York: Orbis Books, 2011.

¹⁹ Bevans, Stephen, Ross, Cathy, “Mission as Prophetic Dialogue”. In: *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*. New York: Orbis books, 2020.

²⁰ Schroeder, Roger. “Prophetic Dialogue and Interculturality”. In: *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*. New York: Orbis books, 2020, 162.

It is to clarify the theological positions on these tensions, for which I will build on the aforementioned concept of the Prophetic Dialogue. Although the concept of *Prophetic Dialogue* proves to be useful as a framework, the question remains what the content is of God's movement in the culture, both in the dialogical and prophetic sense. To answer this question, it is important to take the soteriological perspective into account.

1.3.3 A Soteriological Perspective: The Why of Mission

Soteriological assumptions of mission appear to be under pressure. Missiologist Stefan Paas speaks of a crisis of mission in the Secular West; the missional theology and spirituality are eroding. He argues that the church in Europe needs an "inspiring operational theology of salvation and a clear view of purpose".²¹ In contemporary missionary praxis in the West, there seems to be "little explicit soteriological reflection on the theoretical level and much soteriological insecurity on the ground".²² Paas shows how theological embarrassment, caused by suspicion of invalid soteriological doctrines, results in a reluctance of exploring alternative soteriological approaches.²³

Therefore, the intercultural conversation between the contextual theology of SMITF and a theological discourse on the missional call in the PKN will be approached with special attention to the underlying soteriology. In this way, I will engage in a systematic-theological reflection on mission, since soteriology has a place in dogmatics, a subfield within systematic theology.²⁴

The conclusions of the PhD-research of Philip Wall place these soteriological approaches in a broader perspective. Wall studied the relationship between soteriological and missiological assumptions on the one hand and the concrete practices of Fresh Expressions (FE) in England on the other hand.²⁵ His analysis provides an initial indication of why missiology and soteriology should be studied in their interrelatedness. Furthermore, Wall supports Paas' thesis that FE are not always developed out of an adequate soteriology and that soteriology and mission practices do not always align well.

Wall's theological analysis of a number of FE reveals the clash between missiological and soteriological foundations. He describes how FE, soteriological speaking, often focus on the transformation of the world and culture, a so-called *redemption-centered* perspective. However, missiological speaking, contextualization is central to pioneer communities, as they seek to align with what is happening in the culture and the world. This is based on a so-called *creation-centered* perspective. Wall observes a contradiction between these two perspectives, as FE strive to both align with and transform the culture.²⁶

As will be further elucidated in the second chapter, a similar tension seems to be at work in the discourse on the missional calling of the PKN. However, at SMITF, a fruitful interrelation between the two perspectives seems to be prevalent. Therefore, this thesis will examine the soteriological underpinnings of both contextual theologies in depth and investigate to what extent these two perspectives are presupposed in the missional practices and can potentially be developed further.

1.3.4 The Theological Discourse on the Missional Calling of the PKN

It is impossible to accomplish independent research to the prevalent missiological and soteriological underpinnings of all missiological practices of the PKN in the scope of this thesis. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the recent work of three Dutch Protestant theologians that provides a useful analysis of the theological assumptions underpinning the forms of missional engagement in a part of the PKN. This is the research of respectively Sake Stoppels, Stefan Paas and Gert-Jan Roest. These theologians study, also in interaction with each other, the missional situation in the West, with special attention to The Netherlands, since they originated there. They agree that this situation is characterized by a theological

²¹ Paas, "Conditions of Marginality", 142-143.

²² Paas, Stefan, and Hans Schaeffer. "Reconciled Community". *Ecclesiology* 17.3 (2021): 326-327.

²³ Paas, "Conditions of Marginality". 143-144.

²⁴ Roest, Gert-Jan. *The Gospel in the Western Context: A Missiological Reading of Christology in Dialogue with Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton*. Brill, 2019, 16-17,

²⁵ Wall, Philip R. "Salvation and the School of Christ: A theological-ethnographic exploration of the relationship between soteriology, missiology and pedagogy in fresh expressions of church." Thesis, King's College London, 2014, 14-20.

²⁶ Wall, "Salvation and the School of Christ," 38-39.

crisis and reflect upon the soteriological, missiological and contextual reasons for this crisis. I appreciate their attempts to address contextual and soteriological dilemmas to contribute to the reflection on new forms of church. Furthermore, these theologians are related to some of the main church-planting and church-renewal networks in the Netherlands. They reflect on these practices and their work is also well read by practitioners. Their research will be introduced shortly in the following paragraphs..

Stoppels, a lector of theology at the Christian University of Applied Sciences Ede (CHE), is mainly researching on pioneering and other manifestations of church renewal.²⁷ Furthermore, he was working as a policy advisor for the PKN, focusing on the missional calling of the Dutch church. In that context, he wrote some interesting studies on the theological assumptions of the vision of the PKN. Stoppels has conducted relevant research on the assumptions of pastors and pioneers in The Netherlands, in which he focuses on the necessity of answering soteriological questions behind church renewal movements.

Paas is a professor of Missiology and Intercultural Theology for the Vrije Universiteit (VU) and a professor of Missiology at the Theological University of Kampen/Utrecht (TUK). He is also the director of The Centre for Church and Mission in the West, a research unit of the TUK, which focuses on the sustainable innovation of the church and its mission in the secular parts of the world.²⁸ Paas writes mostly on the missional situation of the church in Western Europe, however, since he originated from the Netherlands, his analyses are deeply rooted in the Dutch context. He has worked himself as a pioneer in Amsterdam, which influenced his academic work. My analysis will centre on his latest articles in which he focuses on the formulation of an inspiring missional theology, with special attention to soteriology.

Roest is an assistant-professor of Missiology and researcher at the Centre for Church and Mission in the West. Equal to Stoppels, Roest works as a policy advisor for the PKN, focusing on the missional calling of the church. This thesis will mainly be focused on his PhD research, in which he proposes a contextualized gospel for the Western Context. In this, he studies the contextualized Christology of a Dutch reformed theologian and a British Theologian. Consequently, he analyses which theological questions should be considered when formulating a gospel for the West.

The analysis of the work of the three theologians will first be placed in the larger theological discussions on the missional calling of the PKN. I will reflect on the missional focus of the current vision document of the PKN for 2025 and refer to the book *Back to Basics*, written by Sake Stoppels and Nynke Dijkstra, two influential equippers of the missional movement in the PKN.²⁹ With their book *Back to Basics*, they aspire to stimulate theological reflection on basic questions which arise as a result of the missional focus of the vision document of the PKN.³⁰ They identify seven theological themes, specific to the Dutch context, which influence missional engagement.³¹

1.3.5 *The Underpinning Theology of the Missional Community of SMITF*

Directed by the uncovered theological questions on the missional calling of the PKN, the third chapter will analyse the underpinning theology of the missional community of SMITF as a contrast experience. I will do this by reflecting on the already existing conversation between theology and practice. This chapter can therefore be placed in the theological field that studies theology and practice in their interrelation. In his introduction of *Practical Theology*, Pete Ward stresses the importance of this relationship between theology and practice.³² He emphasizes that theology should not be studied

²⁷ Stoppels, “Heil zien in missionaire initiatieven”, 8-10.

²⁸ “About Us.” *The Centre for Church and Mission in the West*, www.churchandmission.nl. Accessed 12 May 2023.

²⁹ “Van U is de toekomst. Focus voor de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland op weg naar 2025”. Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk. Geraadpleegd 7 maart 2021. <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/thema/visionota-van-u-is-de-toekomst/>, 10.

³⁰ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 10-11.

³¹ Dijkstra and Stoppels. *Back to Basics*, 12.

³² Ward, Pete. *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church*. Baker Academic, 2017, 50.

separately from the community in which it emerges.³³ Therefore, he argues for methodological resources in which theology is seen as something located within a community's life.³⁴ In his inauguration speech on Intercultural Theology, Benno van den Toren also argues that theology has to come into real conversation with persons and communities of faith to understand them.³⁵ He suggests experimenting with participatory research and action research to create space for a creative interaction between theology and practice.³⁶ Following Ward and Van den Toren, I have chosen to analyse the theology and practices of SMITF in their interrelatedness. This also resonates with the already existing relationship between theology and practice in SMITF.

I will mainly engage with existing theological literature written by Wells, in which he reflects on the relationship between church and world from a systematic-theological perspective, while referring at the same time to his experiences as a vicar of SMITF. Wells has been vicar of SMITF since 2012. Before, he was working as a university chaplain and professor of Christian Ethics at Duke University. His theology is inspired by theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Rowan Williams. Wells characterizes his theological thinking as "generously orthodox", or "Trinitarian with Christ in the centre".³⁷ In his work, Systematic Theology and Ethics come together and fruitfully interact. According to Wells, it is not possible to make a divide between doctrine and ethics as such, since he considers both as coming out of the nature of God's trinitarian character and actions, as manifest in the incarnated reality.³⁸ Therefore, in his books, his systematic theology as the understanding of the nature of God's action, always comes together with concrete formulations of ethical consequences, as the answer of humans to this God in a given context. Wells focuses here on the context of the ecclesial community, as the body of people living and acting between God's revelation in Christ and the fulfilment of this revelation in the eschaton. This centrality of the concrete context is also based on the theological assumption that God abundantly gives everything needed to follow faithfully. Therefore, his work is often characterized as ecclesial ethics.³⁹ The following three books, in which his theological thoughts on the missional calling are described the most, are selected for the analysis; *A Nazareth Manifesto* (2015); *Incarnational Mission* (2018) and *A Future that's Bigger than the Past* (2019).

Subsequently, it will be explored how the theological ideas presented in the literature shape the missional practice of SMITF by looking at an example of a missional practice at SMITF; the *Being With* Course. This is an introductory course on the Christian faith, founded at SMITF.⁴⁰

In the last chapter, in which the two contextual theologies will be brought into conversation, some observations from my participative research at SMITF will be used as a further explication of the unfolding conversation.

The way SMITF functions as a contrast experience in this thesis allies with my own contrasting experiences during my internship at SMITF. According to Van den Toren, these experiences have to do with the *logic of discovery*, in which unquestioned assumptions and formerly hidden perspectives can be questioned.⁴¹ Appropriate for this logic of discovery is an appreciative listening attitude. While the PKN discourse will be critically analysed, I will adopt a more appreciative and humbler attitude to my analysis of SMITF. As Van den Toren has pointed out in his inaugural lecture on the value of contrast experiences for the understanding of the missional calling of the PKN, it is important to first use these

³³ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 65.

³⁴ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 66.

³⁵ Van den Toren, "Three-Way Conversation", 123–143.

³⁶ Van den Toren, "Three-way Conversation", 133.

³⁷ Paul, Herman, and Bart Wallet. *Oefenplaatsen: Tegendraadse theologen over kerk en ethiek*. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2012, 58. Furthermore, in the book *What Anglicans believe*, Wells explores the roots of the Anglican tradition. The work provides a background to understand Wells' theological assumptions and foundation: Wells, Samuel. *What Anglicans Believe: An Introduction*. Canterbury Press Norwich, 2011.

³⁸ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 15.

³⁹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 16.

⁴⁰ Wells, Samuel. *Being With: A Course Exploring Christian Faith and Life – Leaders' Guide*. Canterbury Press, 2022.

⁴¹ Van den Toren, "Openness, Commitment, and Confidence", 2.

experiences as a mirror for the own cultural context and see how another perspective has the strength to indeed give a deeper understanding of the missional calling of a church in their context.⁴²

1.4 An Initial Exploration

This chapter has introduced how SMITF's theological appreciation of its context and its theology can serve as a reflective mirror in which a specific theological discourse in the PKN on 1) the theological appreciation of the context and 2) the soteriological assumptions of missional engagement, can be questioned and formerly hidden internal tensions can be revealed. In the coming chapters, this will be elaborated in more detail. For now, to underline the significance of this study, I will end with two initial insights aroused by my contrasting experience at SMITF in relation to the Dutch missional situation.

First, at SMITF the confidence in God's eternal longing to relate to humanity to give them abundant life forms the ultimate basis on which the church understands and practices her missional calling. This results in a relaxed openness to the context, while at the same time, a strong commitment is present to the centrality of God's desire to be with us, and thus also to his dwelling among people and various contexts, not limited to the realm of the church. In the Dutch context this confidence often seems absent, instead, the church there feels it as her task to relate on behalf of God to the questions and problems they tend to see in their surrounding context. This responsibility can feel like a heavy burden. For SMITF, the context is not seen as a problem to be solved, but as a realm where God's moving can be found. This attitude of confidence is the basis for a real openness to the context, while at the same time a lively commitment to God is made.

This first insight has to do with my second initial insight, namely the centrality of the abundance in the context to discern God's movement and recognize the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Instead of focusing on the scarcity of the context, on the problems which need to be solved, SMITF aims to focus in all her different activities on the springs of God's abundance in all the different parts of the context. This does not mean that they recognize no difficulties, sins or problems. It illustrates that the focus should be on the abundance that God wants to give, especially in those moments in which a person is isolated from God, the other, the self or the world. This is contrasting to how in the Dutch context the church and her message are often presented as an antidote to the difficulties in the context.

With this thesis I aspire to, despite being critical of the Dutch context, contribute to a search for God's abundance in that context, trusting that it's God's eternal decision to relate to us and share his life of abundance.

⁴² Van der Toren, "Vertrouwen delen". 9-10.

Chapter Two

The Theological Discourse on the Missional Calling of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands

2.1 Introduction

As introduced in the previous chapter, this thesis aims to analyse the missional challenges in the PKN as prevalent in an existing, theological discourse. A discourse that presents the pressing theological dilemmas. In this second chapter, this discourse will be analysed and questioned. Towards the end of this chapter, I will formulate the pressing questions that have emerged from the analysis. These questions will guide the analysis of the theology underpinning the missional engagement of SMITF.

This chapter is structured as follows: First, the theological perspective on the missional calling of the PKN will be explored through a critical reading of the vision of the PKN. Next, specific theological themes which characterize the prevalent theological perspectives on the missional calling of the PKN will be distinguished, with reference to the book *Back to Basics*. Consequently, an analysis of the contributions of Stoppels, Paas and Roes will further clarify the prevailing theological perspective on mission in the PKN.

2.2 An Evaluation of the Vision Document of the PKN

The vision document of the PKN for 2025, gives insight into their theological position in general and more specifically, their understanding of the missional calling. Although it remains uncertain to what extent this vision is already practiced in local churches, the document provides insight into the church's theological assumptions. It is accepted as the guiding vision by the highest decision-making body of the PKN and therefore guiding for all local churches. Several points are worth noting:

Firstly, the vision places *grace as foundation*, as the focus of the church.⁴³ This life lived by grace, can be found in the spiritual and concrete unity with Christ, in the celebration of the liturgy in an ecclesial setting, as well as in a Christian lifestyle.⁴⁴ At the same time, the vision acknowledges that Christ can be found in unexpected places; when we encounter signs of God's truth, goodness, and beauty in the world around us. Therefore, both in the introduction and in the conclusion, it is stated that it is not, "Jesus is where the church is," but rather, "where Jesus is, there is the church."⁴⁵

Furthermore, the vision formulates the calling of the church as to be where the Spirit is at work and where Jesus can be found, in places both within and beyond ecclesiastical frameworks. Therefore, it is suggested to cooperate with non-ecclesial partners and find new ways to be engaged with the context.⁴⁶ This aligns with the theology of the *Missio Dei*.

However, what this work of the Spirit and Jesus entails, has in the vision document only been indicated with the abstract notions of truth, goodness and beauty. When it comes to a further explication of the engagement with the context, this is described as "being close and remaining with the other, even if it requires going far into the world of evil and suffering, where others fail".⁴⁷ Although the document claims that Christ can be found in unexpected places beyond the church, the further specification seems to place the work of Christ still in the church and sees the world as a place where Christ is absent. That also becomes clear in how the context is described. The vision states five undercurrents that describe the context, within and beyond the church. These currents are expressed in negative terms, such as "insecurity", "polarization", and "stress".⁴⁸ This raises the question if and how it is possible to discover in that world the presence of Christ in truth, goodness and beauty, formulated earlier on. As the vision

⁴³ "Van U is de toekomst", 21.

⁴⁴ "Van U is de toekomst", 24.

⁴⁵ "Van U is de toekomst", 11.

⁴⁶ "Van U is de toekomst", 33.

⁴⁷ "Van U is de toekomst", 8.

⁴⁸ This critique was also formulated on an earlier vision document of the PKN "Living out of wonder". In an article, Ariaan Baan shows how this document first presents the church as a critical ecclesial community that has to play a prophetic role in society, but in the remaining parts primarily focuses on the way the church needs to fruitfully relate to the context and solve the problems of this context. Baan, Ariaan. *Stanley Hauerwas en de PKN: Hoe leer je leven van de verwondering?*, 344 (341-353).c

itself states, addressing this challenge requires ongoing theological reflection on how to be church and an anchoring of the various new ways in which being church takes shape.

2.3 Three Basic Missiological Themes

In their book *Back to Basics*, Dijkstra and Stoppels initiate a theological discussion on seven pressing themes that shape the missional calling. I'll bring their analysis back to three interrelated themes and present them as a framework to place the analyses of Paas, Roest and Stoppels in a broader perspective. The first two correspond with the two theological perspectives already introduced in the first chapter, the theological evaluation of the context and the underpinning soteriology. The third theme relates to the practical missional form of engagement following these contextual and soteriological assumptions.

2.3.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context

Within the diverse theological and ecclesiological landscape in The Netherlands, there are varying theological views on how to appreciate the context theologically. This variation applies to the view on the context of the church as ecclesial community as well as to the view on the surrounding context and subsequently to the view on the interrelation of church and context. Stoppels and Dijkstra describe two dominant views in the PKN on the role of the church in mission: On the one hand, there is a perspective that relativizes the missionary role of the church and argues that the kingdom will start in the world. On the other hand, there is a view of the church as a crucial instrument of mission.⁴⁹ However, which view is dominant, depends on a theological position on precisely the point raised in our critical reading of the vision document: If the church is where Jesus is, *where is Jesus?* A position on where to find Jesus is often unclear, as will be developed in the theme of soteriology.

The authors connect these two dominant views with two theological perspectives, as also introduced in the first chapter. Influenced by a redemption-centered perspective, churches tend to focus more on the questions in society which need to be solved. This often comes together with a high view of the church as crucial missional instrument and a restricted view of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the context. There are also churches influenced by a creation-centered perspective, focusing on the abundance of God in the cultural context. However, the authors note that the explication of what this abundance entails is often lacking.⁵⁰ In this perspective, it seems to be difficult to formulate what is the added value of the church, not to mention the value of the Christian faith.

The authors note that churches aim to connect with the context and therefore they first want to know everything that is going on in their context and consequently find the right form to engage with this context. The critical point made here is that it becomes the central aim to be the most attractive player in the marketplace of relevant organisations for the good of the neighbourhood, whereas the theological underpinning is less decisive.⁵¹

The authors conclude that the aforementioned theological considerations are often implicit, lacking further deliberation on how their theological position affects their concrete missional practices. This results in their opinion to hesitation and unclarity on the message and subsequently the means of missional engagement.⁵²

2.3.2 Underpinning Soteriology

Different theological views on Jesus, who He is, why He is, when He is and how He interacts with reality, underpin aforementioned theological appreciations of the context. However, these soteriological assumptions often are not explicated and reflected on. Stoppels and Dijkstra bring the implicit views on soteriology that dominate missional engagement back to two prevalent perspectives:

- 1) *Salvation is exclusively in Christ*: The world and every human being is seen as broken and sinful. Only through Christ, this brokenness can be resolved. The authors align this view with the aforementioned redemption-centered perspective.⁵³
- 2) *Universal salvation through Christ as immanent liberation*: In this view, the surrounding world is

⁴⁹ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 90-91.

⁵⁰ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 92.

⁵¹ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 92.

⁵² Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 92.

⁵³ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 23-26.

valued positively. The world is God's world, and his work reaches further than churches and Christians. The authors align this view with the creation-centered perspective. In this perspective, salvation is placed in the immanent world. There is little mention of the reality of eternity and conviction in this model.

The authors point to the weaknesses of both positions and bring it back to the statement that the question who Jesus is, and what His work entails, must be further reflected on.⁵⁴

2.3.3 Missional Engagement

The third theme is the question what a theologically sound missional form of engagement with the context, with or without words, could look like. Stoppels and Dijkstra describe how on paper, in books and vision documents, there seems to be a new longing to spread faith. However, they note that in practice, churches are more hesitant, even resistant or allergic, when it comes to missional engagement.⁵⁵ Stoppels and Dijkstra name several factors on societal-, church- and personal levels that influence this attitude.

In society, they note an undercurrent of pessimism, marked by a mistrust in perspectives that evaluate the world positively.⁵⁶ Churches have difficulty to express the relevance of the message of Jesus for today.⁵⁷ And on a personal level, the authors note among believers a decline of personal faith in the transforming power of the Gospel in one's own personal life. Besides this, people are in general not used to talk about personal experiences and thoughts with others.⁵⁸

The aforementioned theological themes give an overview of the prevalent points of discussion on how the missional calling of the church is theologically underpinned in the PKN. These three themes are interrelated and cannot be understood independently. However, the themes will be used as a map of the landscape to see how the three theological voices central in this chapter deal with these missional themes.

2.4 A Missional Analysis of Stefan Paas

Paas argues that theology needs to rediscover a convincing theology of salvation which informs a clear goal of mission and can contribute to theological sensemaking of the secularization in the West.⁵⁹ He notes that soteriology in traditional Protestant theology in general and in the Evangelical movement in specific, tends to see salvation as a solution to an inner lostness, aside from time and space.⁶⁰ However, Paas argues that in practice, this spiritualization of soteriology is not appealing anymore to contemporary missionaries. Paas points to a theological shift in how salvation is understood, moving from an accent on "verbal proclamation of salvation in a world that needs redemption, towards mission as praxis in a world that is filled by God's grace".⁶¹ In this, the Christian community has to be a sign of the kingdom, a taste of God's presence through relationships and "holistic mission".⁶² However, Paas argues, this salvation narrative for mission in the West is not yet developed theologically and needs further exploration.⁶³

In two different articles, both published in 2021, Paas has proposed two preliminary drafts for an inspirational Christian soteriology.

In his first proposal, Paas searches for the soteriological ground of what he calls 'a missiological existence' as direction for how a church should relate to the context⁶⁴. He proposes to take doxology, as

⁵⁴ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 27-33.

⁵⁵ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 34-35.

⁵⁶ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 36.

⁵⁷ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 37.

⁵⁸ Dijkstra and Stoppels, *Back to Basics*, 37.

⁵⁹ Paas and Schaeffer, "Reconciled Community", 327.

⁶⁰ Paas, "Soteriology in Evangelical Practice", 328.

⁶¹ Paas, "Soteriology in Evangelical Practice", 334.

⁶² Paas, "Soteriology in Evangelical Practice", 338.

⁶³ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 149.

⁶⁴ The claims in this article are a further development of the perspective he proposed in his book: Paas, Stefan. *Vreemdelingen En Priesters: Christelijke Missie in Een Postchristelijke Omgeving*. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2016.

the glorification of God, as the core of this missional existence. This perspective releases missionaries from a quantitative drive to accumulate conversions, but draws them to a relaxing stance in which mission is about trying to reflect and discover the truth, beauty and goodness of God, in the whole world.⁶⁵ According to Paas, this can be found in a Christian community, as a sign of God's coming kingdom, but at the same time, truth, goodness and beauty can be encountered in the world beyond the Christian bubble. For this position, Paas builds on the notion of Betherton who describes the relationship between church and world from "a dynamic pneumatological perspective where both church and world can be 'worldly' or mediators of God's presence".⁶⁶ With this, he wants to navigate between a binary relationship between the church and world on the one hand, and almost identification between church and world on the other hand, which he sees happening in the liberal traditions which redefine football and gardening as types of religiosity.⁶⁷

What then, should be the role of a Christian in the secular world? For this, Paas introduces the metaphor of biblical priesthood, which he understood as the calling of all Christians to meditate between God and people and to represent others in worship.⁶⁸ This is not an individual calling, but a communal one, since priesthood is a form of social existence. Therefore, Christians are called to seek community, with other Christians as well as secular others, since the boundaries of the church are never clear.⁶⁹ Although Paas refrains from speculating about eternal destiny, he acknowledges a mystery around the scope of salvation, describing it as 'abundance and surprise'. For him, the communal character of priesthood means that Christians can also be mediators of salvation, by worshipping God on behalf of their secular neighbours.⁷⁰ In adopting this missional existence, Christians accept that they are a minority in this world, but at the same time join God's movement in the world and expand the reach of salvation.⁷¹

Paas' second proposal for an inspiring missional theology, is introduced in an article together with missiologist Hans Schaeffer. Their proposal focuses on the *restoration of communities* as the core of salvation, in which becoming a converted 'community person' is the definition of being saved.⁷² They underpin their proposal with two theological explorations.

First, they emphasize the conviction that God is at work in communities that are thriving. In effect, building communities can be seen as participating in God's mission. This view of relational soteriology moves away from an individualistic, other-worldly soteriology where salvation is brought back to a set of dogmatic beliefs towards a "more inclusive, this-worldly and communal soteriology" where salvation can be found in action. The church then is not a bounded community that possesses the truth and is holy. On the contrary, the church often fails in contributing to fruitful community building. Yet, through restoring communities, God involves humans, also in churches, in his mission to reconcile the world.

Second, Paas and Schaeffer also note a theological weakness in focusing on community building. They see the risk of obliterating the importance of the confessional faith in God and Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, sacrament and worship.⁷³ They stress the importance of conversion to Christ in the transformational power of the cross, with room to proclaim the name of Christ as truly good news.⁷⁴ They argue that this should not be evangelism in which a stable message of doctrines must be shared and accepted, but that community building as a form of missional engagement should go hand in hand with a witnessing of Christ which invites others to become persons of peace.⁷⁵ In this, the meaning of the cross

⁶⁵ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 150.

⁶⁶ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 152.

⁶⁷ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 153.

⁶⁸ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 155.

⁶⁹ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 156.

⁷⁰ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 157.

⁷¹ Paas, "Finding a Missional Existence", 151.

⁷² Paas and Schaeffer, "Reconciled Community", 325-347.

⁷³ Paas and Schaeffer, "Reconciled Community", 332.

⁷⁴ Paas and Schaeffer, "Reconciled Community", 345.

⁷⁵ Paas and Schaeffer, "Reconciled Community", 346.

plays an important role, understood as the communication of a transformation that draws communities in the direction of the kingdom, in the tension of “human impossibility and God’s possibility”.⁷⁶

How does a critical analysis of Paas’ attempt to formulate an inspirational theology for missional engagement inform the evaluation of the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN?

In the first attempt, I note an ambiguity how Paas talks about God’s work in the context and the way he formulates priesthood as a missional existence and a perspective on soteriology. This metaphor tends to bring missional practice back to only a symbolic representation of the lost world to God, but does not give a fundament to see missional engagement as joining in where the Spirit is already at work. In my opinion, it is ambiguous whether in this perspective salvation is happening within the church or also beyond, and consequently how this informs what the relation between the church and the world is. If God’s work truly is transformative, in the material here and now, should that not have an expanding reach of salvation also beyond the role of the church as priesthood? Although Paas devotes considerable attention to various efforts to build community beyond the church and acknowledges the work of the Spirit beyond the Church, his description of the church as priest leaves ambiguity regarding what it means to join the work of the Spirit in the world. Furthermore, I suspect that Paas’ proposal for a far-stretching doxology ultimately will primarily be vivid in the liturgy of the church, potentially resulting in less attention to the discernment for God’s work outside of this.

In the second article, Paas and Schaeffer propose a soteriology that focuses on salvation as the flourishing of communities as a practice, instead of a system of dogmatic statements. In my opinion, it was remarkable how they, in their description of these communities, emphasize the importance of the conversion to the name of Jesus and the role of the transforming power of the cross in how this community takes form. It seems that the authors feel the need to explicitly highlight how the saving work of God in Jesus is at work in these flourishing of communities, to make sure that the confessional perspective will not be overshadowed in a more praxis-orientated approach. The manner in which they highlight the importance of conversion to the name of Jesus and the transformational power of the cross, seems to be from another magnitude, compared to their earlier discussion on the work of the Spirit for recognizing salvation in the world beyond the church. They conclude their paper by presenting unanswered questions on what the role of Christ in flourishing communities entails.⁷⁷ Asking all these questions, in my opinion, raises the question how the role of Christ in their vision is related to their point that the *Missio Dei* is the foundation for that salvation is also found beyond the church. It appears that the conversion to the name of Jesus and the transformational power of the cross are a kind of condition in which a person is transformed into a community person, before it is possible to speak of a flourishing community as saved by God. However, the authors do not express this explicitly, but the way they present their questions at the end of their paper, reveals in my opinion, that they are not able to express clearly what the work of Christ entails in the context of God’s grace which fills the world.

The exploration of the vision of the PKN, revealed the centrality of the question where Jesus is, as the place where salvation is manifest. In this, a life in unity with Jesus is seen as the ultimate goal. The question arose how this view of Jesus as working in the world, aligned with their appreciation of the context as a problem to be solved, and the subsequent formulated calling of the church to be a counterreaction to the negative undercurrents in the context. This question also arises in the suggested theologies of salvation of Paas. In both suggestions the work of God in the world, beyond the church is assumed. However, it stays unclear how this aligns with the work of Christ. The question arises whether the work of Jesus is only seen as the instrument to reach the end situation of salvation, or whether the transforming presence of Jesus is the ultimate all in which everything and everyone shall live, or more as a means in which in the end all will be redeemed. This question will be developed in the continuation of this thesis.

⁷⁶ Paas en Schaeffer, “Reconciled Community”, 340.

⁷⁷ Paas en Schaeffer, “Reconciled Community”, 345-347.

2.5 Roest's Proposal of a Contextualized Gospel for the West

In his PhD (2019), Roest proposes the contours of a contextualized gospel for the Western world in the 21st century, guided by his own gospel-centered model as a theological perspective on the relation between church and context. He has a dual focus: on the one hand, he wants to formulate a contextual view of Christology, and on the other hand a theological view on how the church should engage with the Western context. This allows him to bring questions that have emerged on the mission-field, back to systematic theology.

Roest describes three theological assumptions of his model, relevant to our reflection on the missiological calling of the church, will be highlighted.

Firstly, Roest proves to be aware of the challenges of contextualization: he points that the message of the Gospel is not stable in itself, but always comes in a certain contextual form.⁷⁸ Therefore, he claims that every local church has to navigate in the dialectic process of contextualization: on the one side the proclamation of the gospel as the church understands this, and on the other side finding out what the Spirit is doing with the context and how that also influences the gospel-message.⁷⁹

Secondly, Roest takes the current anthropology in the West, which is focused on human desires and imagination, as a point of reference to formulate what salvation today means. He points how in Western Reformed Theology the dominating anthropology, in which a human is seen as a thinking thing, emphasized a rational perspective on immaterial, theological questions. However, anthropology with emphasis on desires and imagination as a reference point directs theology more to embodied experiences and understands salvation as relevant in the material here and now.⁸⁰

Thirdly, Roest emphasizes that his approach to navigate in the dialectic process of contextualization urges the church to interact with the context; to rejoice with what is good.⁸¹ This statement relies on the pneumatological position that the Spirit works in the world, independently from the church.⁸²

We now turn to Roest' formulation of his gospel-centered-model. Building on the assumption that the coherence in the bible implies a certain DNA of the gospel seed, Roest formulates three lenses to read

⁷⁸ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 10-11.

⁷⁹ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 273.

⁸⁰ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 323-328.

⁸¹ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 315.

⁸² Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 270-271.

the context from a gospel-centered perspective. In Figure 1, you can see his model and the three lenses he proposes.⁸³

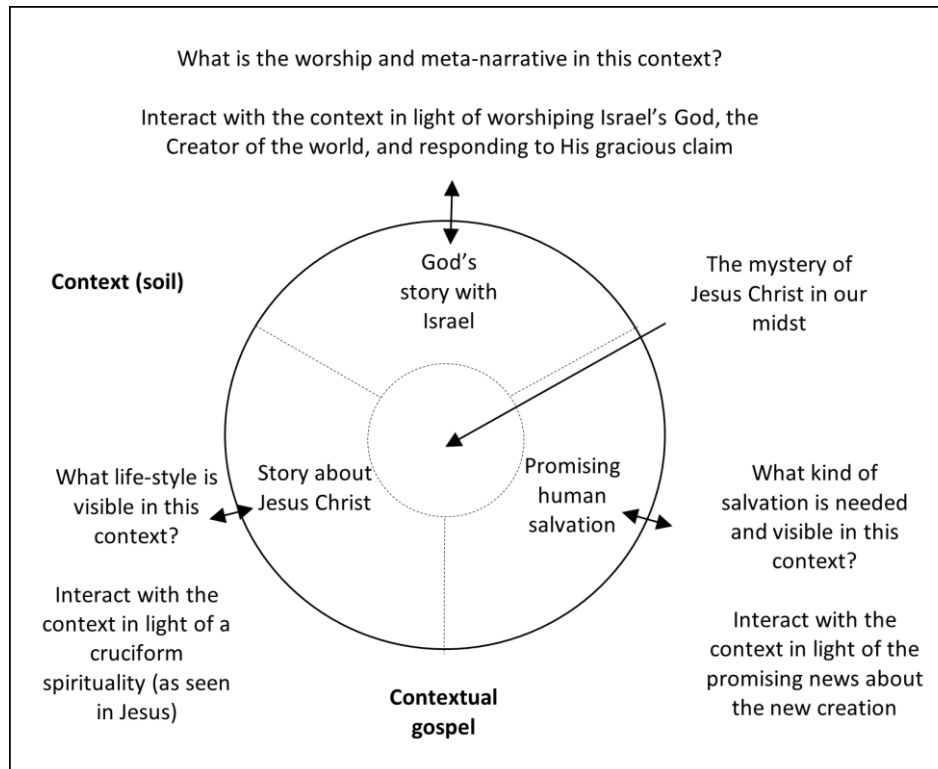


Figure 1 The Gospel-Centered Model

Although Roest meant his model to be used by local churches, his example pertains to the entire West. His interpretation of the Western context is largely influenced by the analysis of Charles Taylor in the *Secular Age*, particularly his interpretation of the *Age of Authenticity*, in which every human being has to realize their humanity and find an authentic perspective on how to navigate through life, choosing from and blending of different perspectives.

Roest starts with the lens of worship and describes three captivating images that, in his opinion, can be seen as the idolatry committed in the West. Firstly, there is the image of human power and agency, which is characterized by personal optimism and societal pessimism, yet it overlooks those who lack agency or power. Secondly, there is the image of free and fulfilled individuals who expect that every person can cultivate and satisfy themselves but disregard feelings of shame and loneliness. Lastly, there is the image of immanent prosperity and security, wherein the satisfaction of desires, eventually results in the burden of consumerism and militarism.⁸⁴

Consequently, Roest formulates how the lens of ‘the promising news about the new creation’ and the lens of ‘the cruciform lifestyle’ can serve as liberating perspectives on those captivating images.⁸⁵

In his last chapter, Roest concentrates on the challenges that must be considered to come to a contextualized soteriology for the West. He argues that the understanding of the human predicament has always had a determining influence on the interpretation of salvation in the context. He describes how alienation in human existence, resulting from being caught between various tensions in life caused by the unattainable goals of the three idolatry images of the age of authenticity, form the current human predicament.⁸⁶ This estrangement from ourselves, others and the whole of reality, results in a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness.⁸⁷ Therefore, according to Roest, the contextualized soteriology ought to

⁸³ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 315.

⁸⁴ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 349-354.

⁸⁵ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 355-370.

⁸⁶ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 370.

⁸⁷ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 373.

be characterized by a theology of presence, in which the presence of God in Christ, is emphasized.

Furthermore, Roest formulates the characteristics of a contextualized gospel-frame for the age of authenticity. This refers to the bigger theological frame in which the gospel-narrative relates to the interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures and to an understanding of the nature of God's acting.⁸⁸ Roest is critical of the traditional canonical narrative which describes the course of salvation history as: creation; fall; redemption in Christ and final consummation. He argues that this underemphasizes how God blessed his people of Israel. Therefore, he suggests, following Berkhof, Barth and Gunton, to emphasize the theme of the blessing of earthly life in the Old Testament. And he describes a new narrative-sequence: Creation, blessing through Israel, fall, redemption through Christ and consummation.⁸⁹ A second characteristic of this gospel-frame for the age of authenticity is an emphasis on the relationality of Christ, whom can be met in the material world. This is not a docetic Christ, but the incarnate Son of God.⁹⁰ Furthermore, he also suggests a relational approach to the understanding of the Trinity, in which the Trinity is not presented as a philosophical speculation, but as a description of the divine desire to engage with this world and people.⁹¹

Roest ends with the formulation of a confession of Jesus Christ for the Western context, focusing on the there-existing impact of new spiritualism, in his opinion one of the biggest challenges for the church of the future.⁹² He points that this new spiritualism leads to an equalization of God-realization and self-realization, in which truth is seen as found in inner revelation instead of external, transcendent revelation. On the other side, this movement rightly points to the importance of spiritual experiences in present life. Consequently, Roest proposes a confession of the church in which God can be found in spiritual experiences, within and beyond the church. However, he cautions against equating God with the world, but he envisions God as a dynamic presence, moving in this creation, being able to draw near and retreat, as well as to indwell people and places.⁹³

How does Roest's attempt to formulate a contextual gospel contribute to our understanding of the theology that undergirds the missional vision and practice of the PKN? To begin, Roest argues that the message of the gospel always comes in a contextual form. Therefore, he demonstrates why contextual and soteriological perspectives are relevant in the reflection on missional engagement, and he indicates that these perspectives are not available separately but are inherently interrelated. His contextual understanding of the message of the gospel, is theologically based on a trinitarian theology in which the *presence* of Christ in the context, God incarnated, forms the foundation to engage with the undercurrents in today's society for understanding the Gospel. An important example of this is how his view on soteriology as material, is coloured by the current anthropology of the West, which centres on the embodied experiences of this life. He opposes his with a docetic view of the gospel, which tends to understand the reality of Christ only in a spiritual way. This centres the missional calling of the church in the material world around it, working with and trusting on the dynamic presence of God in this context.

However, considering the theological assumptions of the model, it is notable how Roest applies the model himself. In his formulation of a soteriology for the West, he sees the context as a positive correction on how to understand and communicate the message of the gospel. For instance, the current emphasis on material life in opposition to the focus on eternal redemption of the soul, corrects in his opinion the prevalent interpretation of the salvation history in which blessing is seen as only present after the fall, as a solution, to a view in which God's blessing in the world is a ground theme in material life. However, when it comes to a more concrete application of how to formulate the meaning of the gospel for the context, the context seems to him primarily a broken place that needs to be healed. Although he emphasizes the importance of rejoicing in what can be found in the context as a blessing and work of God, he formulates the gospel narrative completely in the future sense, as something to

⁸⁸ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 377.

⁸⁹ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 378-380.

⁹⁰ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 382.

⁹¹ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 384.

⁹² Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 386.

⁹³ Roest, *The Gospel in the Western Context*, 392.

come and not present at all. In his description of the Western Context at the hand of the work of Taylor, Roest primarily names images in the context which are captivating and ought to be solved by the gospel. The question arises if this incorporates his understanding of a trinitarian, relational God who, incarnated in Christ, is present in the context, independently of the church, as he assumed earlier. Similar to what was detected in the work of Paas, it should be considered what it entails that Christ is present and active in the context outside of the church and how this informs the missional calling of the church.

2.6 Soteriological Beliefs amongst Dutch Protestants Ministers

A final investigation of the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN is an evaluation of an article on the prevalent theological beliefs under missionary practices of ministers. In this article, Stoppels, Paas and Zwijze reflect on the findings of a qualitative study, conducted by Stoppels, of the soteriological beliefs among Dutch Protestant ministers who work in pioneer settings (N=20) and established churches (N=40).⁹⁴ By analysing their theological evaluation of this practical study, the theological problems which Paas and Roest discuss in their other work in a more abstract theological way can be connected to the practice of Dutch Protestants ministers and therefore the aforementioned theological tensions can be demonstrated more concretely.

First, Stoppels ea. note that “ministers emphasize God’s / Jesus’ (unconditional) love, grace, and forgiveness, while no one refers to ‘judgement’, in their understanding of the uniqueness of Christianity”.⁹⁵ Ministers tend to “affirm Jesus’ unique role in salvation, ‘but’ have at the same time a more universal perspective on the efficacy of this salvation”.⁹⁶ With the ‘but’ in this conclusion, the authors seem to point to a contradiction between the unique role of Jesus in salvation and an inclusive view of the efficacy of salvation. Yet in my opinion it is a debatable theological question whether the unique role of Jesus indeed is contradictory with an inclusive view of salvation. This is the theological tension also noted in the way Paas and Roest interpret the role of Jesus in the understanding of the missional calling of the church. How inclusive or exclusive is Jesus?

Second, Stoppels ea. note that the efficacy of salvation is communicated mostly with reference to the here and now as opposed to eternal life. Parallel to this, the fruits of salvation as well as the meaning of lostness, ministers express in reference to the embodied, lived experience. This observation is related to the observation that, while many ministers keep the traditional soteriological claims more in the background, those beliefs are not abandoned altogether. At the same time, they also conclude that ministers are more agnostic when it comes to their own beliefs. In my opinion, the question arises how the underpinning soteriological beliefs are linked to where the efficacy of salvation according to the ministers can be found. Again, a systematic-theological question that needs revisitation.

Third, in my opinion, it is unclear how Stoppels ea. link the theological beliefs of the ministers on the uniqueness of Christianity and salvation to their missionary practice. In their study of the missiological awareness of ministers, they describe two independent conclusions. First, they observe that ministers have an increased open-mindedness towards their context, and an openness to the good present in the other. Second, they note that ministers experience a “new boldness to communicate the gospel and to openly share the gospel.”⁹⁷ However, the question arises what this gospel contains and how that informs the engagement with the context. If there is more openness to the good in the context, and at the same a firmer communication of the gospel, maybe the message of this gospel includes the good in the context. However, the authors don’t address the interrelation between the two conclusions. Also, to draw such conclusions, the theological claims underpinning ministers’ views on ‘the good in the other’ and ‘the gospel’, should be studied further. Further, when it comes to conclusions on how ministers communicate the uniqueness of Christianity, they note an embarrassment to use religious language and the hesitations in missional communications. This aligns with the conclusion of Stoppels and Dijkstra in *Back to Basics* in which they note a hesitation to share the gospel. The question arises, how this relates to the new boldness to communicate the gospel, they noted earlier. For example, they quote one of the ministers who claim that “the overlap between missional/diaconal work and social-cultural work has

⁹⁴ Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze. “Ministers on Salvation”, 1-20.

⁹⁵ Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze, “Ministers on Salvation”, 10.

⁹⁶ Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze, “Ministers on Salvation”, 10.

⁹⁷ Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze, “Ministers on Salvation”, 9.

become more fluid”.⁹⁸ This seems to indicate that explicit religious language becomes less prominent.

To conclude, the way Stoppels et al. evaluate the outcomes of the practical study of the soteriological beliefs amongst Protestant ministers, demonstrates that unclear soteriological reflections can lead to hesitation in missional practices.

2.7 An Initial Exploration of the Theological Questions around the Missional Calling of the PKN

Thus far, this chapter has uncovered the theological tensions in a specific theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN. I will conclude this chapter with the formulation of several theological questions that arise from the analysis, structured by the three interrelated themes formulated at the beginning of this chapter.

2.7.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context

Firstly, an ambiguous move in the theological appreciation of the context was noted. On the one hand, the movement of God is placed in the truth, beauty and goodness in both church and world, in the material here and now. However, on the other hand, the way how the context is described, is primarily through the lens of problems that need to be solved. The way how Roest formulates his gospel-frame with reference to some positive focus points in the context, might be an exception for this, but still, he concludes with a more solution-focused application of his model. In more general terms, the authors tend to move to a creation-centered perspective, motivated by a *Missio Dei* perspective in which they want to join God's work in the world. However, as it comes to a formulation of what this work entails and how to discern it, there still exists unclarity. Yes, they say that Jesus can be found beyond the church, but the theological view on where and how, stays unclear. It is the same critique formulated at the beginning of this chapter on the vision document, and it turns out, this is still unresolved.

2.7.2 Soteriological Perspectives

All authors proclaim that the underpinning soteriology is a determining factor for a view on missional engagement. Therefore, they attempt to formulate or clarify the soteriological assumptions underlying missional engagement. They tend to focus in this on the uniqueness of the work of Jesus Christ, and the importance to confess to his transformational work in our bodily and communal existence. In their analyses, it comes back how this transformational power of the gospel of Jesus, can be seen in for example the flourishing of communities (Paas) and creativity (Roest). However, when it comes to a more specific formulation of this transformational work of Jesus, they tend to formulate it as the answer or instrument that is brought in as a reaction to something which is absent or to a problem in the context. It seems if there is a tension in this view: on the one hand it is argued that the work of Christ can be found in our material world, in the here and now, not limited to church walls and it opposes in this way the spiritualization of salvation which long dominated Protestant theology. However, on the other hand, how Christ affects the context, stays unclear.

In the initial exploration of the missional context with reference to the vision of the PKN and *Back to Basics*, a more universal view on salvation, a so-called creation-centered perspective and a more exclusive view on salvation, a so-called redemption-centered perspective, were presented as two different perspectives on how to understand the work of Christ. In this, either Christ is seen as universal and therefore the world is good and salvation becomes something vague, either Christ is seen as exclusive, and salvation completely depends on the scope of his saving work. However, in the work of Paas and Roest, as well as in the research of soteriological assumptions of ministers, these two perspectives seem to be at work at the same time. There is an emphasis on the work of God in the world as the foundation of why salvation is also happening outside the church and why, in effect, missional engagement also is about joining in where the spirit already is at work. Besides this, they also aim to implement what the redeeming work of God in Christ entails for how God is visible and working in the whole world. However, it remains a question how the work of the spirit in the context and the redeeming power of Christ are related.

It appears as if in the recent development of missional theology in the PKN, a creation-centered perspective is emphasized, but in their further explorations, they stumble with questions of how this

⁹⁸ Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze, “Ministers on Salvation”, 8.

work of God in the world relates to the work of Christ. It seems as if they struggle to formulate how the creation-centered and the redemption-centered perspective on the work of God and Christ correlate. In my opinion, they decline to clearly explain how the *Missio Dei* is related to the redemptive power of Christ. Stated differently, in my opinion, the creation-centered and redemption-centered perspectives can be seen as two dimensions of the universally present and therefore everywhere active powers of the Trinity. However, as concluded, the theological discourse in the PKN is not able to express a clear view on this interrelation. Moreover, the theological appreciation of the context, reveals that the two are seen as in tension with each other.

The question arises, how to formulate a theological perspective on the activity of the Trinity in which these two perspectives are not seen as distinctive, in tension with each other, but as inherently connected.

2.7.3 Missional Engagement

When it comes to perspectives on specific forms of missional engagement as present in the analysed prevalent discourse of the PKN, an internal tension becomes evident. On the one hand, it was noted that the intentions among missional practitioners are not declining: There seems to be less hesitation to share faith than earlier and more urgency to bring in a Christian narrative in the secular world. On the other hand, it was noted that there seems to be unclarity what this Christian faith exactly entails; and which Jesus is confessed with this.

The most concrete form of missional engagement was found in the proposal of Paas, which focuses on flourishing communities. However, what this flourishing community exactly entails and how churches can play a role in this, remains unclear. This ambiguity stems from their inability to refer how the work of God in the whole world is connected with the work of Christ. It seems that the missionary drive is not the problem, but the challenge lies in the formulation of a concrete rationale and form.

Chapter Three

The Contextualized Soteriology of St.Martin-in-the-Fields

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the theological underpinnings of the missional engagement of St.Martin-in-the-Fields. In doing so, a contrasting experience will be presented that allows for a deeper analysis of the questions that arose in the previous analysis of the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN.

Where the second chapter discussed an influential theological discourse as prevalent in the PKN, this chapter focuses specifically on the theology as well as the practices of one local church. Different sources will be applied to highlight the interrelation between underlying theology and practice present in this particular church. First, I will introduce the missional practice of SMITF more broadly. Second, I will concentrate on the academic work of Wells and its interplay with the theology of SMITF. Then I will describe the theological assumptions on which his view on the missional calling of the church rest. Third, I take an example and illustrate how Wells' theology is translated into a concrete form of missional engagement; the Being With course, a course that explores Christian faith and life. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis showing the theological insights of the contextualized soteriology of SMITF, and offer a perspective on the three clusters by approaching the questions that arose in this and the last chapter.

3.2 A Heart on the Edge

Although SMITF is mostly known for its reputation for an exceptional music program, throughout the years the church has developed throughout the years into a lively centre of faith with vibrant connections to its surrounding context. In its mission statement, SMITF describes itself as “a community of hope, reimagining church and society through the lens of four Cs: compassion, commerce, culture, and congregation”. This has resulted in an active *congregation* life with services, lectures, and other public events, which coexists with the said music program and other *cultural* programs, a *compassion* project for people experiencing homelessness, and a *commercial* enterprise that includes a café and a bookstore. All these components work in tandem to create that vibrant, beating heart at the centre of the neighbourhood, while at the same time being attending to those who encounter the limits to their existence in a variety of ways.⁹⁹

In his book *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, Wells introduces SMITF by telling its history, a history which starts long before his placement there; The origin of a small church in the fields in the 13th century; then becoming of a royal parish church in the 18th century; the growth of London and the dominant place the church held at the boundary of Trafalgar Square in the middle of the centre; the ministry of Rev. Dick Sheppard in the 20th century, that offered refuge to soldiers and homeless people; the founding of the first religious broadcast programme; the creation of the academy of music; and the development of a secure financial situation.¹⁰⁰ It is a history of a changing context, in which the particular circumstances are precisely what shaped the ministry and mission of the church. The uniqueness of this place, however, is not only to be found in the specific contextualities. In my opinion, the uniqueness lies in two other factors. First, that despite the difficulty certain circumstances may have brought in hindsight, these are seen as gifts and part of the abundance of God. Second, how the various activities enhanced by the gifts in the contexts, act as catalysts. These two points will be explored further in the rest of this chapter.

3.3 The Theological Work of Wells

With. According to Wells this is the most important word in theology. It describes the heart of God, the nature of God's purpose and desire for humanity and also the essence as well as the existence of mission.¹⁰¹ God is abiding with us and, in this way, invites us in its dynamic life of abundance.

⁹⁹ “Congregational Life - St Martin-in-the-Fields.” www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/life-st-martins/. Accessed 23 May 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 17.

¹⁰¹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 3.

Therefore, Christianity should not be characterized by a so-called ‘working-for’ mentality, in which the starting point of social engagement is problems in need of solutions, but rather, that the purpose should be the divine desire to be with people and to discover through and with them the abundant character of the Trinity.¹⁰² According to Wells, *with* sums up the heart of systematic theology, and it is the task of theological ethics to inhabit and intimate it.¹⁰³ The description of this heart and its consequences for Christian life constitutes the task appointed to theology. And it is this task Wells undertakes in his writings and ministry.

In reference to this theological program, I will declare the theological assumptions underpinning his understanding of the missional calling of the church today.

3.3.1 *Four Modes of Engagement*

In *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Wells begins his exploration with an examination of four modes in which Christian social engagement takes place: Working for; working with; being for and being with. ‘Working for’, is deemed the most established model of engagement, where the advantaged use their skills and resources to identify and solve the problems around them. While ‘Working with’ also focuses on problem-solving, here methods are found in cooperation with those who are in need of benefiting from said work. ‘Being for’ involves a wish to improve other’s situations, but excludes a personal encounter. ‘Being With’ circles around the personal encounter, in which a situation is not to be resolved, but revolves around the deep attending presence in which the abundance in the other can be discovered.¹⁰⁴

While respecting the importance of working for, -with, and being for, Wells argues that being with is the most faithful form of Christian witness and mission. Since - as will be enfolded in the rest of this chapter - *being with* is in complete resonance with the character of the Trinity and the related incarnation of God in Christ.

3.3.2 *The Human Predicament*

Wells explains the primary reason for the church's inclination towards a working-for approach to mission, as being rooted in the inclination to be responsible for solving the inherent challenges of human existence. In this perspective, persons and the world are perceived as limited and broken, and the church sees it as its divine obligation to rescue and redeem them. Wells notices two shortcomings of this approach. First, the prevalent idea where the problems of human condition reside in mortality and limitation, is inaccurate. According to him, *isolation* from God, the other, the world and oneself is the fundamental human predicament. Second, in following the claim that isolation is the fundamental human predicament, the church should not be brought in as an external source that can solve death and suffering, but rather as an integral part of God’s movement throughout the world to restore relationships, to embody the *with*. So, mission should not be about adding new information or techniques, but instead, about restoring relationships with the context that inherently carries in it what is needed.¹⁰⁵ Further in his book *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Wells states that sins are all ways that do not align with being with God; it is attempting to live without God.¹⁰⁶ In his recent book, *A Future that’s Bigger than the Past*, Wells reformulates this again and describes isolation as impeding of the abundant life which God wants to give us.¹⁰⁷ In his view, mortality and limitations are, though influential and difficult, not definitive. Even in those difficult circumstances, there are ways to live in the abundance of the Trinity and to experience what it means to be with.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, this ‘being with’ modus should be central in the mission of the church, and ought to be directed to restore broken relationships. Then, the church will consider itself as part of the human condition and will involve itself in the calling to move into flourishing relationships with the context

¹⁰²Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 27-30.

¹⁰³ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 45.

¹⁰⁶ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 240.

¹⁰⁷ Wells, *A Future that’s Bigger than the Past*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 236.

around them. Where this focusing on relationships and participation with the context is often seen as a means to an end, Wells sees it as the ultimate goal.¹⁰⁹

3.3.3. *Being With as the Essence of the Trinity*

Although Wells describes his theological notion of *being with* in its incarnated form at first, referring to how it's visible among the present relationships between human beings and in nature, he traces its source back to what he calls "the everlasting present character of the Trinity".¹¹⁰ This points to the essence of what *being with* means, and separates it from a relationship with sin, which distorts its very essence. Wells examines eight aspects that he sees as characteristic of the inner relations of the trinitarian persons, Father, Son and Spirit. Together, these aspects can be seen as the multi-layered meaning of the notion of *being with*. Since this thesis focuses on the missional call of the church, I will describe how Wells applies these eight dimensions of the inner relations of the Trinity to an understanding of mission. In other words, the described direction for how one ought to relate to the other in a missional relationship. This is described in his book *Incarnation Mission*, in which he focuses on how the theological concept of *Being With* is to be understood in reference to mission.

The first aspect, thereby also forming the foundation of the other aspects, is that of *presence*. It refers to being in the same sphere, being actually present to each other. The second aspect is where Wells further specified the focused interaction, where real *attention* is given to the other and their situation. The third aspect is that of *mystery*, in which the other is not seen as a problem to solve, but as a mystery that can be entered, explored and appreciated. The fourth aspect is that of *delight*, in which the abundance in the life of the other is received as a surprising gift. The fifth and sixth aspects are *participation* and *partnership*, both referring to how the previous four aspects can be lived truly together with others. The fifth, participation, emphasizes meeting and togetherness, whereas partnership recognizes the interaction between complementary, but different, qualities of the different persons in a relationship. The seventh aspect is *enjoyment*, meaning that all the previous aspects have their value for their own sake, and are meant to be enjoyed as an end in itself. The last aspect is that of *glory*, which refers to the purpose of all relationships: the glory of God being with us in Christ.¹¹¹ Wells considers these eight aspects of the eternal character of the Trinity the central notions which direct Christian life, in every context.

3.3.4 *Jesus as the Purpose of the Universe*

An important consequence of aforementioned aspects of the inner relations of the Trinity is that these inherently lead to the incarnation. The everlasting character of God is from the beginning directed at the longing to be in relationship with humanity. The incarnation, therefore, is seen as more than the solution to the problematic condition of humanity. It is a gift that would be given anyway, regardless whether the fall would ever happen. Christ was not the solution to a problem. No Christ has, was and will fulfil God's ultimate purpose to be with us. Wells' Christology can therefore be characterized as supralapsarian, meaning that the gift of incarnation is an everlasting decision more deeply embedded in reality than the dynamic of sin and forgiveness.¹¹²

This supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation can be seen as the very heart of the theological notion of *being with*.¹¹³ According to Wells, it answers "the fundamental theological question of all: Did Jesus come in response to the fall, to restore everything that was broken and secure forgiveness and eternal life or was the coming of God in his Son the eternal decision of the Trinity to be with us in Christ?"¹¹⁴ For Wells, the latter is the case. With this, he places the epistemological centre of theology in the history of incarnation and resurrection, which he understands as the purpose of creation from the very beginning.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 46.

¹¹⁰ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 125.

¹¹¹ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 14-15. The aspects are described in more detail in Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 125-144.

¹¹² Van Driel, Edwin Chr. "Sharing in Nature or Encountering a Person", 193-206.

¹¹³ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 198.

¹¹⁴ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 60.

¹¹⁵ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 233.

According to Wells, this purpose of the incarnation as Christ with us, is ultimately demonstrated at the cross. He sees it as a unique event in which the inner relationship between the three persons of the Trinity is broken for once; God separated from God.¹¹⁶ Although left by his father, and his distant followers, Jesus chooses at that moment to stay with us. He experiences in this way the reality of human sin: fundamentally isolated from God and others. The resurrection then, is seen as the vindication of God's being with us.¹¹⁷

Having established *Being with* as the Christological notion which demonstrates the purpose of God's acting, Wells distinguishes from two other Christian accounts of God's activity. First, the account that sees God's acting as a demonstration of his divine glory and power for his own good, and mission as the fulfilment of this. Second, the account which sees the coming of Christ only as solution for the human condition of limitation and mortality. No, the essential purpose of the Trinity is to share its glory with humanity fully, to enter it and enjoy it fully.¹¹⁸ This does not mean that God's acting has not a working mode at all, the point is that the divine working for, has being with as its end.¹¹⁹

Therefore, how churches understand their missional call has, according to Wells, everything to do with their view on soteriology. He describes two accounts of salvation that dominate a view on the mission of the church. On the one hand, he describes churches that consider sin and death as the problem of humankind, and the only solution to this problem is the blood of Jesus Christ. In this account God is at risk of becoming an unpredictable monster who can send everyone to hell. On the other hand, he describes churches that make salvation as something vague and symbolic. In this account, God turns into an anodyne version of humanity. The issue with both of these accounts is that they are ultimately focused on the human fears and goods, while the debate ought to be about the nature and purposes of God.¹²⁰

3.3.5 *The Work of the Holy Spirit*

After discussing how Wells' view of the nature of the Trinity and the meaning of incarnation, cross and resurrection directs his perspective on mission, I will shortly touch upon his view on the role of the Holy Spirit. Wells describes Pentecost as the embodiment of the resurrection, since the Holy Spirit guaranteed our union with God in Christ and with each other.¹²¹ Further, Pentecost is seen as an ongoing event, in which the Holy Spirit continues making present the incarnate Christ of past and future.¹²² This can be found in the regularity of rituals, as well as in finding surprising directions in unexpected places. These generous gifts of the Holy Spirit ought to be received in mission. Mission then, Wells understands as responding to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world.¹²³ The question arises what the exact nature is of the holy spirit; whether it is the spirit of Christ, or the eight aspects of the Trinity in our material world.¹²⁴ This question will be further explored in the next chapter.

3.3.5 *The Missional Calling of the Church*

I now turn more concretely to Wells' view of the missional calling of the church. Wells starts with the position that missions should not focus on the scarcity of the world; as a search for solutions for the vulnerability and shortages of this existence, but rather on receiving, dwelling in, and sharing God's abundance, in the midst this concrete reality.¹²⁵

¹¹⁶ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 80.

¹¹⁷ For a recent evaluation of the supralapsarian Christology of Wells, see the recent article from Edwin Chr. Van Driel, in which Driel analyses and compares Wells' supralapsarian Christology with the supralapsarian account of Christology according to Kathryn Tanner and shows how Well's account is constructively more fruitful. Van Driel, Edwin Chr. "Sharing in Nature or Encountering a Person: A Tale of Two Different Supralapsarian Strategies." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2022, 193–206.

¹¹⁸ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 237.

¹¹⁹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 244.

¹²⁰ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 5.

¹²¹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 83.

¹²² Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 17.

¹²³ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 18.

¹²⁴ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 71.

¹²⁵ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 2.

To reimagine what it means to be a church in contemporary times, Wells asserts that it is crucial to change the church' relationship with the world. He argues that the world has intrinsic value, and that not everything has been lost with the fall. The Holy Spirit can do surprising, exuberant, and generous things in this world. Wells notes: "The church is called to celebrate creation, enjoy culture, and share in flourishing life ... This 'abundant life approach' seeks to form communities whose habits and practices anticipate and express the life of God's kingdom."¹²⁶

Mission is not saving the world; it is seeking to live and share the abundant life of the Trinity. It is not about fixing perceived deficiencies, but about trusting and assuming that sustainable change is coming from people within the context themselves.¹²⁷ However, this modus is not passive. It is about *overaccepting* the narrative you encounter in your context and placing it in the bigger narrative of God's history and future with his world. Wells explicates this by referring to his earlier work on Christian Ethics in which he introduces concepts coming from improvisation theatre.¹²⁸ In this, the modus of overaccepting is the attitude in which the actor keeps the flow of the play going by incorporating the tensions and blockages and turning them into the bigger story.¹²⁹

Wells further develops his proposal for a missional practice along the lines of the book *The Abundant Community* of John McKnight and Peter Block.¹³⁰ In this book the authors offer a perspective that evaluate the context of a community as abundant, in which gifts are seen as inherent, awaiting to be nurtured in the context to further emerge.¹³¹ Wells adopts this emphasis on appreciating the gifts in the context. He applicates here the concept of overacceptance as a way of incorporating the gifts that churches and Christians encounter within their surroundings, in persons and assets, into the broader narrative of God's story, which cannot be considered whole without their inclusion.¹³²

In his book *Incarnation Mission*, Wells brings this focus on abundance into practice by incorporating it in the way he evaluates the different contexts, of individuals and of collectives, a church is part of. He focuses in this on the good gifts which can be enjoyed and nurtured by churches. It is all about seeing the potential, the transcendent moments of cooperation and innovation, which should be overaccepted. Furthermore, Wells also describes how certain elements of the contexts can be seen as an enrichment and new perspective for Christian lifestyle as well. An example is how Wells evaluates the characteristics of associations and organisations; these can also inspire churches in their organisational tasks.¹³³ However, it is not the case that Wells entirely shares the vision of the church ignores what opposes the realm of God's kingdom. Building on his understanding of the meaning of the cross, he states that this abundance is to be found among the excluded, those considered as trash within society. It is about finding out where Jesus is, and Jesus can be found under the excluded, Wells argues. It is about finding abundance amid and within (what others might see as) scarcity.¹³⁴

Wells develops these ideas on mission in his *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*. He starts this proposal with a critical reading of how Taylor in *The Secular Age*, proposes a form of Christianity. According to Wells, Taylor suggests two possible strategies for Christianity to position itself as middle position in the diverse field of positions in which people nowadays try to find their fulfilment of life.¹³⁵ The first presents Christianity as the best option for achieving lifegoals such as human flourishing, good relationships, healthy careers and social welfare. For Wells, this option is instrumentalizing Christianity to something which is in the end a contradiction to the gospel. The second strategy presents Christianity as a cultural phenomenon in the social marketplace, which needs to defend its identity and territory, and is convulsively trying to keep its already marginalized position in society. In this strategy, the church

¹²⁶ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 6.

¹²⁷ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 117-135, 150-152, and 177-179.

¹²⁸ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 186-188.

¹²⁹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 143.

¹³⁰ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 250.

¹³¹ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 253.

¹³² Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 260.

¹³³ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 165-169.

¹³⁴ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, 219-230.

¹³⁵ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 45.

forgets its calling to be a blessing to the context.¹³⁶

Wells proposes an alternative approach. He wants to take serious Taylor's analysis of this age, in which Christianity has become one of the options among others, and faith became understood as something experienced in the here and now. However, Taylor's conclusion that faith is a private matter, ought to be contested. Moreover, the church should insist that faith makes a concrete difference for individuals as well as for associations and communities. How? The church should be "an alternative society, overlapping and sharing space with regular society, but living in a different time in which God's future is modelled in our present".¹³⁷ The church needs to reimagine how church and society could look, along the vision of the kingdom.

In the rest of his book, Wells further elaborates how this renewal of churches can look in a local church along the lines of the four C's, already introduced earlier on. His central claim is that the resources required for renewal are already given within the surrounding context. They are visible in the way *commercial* initiatives can be a fruitful combination of financial profit and social impact; how in *congregations* an inclusive and inviting form of liturgy, worship and common life can evolve and will result in new relations between congregation members and guests; in the ways *culture* can be finding places for God's work in art; and finally how projects of *compassion* are fruitful forms of friendship in which it is not sure who is host or guest, but are all enriched by each other.

This theology has further developed to the missional practices as introduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, the theology was not the starting point of these missional practices. Aligned with the theological assumptions of how the context can be seen as an enriching gift, the missional practices already developed at SMITF Wells encountered when he started as vicar, were an important catalyst for the ideas he further developed in his books. Thus, the source of renewal is not solely reliant on a model or strategy, but it is rooted in the contextual, embodied reality. The formation of an alternative society that coincides with and partakes in the regular society is an integral aspect of this approach. This vision on the relation to the context can therefore be described as *contextual revitalization*.¹³⁸

3.4 The Being With Course

After studying Wells' theological perspective on mission in detail, I will now move to a concrete example of a missional practice which is informed by his theology; the Being With course, an introductory course to the Christian faith. This practice is exemplary because it refers to and clearly explicates the different theological assumptions as presented above. Furthermore, this course gains attention in The Netherlands, where churches are experimenting with a Dutch version of this course. The intercultural conversation this thesis aims to enhance, in this way also carries a practical application. Finally, there are several sources to discuss this practice. Most importantly the leaders' guide in which the theology underpinning this course and the way this translates into practice.

The Being With course was created in 2022, during the pandemic of Covid19, by Wells and Sally Hitchner, another priest of SMITF, and is theologically grounded in the same principles as SMITF's church vision. Two principles form the foundation of this course. First, the method of the course should match its content, because *being with* is both the purpose and the method of God's movement towards us in Christ. Hence, everything that takes place in the course aims to be an experience of that relationship and an experience with the kingdom of God. It is the aim that participants can say, both during and after the course: "That was Christianity. That was church. That was what it meant to be with God and with each other." The second foundation is the assumption that the group has everything it needs to experience and understand the trinitarian character of the everlasting God in their own context, because it is believed that the Holy Spirit is working in a participant's life from the beginning.¹³⁹

These foundational principles are grounded in Wells' theological thought, and in the leaders' guide summarized in four key-ideas:

¹³⁶ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 46.

¹³⁷ Wells, *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*, 47.

¹³⁸ This term is coined by the curate of St. Martin-in-the-fields, Angela Sheard, in an intern document she has written for HeartEdge and forwarded to me for this thesis.

¹³⁹ Wells, *Being With Leaders' guide*, 1-14.

- 1) The idea that Christ carries and shows the whole character and purpose of the trinitarian God, emphasizing that Christ is not the means of God to solve a problem, but the end to fulfil the ultimate purpose of God with us. The salvation of Christ is seen as the abundant relationship God longs to have with the whole of humanity. This focus on abundant relations is the foundation of the course.
- 2) The idea that Christianity is in the end not a set of convictions but a lived experience in relationships, and as such, an experience of the kingdom of God. The course should reflect this, and therefore be focused on lived experiences.
- 3) The idea that the Holy Spirit has been involved in the lives of the participants from the very start and is constantly seeking to have a relationship with every single person and points in this way to the presence of Christ in their life.¹⁴⁰ In the course it is hoped that participants come to perceive how God was and is present in their own life.
- 4) The idea that the incarnation shows that God didn't reject our human condition, but became what we are to complete us.¹⁴¹

Concretely, the course exists out of ten 90-minute meetings for groups formed by six to fourteen people, and two leaders: a host and a storyteller. Every week another core theme of the Christian Faith is central. Each week follows the same pattern of four elements: welcome, wonderings, talk and reflection.

During the *welcome* each group member, including the host and storyteller is invited to tell the so-called 'heart of the week'. Not asking to tell what was the up or the low this week, but inviting someone to share what was this week most vivid for them. It is a practice to be with each other in hearing each other's thoughts and experiences, trusting that they are not meaningless. It is not meant to give advice or insights to overcome human limitations, but to enable relationships.¹⁴²

The second part is a time of *wondering* about topics related to the theme of the week. This is coming from the godly play technique. Wonderings are not questions which point to a rational answer, but are an invitation to imagine and bring in your own experience. This is also built on the assumption that everything that is needed is available in the group. The wonderings are not to be reflected on further, but are to be appreciated with a simple 'thanks' from the host.

The third element is the *talk* where the storyteller takes the group on a journey into the Christian Faith. The following ten themes are central in these talks 1) Meaning; 2) Essence; 3) Jesus; 4) Church; 5) Bible; 6) Mission; 7) Cross; 8) Prayer; 9) Suffering; 10) Resurrection. In all the talks, the content is articulated in such a way that it touches the thoughts and experiences of participants as shared during the time of wondering. In the guide for leaders a reference is made here to the theory of improvisation; the idea is that the stories of the participants will be overaccepted by the talk, that their experiences will be inscribed into God's story, so participants will find out that their contributions are of relevance for the gospel of God.¹⁴³

The last part of the course is the time of *reflection* in which everyone can react on what has been said until now and react on each other.

The sequence of the course allows for participants to experience what it means to actually be with each other, God and their contexts. At the same time, it is aimed that participants attaining insight in how the story of Jesus Christ is also at work in their own existence.

In my analysis, I have mostly focused on how the methods of this course match the theological underpinning and the content of the course. It is a vivid example of how the theology of Wells works in practice.

3.5 Conclusion

3.5.1 Theological Appreciation of the Context

The theology of SMITF, strongly enhanced by the thought of Wells, takes its starting point in the everlasting character of the Trinity and how it was always meant to be incarnated in human existence, and therefore God is indisputably involved with material reality. Following this theological statement,

¹⁴⁰ Wells, *Being With Leaders' guide*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Wells, *Being With Leaders' guide*, 5.

¹⁴² Wells, *Being With Leaders' guide*, 18.

¹⁴³ Wells, *Leaders' guide Being With*, 20.

the circumstances in the context are seen as gifts that can contribute to the ultimate purpose of God's longing to be *with* humanity and in this way, to bring humanity in contact with the abundant character of the Trinity. So, in this view the context is not seen as a problem that needs to be solved, but the context provides the place where God's longing to live in relationship with humanity, from the side of God is established. Thus, SMITF inhabits a hopeful view of the world which applies itself to the circumstances in broader society, as well as to the resources of an ecclesiastical community. The reincorporating of circumstances into the bigger story of the trinitarian God, Wells indicates with the term 'overaccepting', coming of the practice of improvisation theatre.

Further, the theological view on the context is also characterized by a focus on the catalysing effect of the vibrant connections between the circumstances of church and society. Theologically, this is underpinned by a pneumatological perspective in which the Holy Spirit is seen as the activator and indicator of the resurrection power in current situations.

This view on the context also becomes apparent in Wells' methodological proposal for a missional church. In his work, Wells receives the insights of others as gifts and shows how these fit into his understanding of theological assumptions.

This incorporating attitude to the context is adverse to the more ambiguous appreciation of the context in the theological discourse of the PKN. This will be enfolded in the next chapter.

3.5.2 Soteriological Perspective

It was found that SMITF's theological appreciation of the context has everything to do with their underlying view on soteriology. This is characterized by a supralapsarian Christology in which the incarnation of Christ is not primarily seen as the solution for everything that went wrong as result of sin and fall, but as the purpose from before the foundation of the world. From this perspective, Wells rejects the understanding of the human predicament as mortality or limitation as final determining problems to be solved by an instrument. Instead, the predicament of human existence is seen as isolation, which can only be changed by being an incorporation of the ultimate purpose of God's relating to humanity in Christ. Importantly, this is not seen as an instrument to reach the goal of everlasting life, but as the way to incorporate being in the ultimate essence of the Trinity, in His own abundant life which longs to be in relationship with humanity. However, Wells also fully incorporates the narrative of cross and resurrection in his perspective. These are precisely the moments on the edge, the difficult circumstances, which can be seen as the beginning of this abundant life, since by the power of the resurrection the cross can be transformed into new life. This is to be situated in the material here and now, but at the same time has to do with the eternal essence of the Trinity, beyond time and space.

Striking is Wells' evaluation of the work of the Spirit in his soteriological perspective. For him, Pentecost embodies the resurrection by making present the incarnate Christ. In the next chapter, it will be evaluated how his view on the Spirit relates to the view on the Spirit in the theological discourse in the PKN.

To end, in his view a coherent interplay between a creation-centered and redemption-centered perspective can be recognized, which seem to interact in a more tensioned relation in the theological discourse of the PKN. Wells notes an inherent relation between Christ and creation. The implications for this will be enfolded in the next chapter.

3.5.3 Missional Engagement

As it comes to a more concrete formulation of the form of missional engagement, the notion of *being with* is central. Mission is meant to be directed by God's everlasting nature and purpose to live in abundant relationships. Therefore, churches are called to approach the world and humanity by appreciating its intrinsic value. So, the concrete missional practice unfolding out of this, is characterized by receiving all the different contextual circumstances, in material and immaterial form, as gifts and *overaccept* them into resources for mission. This has further developed in the focus on four different fields where these gifts can be recognized: Commerce, Culture, Congregation and Compassion. So, mission is not directed to solving problems in the context, but by trusting that sustainable change is coming from people in the context themselves, because the transformational power of God's incarnation, cross and resurrection is also at work there. This does not mean that everything in the context is evaluated as good and contributing to the kingdom of God. The everlasting story of God's giving love is

fundamental and turns situations conflicting with this upside down. A church taking seriously all the gifts God has given in this world can truly reimagine how church and society could more look like the kingdom.

Several examples were given of how this vision works in practice. The first example was the way how the connections between the four focus areas, commerce, culture, congregation and compassion, flourish in interaction, in which ecclesiastical partners and non-ecclesiastical partners work together. Second, the study of the theology and method of the Being With Course indicated how the means of this course are meeting its theological message. It can be seen as a good example of how the systematic theological claims of Wells work into practice.

Chapter 4

The Unfolding of an Intercultural Conversation

4.1 Introduction

After an independent exploration of a prevalent theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN and the underpinning theology of the missional practices of SMITF, this last chapter will further develop the conversation which unrolls out of these two analyses.

First, this conversation will be introduced by referring to some observations of my own participative research during my internship at SMITF. This research was conducted with the intend of formulating questions and recommendations for churches in the Netherlands, specifically Citykerk Amsterdam, which aim to adopt the principles of HeartEdge, the international church renewal movement initiated by SMITF. The initial conclusions of my research can be seen as the motive to focus in this thesis on the theological underpinning of the missional calling of the church in an intercultural perspective. The observations of this research are in coherence with the analyses of the theological discourse in the second chapter, and therefore relevant and exemplary for the intercultural conversation this thesis wants to enhance.

4.2 An Initial Exploration of the Intercultural Conversation

Amsterdam Citykerk is a new church initiative in Amsterdam, initiated by Tim Vreugdenhil, who is a vicar part of the PKN. It is one of the places in The Netherlands which is inspired by the theological ideas and missional practices of HeartEdge. They see themselves as an early adopter of HeartEdge and use the four c's to structure the development of their activities. There is a *community*, with a weekly program for Christian spirituality for (un)believers, offline and online. They aim to start *compassion* projects in collaboration with the surrounding neighbourhood. Inspired by the focus on *culture*, they developed a series of 'stand-up theology programs: theology in theatre form. And *commerce* is getting form in the development of a church model as social enterprise.¹⁴⁴ As direction for my participative research at SMITF, Citykerk asked me to explore whether they could be a so-called 'hubchurch' for HeartEdge in the Netherlands. This is a place where similar churches can find a landing place with contextualized inspiration.¹⁴⁵

An initial exploration of the vision and practices of CityKerk and a literature study to the theoretical principles of HeartEdge revealed that in theory the interrelations between the four c's were seen as ignition point for church renewal. However, these interrelations seemed to be only minimally present at Citykerk. Therefore, my participative research was focused on the theological underpinning as well as on the practical application of the interrelation of the four C's. During the six weeks in which I conducted my participative research at SMITF, I interviewed seven staff members of SMITF (four vicars, the person responsible for the development of the Being With course, a representative of the compassion project and the director of HeartEdge). Further, I participated in all the different activities of SMITF and in that way searched for interrelations. Subsequently, I could present several observations as perspectives.¹⁴⁶

Firstly, I observed that the theological underpinnings of missional activities of Citykerk often remained unclear, while at SMITF theological reflection on the nature of God, the role of the church, and the work of the Holy Spirit within the context, were in lively interaction with the concrete missional activities. In this manner, the systematic theological principles served as a dynamic invitation to be implemented in practice. This could for instance be observed in how clergy engaged their practical experiences in theological discussions. Additionally, during conversations with congregation members, I observed that theological ideas were alive and served as a fertile ground for their own practical engagement with the different interactions with the context.

Secondly, it was striking how the life of SMITF, the theological reflection as well as the concrete practices, is embedded in a lively faith. This is manifest in the rhythm of prayer, every morning

¹⁴⁴ Tim Vreugdenhil, *Visio document CitykerkAmsterdam*, September 2022. Available upon consent.

¹⁴⁵ Documented by the author in Six, Ruth. "Research Report Theme-course Church Renewal", January 2023, 1-42. Available upon consent.

¹⁴⁶ Six, "Research Report Theme-course Church Renewal", 26-30.

and afternoon. Additionally, I observed at SMITF an openness to speak about faith in Christ and what that could mean for the context, among clergy as well as among congregation members. The theological reflections as well as the lively faith of SMITF create an inviting centre, open for people and their stories. At Citykerk there seems to exist a hesitation to formulate their theological beliefs, since this is seen as a boundary for people to join their activities. The way the application of the four c's is formulated tends to be focused on their practical form and less on the theological underpinning. Furthermore, a form or rhythm of prayer has not yet been developed. The question arose how Citykerk would formulate its theological centre and how this affects the activities they are developing.

My third observation, centred around a theological idea, foundational for SMITF and HeartEdge, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God's abundant presence can be found in surprising ways and in unexpected places. This underpins the focus on vibrant connections with the context and is visible in the concrete implementation of the four c's. The interrelation of two, three or four of the C's, is seen as an encounter of God's presence in this world. In this way, the four C's are not instruments or tools to fulfil a certain goal of the church. In the organisation of SMITF, in which the organisation of all the different activities come together, efforts are being made to intentionally enhance the connection between the four Cs. For this, shared values and a shared development of the theological lens are being sought. Therefore, the question I took back to the Dutch context, was how this interrelation between the four c's could be enhanced in the Dutch Context. As an initial suggestion, I hinted to focus on reflecting on the own theological underpinning and to focus consciously on the inherent interrelation between the different activities.

My fourth observation circled around the way relations with(in) the context emerge. Due to the history and particularities of the context, the relations with(in) the context at SMITF have emerged organically. The contextual circumstances are received as a gift. However, Citykerk tends to emphasize a "costumer-oriented" approach, focusing on demand as directing for what activities Citykerk should supply. I suggested, following the vision of HeartEdge, that emphasis should not be on identifying market opportunities, but rather on how Citykerk can participate in the existing movements already taking place within the context, underpinned by the theological claim that God abundantly bestows his gifts upon this world.¹⁴⁷

The rest of this chapter will show how the enfolding of the intercultural conversation this thesis aimed to enhance can shed light on the aforementioned observations.

4.3 An Intercultural Perspective on the Missional Calling of the Church

4.3.1 The theological appreciation of the context

The theological appreciation of the context, both within and outside the church, plays a determining role in shaping a church's understanding of its missional calling.

The analysis of a prevalent theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN revealed the theoretical perception of the context as a realm wherein God is actively engaged. However, when providing a more specific description of the context, the world beyond the church, is often assessed either as a predicament requiring resolution or as question necessitating a response. The many references to Jesus' presence in truth, beauty and goodness, extending beyond the walls of the church, appear to lack explicit elucidation regarding the subsequent description of the context. In this theological appreciation of the context, it was observed that two prevailing theological perspectives appear to be in state of tension with one another. On the one hand, there was noted an emphasis on a creation-centered perspective, characterized by a trinitarian theology of presence, which drives the understanding of God's work manifesting in the truth, beauty and goodness within the church and the world. However, in the concrete description of the context, a redemption-centered perspective tends to be the basic theological principle. This pertains to the viewpoint in which the church is perceived as a resolution for the challenges that define the context.

At SMITF another perspective seems to be prevalent. There, the context is seen as a vibrant possibility, as a gift to be received and an essential enrichment. This does not mean that SMITF only focuses on the people and things in the context who are 'obvious' gifts. On the contrary, they believe

¹⁴⁷ Six, "Research Report Theme-Course Church Renewal", 27.

that especially on the edge of society and the cutting edge of innovation and exploration, God can be found. Consequently, there is no denial of the difficulties or problems present in the context. Yet, they are seen as openings to discover how God is involved in this world. In this theological appreciation of the context, I observed a coherent interplay between a creation-centered and redemption-centered perspective. The context is seen as the pre-eminent place to recognize God's everlasting longing to be with humanity and the world (creation-centered) and at the same time the longing to bring them in the abundant character of His trinitarian being (redemption-centered). So, the message of God, which conveys his desire to be with humanity and the world, aligns entirely with his method of transforming both humanity and world, incorporating them in the abundant relationships of His being. Therefore, the vibrant connections existing in (and between) church and society can be seen as manifestations of the abundant relationships of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is seen as the activator and indicator of these vibrant connections.

From the perspective of the prophetic dialogue - as introduced in the first chapter - it can be argued that in the Dutch context, a prophetic perspective is prevalent. This perspective contests elements contrary to God's reign and the blindness of God's movement in all cultures. In the context of SMITF, the dialogical perspective seems to be more central. This perspective focuses on the seeds of God's word, to be found in the good present in the context. As also noted in chapter one, the concept of Prophetic Dialogue proves to be useful as a framework to understand the scope of different theological appreciations of the context. However, the question remains what the effect or content is of God's work in the context, both in the dialogical and prophetic sense. The theological evaluation of the context appears to either fall or remain standing depending on whether it is based on a soteriological foundation. Determining for how these two aspects of mission can fruitfully interrelate in a missional encounter, is the constant discernment of God's movement in the world. That discernment has to do with the soteriological underpinning of the theological evaluation of the context: because what contains God's movement in this world? In order to gain a deeper understanding of the origins of these diverse interpretations of the context, it is necessary to delve into the soteriological perspective.

4.3.2 The Soteriological Underpinning of Missional Engagement

Throughout the analysis of both contextual theologies, it became evident that the soteriological underpinning was decisive for both the theological appreciation of the context and influences the subsequent evolution of missional practices within this context.

To start, it was observed that within the interpretation of the missional calling of the PKN, perspectives on soteriology often remained implicit or lacked clear argumentation. This also aligns with the observations of my participative research. However, recently, this is seen as a shortcoming. Consequently, in a part of the PKN a theological discourse has been developed, seeking to present an inspirational soteriological theology. An analysis of these new soteriological developments revealed some inherent tensions and theological ambiguity. On the one hand, an important development is the focus on the work of the Spirit, affirming that salvation can be found in our material world, in the here and now, and not limited to church walls. This opposes the spiritualization of salvation, as long prevalent in Protestant theology. However, on the other hand, how the redemption of Christ is exactly visible and active in the context is presented as a question. This finding is parallel to those of the analysis concerning the theological appreciation of the context. On the basis, it is assumed that God in Christ is active in the whole world. Yet, when it comes to a more concrete formulation of the missional calling of the church, the active presence of Christ is described as the redemptive movement which needs to be brought in as a solution to the brokenness of the context. It was concluded that it seemed as if the redeeming work of Christ is of another magnitude than how God is visible and working in the context.

In the analysis of the soteriology of SMITF, another perspective on the presence of Christ in the context was prevalent. The perspective was identified as a supralapsarian Christology in which the incarnation of Christ is not only seen as a solution for everything that went wrong as a result of sin and fall. Rather, Christ is seen as the ultimate purpose of all from before the foundation of the world, the demonstration of God's *with*. From this perspective, Wells understands the human predicament not as mortality or limitation, which can be solved by an instrument. Rather, the predicament of human

existence is isolation, which only can be changed by being incorporated in the ultimate purpose of God's relating to humanity in Christ. This incorporation has a transformational impact on the material here and now, but at the same time, has to do with the eternal essence of the Trinity, already decided beyond time and space. In this, the creating- and redemptive power of the Trinity come together, they are manifestations of the same Trinity.

It can be observed that, in the theology behind SMITF, an explicit connection is made between a specific soteriology and a more concrete missiological practice. How these connections are drawn and which perspectives it is opposing, sheds light on the soteriological underpinning of the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN.

First, several parallels can be discerned between the theological discourse of the PKN and SMITF. In the PKN as well as in SMITF, salvation is seen as effective in the here and now, in the material world. Furthermore, the incarnation plays an important role in how the presence of Christ is argued to be recognized in the world. In a more recent article, Roest even suggests taking the incarnation as a central emphasis of salvation.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, Roest also describes the human predicament as alienation, comparable with Wells' description of human predicament as isolation. According to Roest the estrangement from ourselves, others and the whole of reality, results in a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. Therefore, Roest suggests a contextualized soteriology characterized by a theology of presence, in which the presence of God in Christ, is emphasized. This has many similarities with the view of Wells. Moreover, in the evaluation of the soteriological assumptions of ministers in the PKN, it became clear that they tend to formulate an inclusive interpretation of salvation, which affects the whole of creation.

Where then, lies the difference? Let us start by describing a notable difference in the interpretations of Paas and Wells regarding the understanding of the Trinity's nature as the foundational principle of missional existence. Paas characterizes this with the metaphor of priesthood, in which the glorification of the trinitarian God is the central purpose. However, his understanding of this glorification, seems not to have a direct effect on human existence; it is completely directed to the glorification of God. A deep desire for people to be affected and fulfilled by this glory of God, seems absent. The question arose what the motivation is that people come to recognize God in their life and why to long for an encounter with Jesus. However, Wells understands the character of the Trinity as an attentive presence with the internal desire to share His abundant life in Christ with humanity. Consequently, the motivation why missional existence should be focused on this life of abundance for the whole of creation, is grounded in the nature and purposes of God. Since, these are directed to draw all in the abundant life of the Trinity. In my opinion, Paas is not able to ground his perspective in the nature and purposes of the Trinity.

Furthermore, Wells distinguishes his account of salvation from two prevalent views on salvation, which he considers as invalid. His evaluation of these views shed light on the prevalent perspectives on salvation in the Dutch Context. Firstly, Wells distinguishes the account in which salvation is restricted to the solving of sin and brokenness of humankind by the blood of Christ. Secondly, he analyses the perspective in which salvation is brought back to something vague and symbolic. According to Wells, the issue with both of these accounts, is that in the end they are focused on the human fears and goods, while the debate ought to be about the nature and purposes of God. Back to Basics provided a description of two prevalent perspectives on salvation within the Dutch context, described as the exclusive and the inclusive perspective. In my opinion, these align with the accounts of salvation which Wells, with his focus on God's eternal desire to share His abundant life in Christ with humanity, wants to overcome. This deep reflection on the nature and purposes of the Trinity in relation to the material here and now, I have not encountered in the theological discourse of the PKN, under consideration in this thesis.

¹⁴⁸ Roest, Gert-Jan. "Op zoek naar de toren in het midden: Verzoening in de Westere context. In: *Hoe kan Jezus' kruisdood ons verlossen?: Christus victor en verzoening door voldoening in verleden en heden*. Buijten & Schipperheijn, 177-186.

I will now attempt to declare the difference. In the analysis of the theology of Wells, it was noted that the characteristics of the everlasting Trinity, inherently lead to God becoming incarnate. It was noted that this understanding of incarnation can be characterized as supralapsarian, in which a creation-centered and a redemption-centered perspective came together. However not explicated, I think to recognize in the attempts to formulate soteriological perspectives in the theological discourse of the PKN, an infralapsarian Christology. In this perspective, Christ is seen as the solution for the fall and therefore also dependent on the Fall. An infralapsarian perspective on Christology has had for centuries a big influence on Reformed theology for centuries, and also forms the roots of the theological voices in the discourse on the missional calling of the PKN.¹⁴⁹ In my opinion, this is an important theological difference between the soteriological assumptions of the two contexts. This declares the ambiguity within the theological discourse of the PKN, wherein, on one hand, it affirms the presence of Christ in the world independent of the church, yet, on the other hand, in the specific description of the missional calling of the church, the context appears to lack the presence of Christ altogether. To infralapsarian Christology, Christ is seen as the redeemer of the situation of the Fall, and in this instance is seen as crucial. However, to supralapsarian Christology, Christ is not only seen as the redeemer of whole creation but also as the goal of creation. From this understanding, a creation-centered perspective doesn't have to be adversing to the redemption-centered perspective on the missional calling of the church and vice versa. In an understanding of Jesus as the redeemer of the entirety of creation as well as the goal of creation, these two perspectives can come together, and moreover, they have an inherent relationship. It is only through the integration of these two perspectives that the everlasting character of the Trinity, driven by the eternal desire to incorporate the whole of creation in His abundant life, can attain its full realization. In the theology of SMITF, this integration is in my opinion already assumed, since it is argued that the salvation of Christ is seen as the realization of the abundant relation God longs to have with the whole of humanity. So, in this the 'working for' modus of Christ, the 'work' of redemption, has in the end *being with*, as the ultimate longing of God to share the abundance of God in Christ with the entirety of humanity and the world, as final purpose.¹⁵⁰ However, in the analysis of the theological discourse in the PKN, a tension between a creation-centered and redemption-centered perspective seemed to be assumed. An infralapsarian perspective could, in my opinion, be seen as the reason for this tension.

Nonetheless, in the development of soteriological perspectives in the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN, I observed a move to a perspective which can be founded in a supralapsarian perspective. This becomes evident in Paas' discussion, where he illustrates a shift in the understanding of salvation from a primary focus on verbal proclamation of salvation in a world that needs redemption, towards a conception of mission as praxis in a world that is filled by God's grace. It is also visible in Roest's emphasis on the incarnation as starting point for a theology of salvation. Furthermore, the shift seems to be visible in the research to the soteriological assumptions of ministers of the PKN, in which Jesus' unique role in salvation is emphasized, while at the same time a more universal perspective on the efficacy of salvation is evident. Nonetheless, the discussion on the impact of a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian perspective on Christ is in my opinion essential and needs to be developed in the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN.

Aforementioned argument, also sheds another light on how Wall, introduced in the first chapter, discusses soteriological perspectives underpinning fresh expressions.¹⁵¹ In his analysis, Wall introduced the redemption-centered perspective and the creation-centered perspective as two dimensions that, when both present in the same missional practice, give rise to tension. It was this tension I also assumed to be at work in the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN. In my opinion, the distinction between the two perspectives was insightful to analyse the reason for the difficulties to develop a theology of salvation as underpinning for missional practices in the PKN. However, this thesis revealed

¹⁴⁹ Zwanepol, K., and C.H. Van Campenhout, editors. "Dordtse Leerregels." *Belijdenisgeschriften van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, Protestantse Pers, Heerenveen, 2009, 192–226.

¹⁵⁰ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, 244.

¹⁵¹ Wall, "Salvation and the School of Christ," 38-39.

how a combination of the two perspectives, rooted in a supralapsarian Christology, offers a perspective to overcome this difficulty.¹⁵²

Although the discussions on soteriology in both contexts have a Christological focus, a Pneumatological attention with an explicit openness to the work of the Holy Spirit as God's activity beyond the church is also present in both the contextual theologies analysed in this thesis. The question arose how the relationship between the presence of the Spirit and the presence of the incarnate Christ can be drawn and what the theological consequences are of this interrelation. In a recent article, Van den Toren gives an overview of the different theological perspectives on this relation and considers their implications.¹⁵³ He argued that it is important to speak of one salvation history in which a pneumatological understanding of the presence of God entails that "the universal spirit desires to share the grace of Christ everywhere". In this, the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit are the same.¹⁵⁴ Christ is seen as "both the key to discern the presence of the Spirit and the goal of the universal work of the Spirit."¹⁵⁵ From a supralapsarian perspective, in which the purpose of the Trinity to be incarnated is an eternal decision from before the foundation of the world, the inviting work of the Holy Spirit to see this presence of God outside the boundaries of the church is in no way subordinated to the work of Christ.

While Wells not explicitly reflects on the relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit, this supralapsarian understanding of the relation seems to correspond with the perspective of Wells. Since, he sees the Spirit as making present the incarnate Christ of past and future. In the discourse on the missional calling of the PKN, the Spirit is also seen as working in the world, beyond the church. However, the relationship of this work to the activity of Christ in the context stays unclear. In my opinion, the implicit infralapsarian understanding of Christology, can be seen as a reason for this. In a supralapsarian perspective, Christ is understood as the ultimate purpose of the whole of reality, and the work of the Spirit is seen as pointing to this ultimate purpose. However, in an infralapsarian interpretation, the activity of Christ is brought back to the redemption of everything that is wrong in the context. In my opinion, in the latter interpretation, it is less clear what the work of the Spirit entails and how it relates to the universal spirit of Christ.

Yet, the idea of a relation between a supralapsarian interpretation of Christology and a view on the relationship between the work of the spirit and the incarnation of Christ should be explored further.

4.3.3 *What Missional Engagement Enfolded out of the Theological Underpinning?*

The suggestion that an implicit infralapsarian Christology is still influential on how the missional calling of the PKN is understood, explains in my opinion the aforementioned differences between the theological evaluation of the context in the Dutch discourse and SMITF. In the last paragraph of this chapter, I move to the practice of missional engagement in both analyses and further explore the consequences of the above examined theological differences.

In the context of the PKN was observed a tension between on the one hand a growing missional motivation, but on the other hand also hesitation to come to explicit forms of missional engagement in which there was freedom and openness to explicitly refer to the meaning of the commitment to Christ. The moves to formulate an inspirational theology as basis for concrete forms of missional engagements were primarily exploratory but did not result in concrete proposals. Concrete practices were more focused on how to be a competing and relevant option at the marketplace of civil society organisations.

Exploration of the practices of the missional community of SMITF has shown how their systematic theology underpins the unfolding of a fruitful missional practice, in which the missional calling of the church is understood as to embrace what is already there in relation to God's all-surpassing self-giving in Jesus. Both in the four c's of HeartEdge and in the Being With course, it is emphasized that the means of this missional engagement should be in complete accordance with the message. This,

¹⁵² Van den Toren also explores this in his article: Van den Toren, Benno. "The Relationship between the Creation Mandate and the Mission Mandate:" *Is Africa Incurably Religious?*, 2021, pp. 157–174.

¹⁵³ Van Den Toren, Benno. "The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology of Religions." *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2012, 263–280.

¹⁵⁴ Van den Toren, "Relationship between Christ and Spirit", 268.

¹⁵⁵ Van den Toren, "Relationship between Christ and Spirit", 274.

because also God's means are completely in accordance with his message. The question arose to what extent this interrelation between means and message is at work in the concrete missional context of the PKN.

It is relevant to entangle the observations of my participatory research in this conversation, as these reveal that while the concrete framework of missional engagement may share a similar structure, significant accent differences still exists in practice. I noted that Citykerk Amsterdam also tries to implement the four C's of HeartEdge to build fruitful interrelations with the context, however a connection to the meaning of Christ seems to be absent in this. With this, I do not mean an explicit mention of His name, but to what extent it is trusted that the incarnate Christ as the ultimate purpose for whole the world, is indeed active. Consequently, how Citykerk formulates an interpretation of the four c's, tends to be focused on the practical form and less on the theological underpinning. In my opinion, this has to do with the theological differences as explored in the previous paragraphs.

While SMITF offers an ontological perspective that nurtures the trust that Christ is indeed present and active in the whole world and therefore needs to be recognized, the question arises how this can be discerned in a trustworthy manner. The whole theology of SMITF is built on the preposition that systematic theology and ethics are inherently connected. However, theological statements on paper still need to be accompanied with a discernment for the work of Christ. A theological foundation can broaden the imagination and deepen the receptivity to the work of the Spirit, which makes present the incarnate Christ. Nonetheless, the characteristics of imagining and receptiveness, hint at the surprising and unexpectedness which can in no way be controlled and secured by anyone else but the Trinity. Discernment can thus not be brought back to a systematic verdict but has to do with getting more and more related to and receptive for the abundant character of the Trinity.

4.4 Moving to a Conclusion

In this last chapter unfolded an enriching conversation between the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN and the contextualized soteriology of the missional practice of SMITF. In the conclusion of this thesis, the conversation will be recapitulated, and it will be formulated what this entails for the intercultural theological debate on the missional calling of the church.

Conclusion

In their vision for 2025, the PKN formulated the mission to engage church and world in a life lived by grace, to be found in the spiritual and concrete unity with Christ. However, the theological underpinning of what this unity with Christ entails, proved difficult to formulate, resulting in ambiguity on the purpose and means of missional engagement in concrete situations.

Adopting an intercultural methodology, I presupposed that an exchange of ideas and perspectives among Christian communities from different settings, can be enriching. Therefore, I focused in my thesis on how the theological discourse on the missional calling of the church in the PKN could be enhanced by bringing this into conversation with the soteriology in relation to its understanding of the context, underpinning the missional practices of SMITF as a so-called contrast experience. After a more independent exploration of respectively a prevalent theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN and of the underpinning theology of the missional practices of SMITF, in the last chapter, the two analyses were brought into conversation with each other.

In this conclusion, the most important insights resulting from this intercultural conversation will be presented.

Theological appreciation of the context

The theological appreciation of the context, proved to be determining for how a church understands its missional calling.

The analysis of the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN revealed the assumption of an underlying tension on the nature of God's involvement in the world. On the one hand, it was observed that the context is appreciated as a realm where Christ can be found and the Spirit is present. On the other hand, the practical application of missional engagement, characterized by the aim to be a solution for the problems in the context, seems to depreciate God's involvement in the context. In first instance, it seemed that there existed a tension between a creation-centered perspective, which values the world where God is at work and a redemption-centered perspective in which the world is seen as a damaged sphere that needs to be redeemed.

The analysis of how SMITF evaluates its context, proved to be a mirror in which this prevalent theological appreciation of the context in the PKN, could be understood more deeply and the initial analysis could be questioned. Since, at SMITF the tension as prevalent in the PKN was absent. Moreover, in SMITF's appreciation of the context, a coherent interrelation between a creation-centered and a redemption-centered perspective seems to be at work. SMITF sees the context, the tracks of goodness, beauty and truth, as well as the brokenness and difficulties, as places where God's abundance can be discovered.

It was concluded that the different theological appreciations of the context had to do with the underpinning soteriological perspective which will further be discussed in the next section.

Supralapsarian Christology

The analyses in this thesis reveal that the soteriological underpinning, as perspectives on how God relates in Christ to the world, proves to be decisive for as well the theological appreciation of the context as for the further development of missional practices in this context. While in the PKN, recent attempts are made to formulate an inspirational salvation theology, the analysis in this thesis revealed an assumed internal tension in these suggestions in which on the one hand an inclusive perspective on the scope of Christ's engagement in the world is visible, while on the other hand the salvation of Christ is formulated as the means to solve the problems of humanity. This tension is also touched upon in the first conclusion. As a result, the concrete formulation of how God's relating to the world in Christ is visible and active in the context, in the church as well as beyond the church, remains unclear.

Similar with the analysis under the first conclusion, the theology of SMITF provided input to consider these assumptions from a different angle. At SMITF, another perspective on how God in Christ relates to the world was prevalent. This view is built upon a supralapsarian Christology in which the incarnation of Christ is not only seen as a solution for the fall, but as the ultimate purpose of all, from before the foundation of the world. So, it was and is always the ultimate purpose of the Trinity to relate to humanity in Christ. This relation is situated in the material here and now, but at the same time has to do with the eternal essence of the Trinity, beyond time and space. In this, the creation- and redemption-

centered perspective come together. This soteriological underpinning, based on a supralapsarian Christology, explains why at SMITF this relation between the two perspectives emerges.

In the light of this contrast experience, I have explored the idea that an implicit infralapsarian perspective could be the reason for the tension which is assumed in the theological discourse on the missional calling of the PKN between the perspective that God is at work in the context and the formulation of the missional calling of the church as the redemptive movement to the context. In this, I recognized an infralapsarian perspective, since in that perspective Jesus is only seen as a means, to reach an end, while a supralapsarian perspective claims that Christ' relating to the world is the ultimate all in which all will find their purpose. However, it was also observed that the recent soteriological developments within the prevalent discourse on the missional calling of the PKN can be understood as movements to a supralapsarian perspective. This is evident in the quest for a perspective that inherently connects God's involvement with the entire world with the redemptive work of Christ. Nonetheless, the discussion on the impact of a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian perspective on Christology is in my opinion essential and needs to be developed in the theological discourse on the missional calling of the church in the PKN.

Subsequently, I have also explored the theological implications of aforementioned conclusion on the interrelation between the presence of the Spirit and the incarnated Christ in the world. It was observed that in the theological discourse of the PKN the Spirit is also seen as working in the world, outside of the church. However, the relationship of this work to the work of Christ in the context remained unclear. I explored whether an implicit infralapsarian understanding of Christ can be seen as a reason for this. In a supralapsarian perspective, Christ is understood as the ultimate purpose of the whole of reality, and the work of the Spirit is seen as pointing to this ultimate purpose. So, in this perspective, the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit are not to be evaluated separately. However, this idea of an interrelation between a supralapsarian interpretation of Christology and a view on the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the incarnation of Christ should be explored in further research.

Interculturality and transcultural truth

Aforementioned conclusions confirm the value of the intercultural methodology of this thesis, since in the light of the theology and practices of SMITF as contrast experience, a prevalent theological discourse in the PKN could be questioned and enriched. Furthermore, the conclusions reveal how a different underpinning theology can be seen as determining for how the context is appreciated. However, it has to be noted that the emergence and development of theological statements, are always in interrelation with the contextual circumstances. The different interpretation of HeartEdge in NL and UK on what the missional calling of the church entails, has to do with different theological appreciations of the context, in which the prevalent theology inherently coheres with contextual characteristics. Nonetheless, the analysis of the different perspectives on Christology and their implications for a context, assume that it is possible to recognize the same Christ in different cultures and that it is possible to formulate in this way a transcultural truth.

This thesis has not only explored how theological notions on Christ inform the missional practices of SMITF, situated in the specific context of the city of London. In line with the vision of the church-renewal movement HeartEdge, it was also the aim to formulate how these theological notions can inspire and direct missional practices of churches in other contexts. This vision on the relation to the context was described as contextual revitalization, building on the theological notion that God abundantly gives in every context all what is needed. This aligns with the notion of transcultural truth, meaning that in every context, although in different forms, the same Christ can be recognized. So in this, the source of renewal is not solely reliant on a model or strategy, but it is rooted in the contextual, embodied reality.

What could it mean when churches within the context of the PKN, renew their missional engagement in alignment with the recent developments in soteriology as evaluated in this thesis? That's the question this thesis brings to the table of local church councils, ministers and church-policy makers. In the last conclusion, I will do an initial exploration of this question and ask how the aforementioned considerations on the theological underpinning inform the concrete forms of missional engagement.

The means in accordance with the message

While in the context of the PKN the moves to formulate an inspirational theology as basis for concrete forms of missional engagement did not yet result in concrete proposals, at SMITF, in interaction with a theological underpinning, fruitful forms of missional engagement practices have unfolded. An important foundation of the missional practice of SMITF is that the means have to be in accordance with the message. Mission should not be about adding new information or techniques, it is about forming relationships with the context which has already almost everything which is needed to restore relationships. In the context of the PKN, this synergy between content and method tends to be ambiguous. This is also in accordance with the conclusions on how the soteriological underpinning influence an appreciation of the context.

The vision of the PKN states that the church should be there, where Christ and the fruits of the Spirit can be found. This thesis reveals the importance of theologically reflecting on who Christ is, how He relates to the world and how the relation to the Spirit can be seen. Furthermore, this thesis presented an inspirational theology that give a perspective on these questions which are worthy to explore further in the context of the PKN.

As aforementioned, a supralapsarian Christology, can be seen as the underpinning theology of the message of SMITF. In this message, how God relates to His world, could be described as improvisation. Alongside the idea that the means should be in accordance with the message, it is proposed that the means by which a church practices its missional calling, can also be described as improvisation. This focuses the missional engagement in the concrete here and now, overaccepting all the gifts in the context, while at the same time incorporating these into the eternal abundance of the Trinity.

The title of the vision of the PKN is *Yours is the Future*. In my opinion, an attitude of improvisation ensures that a church, as part of the body of Christ, indeed can confess that the future is His. In this way, the church doesn't have to be focused on securing, solving or even redeeming the future, as seems to be the implicit direction of the PKN, but can truly receive the gifts of the abundance of the Trinity in their own context.

This perspective of improvisation was one of the important insights which has changed my perspective on the calling of the church. During a service at SMITF I spoke about my experiences, and I ended with the following words:

“Maybe what I learned the most here, is best to explain with a posture: to live with your arms wide open.

Wide open to improvise, to say: ‘Yes, and.’

Wide open to imagine, to shape my perspective of this world by narratives of hope.

Wide open to delight in where the ones upon our path find delight in.

Wide open to be proximate to those who live in our world, to hear their story, to be really moved by them.

Wide open to encounter God in the people and the world around us.

Wide open to live eternity now.

What will happen when churches try to live with their arms wide open? Open to work together with people and initiatives around them? Open to trust that God's Holy Spirit is at work in this world?

For me a church as a true community of hope, realises that the church is not the owner of this kingdom, but that the church is called to use everything what God has given to be a taste of the kingdom of God.

I go back with my arms wide open, for the work of the Holy Spirit around me, trusting that the living water flows in this world.

And trusting that, when we encounter the presence of God, in ourselves, in the world, in the other, this overflow of living water, will guide us to be creative, to be hopeful, to be loving and to be present.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Six, Ruth. *Bread for the World*, 23 November 2022, St.Martin-in-the-Fields.

I hope that the intercultural conversation as unfolded in this thesis, will enhance the theological discourse on the missional calling in the PKN in such a way that indeed the arms can be opened to receive and join the movement of Christ who was, is and will be All in all.

Works Cited

- “About Us.” *The Centre for Church and Mission in the West*, www.churchandmission.nl. Accessed 12 May 2023.
- “Congregational Life - St Martin-in-the-Fields.” www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/life-st-martins/. Accessed 23 May 2023.
- “Van U is de toekomst. Focus voor de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland op weg naar 2025”.
Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk. Geraadpleegd 7 maart 2021.
<https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/thema/visienota-van-u-is-de-toekomst/>.
- Baker, Jonny. “Prophetic Dialogue and Contemporary Culture”. In: *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*.
- Bevans, S. and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: reflections on Christian Mission Today*, New York: Orbis Books, 2011.
- Bevans, Stephen, and Roger Schroeder. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. New York: Orbis Books, 2014.
- Bevans, Stephen, Ross, Cathy, “Mission as Prophetic Dialogue”. In: *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*. New York: Orbis books, 2020.
- Dijkstra-Algra, N., and S. Stoppels. *Back to Basics: Zeven Cruciale Vragen Rond Missionair Kerk-Zijn*. Boekencentrum, 2017.
- Gruber, Judith. *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018.
- Küster, Volker. “Het project interculturele theologie: Een analyse en plaatsbepaling in het debat over christelijk geloof en cultuur”. In: *Wereld en zending*, no. 3, 2004, 70-83.
- Paas, Stefan. *Vreemdelingen En Priesters: Christelijke Missie in Een Postchristelijke Omgeving*. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2016.
- Paas, Stefan, Sake Stoppels, and Karen Zwijze-Koning. "Ministers on Salvation: Soteriological Views of Pioneers and Pastors in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands". *Journal of Empirical Theology*.
- Paas, Stefan, Schoemaker, Marry. “Crisis and Resilience among Church Planters in Europe.” In:
- Paas, Stefan. "The Counter-Cultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Ecclesiology in the Post-Christendom West". *Ecclesiology* 15.3 (2019): 283-301.
- Paas, Stefan. “Missional Christian Communities in Conditions of Marginality: On Finding a ‘Missional Existence’ in the Post-Christian West.” *Mission Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2021, pp. 142–160., <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341778>.
- Paas, Stefan. “Soteriology in Evangelical Practice: A View from the Street.” *Exchange*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2022, 323–342.
- Paas, Stefan, and Hans Schaeffer. "Reconciled Community". *Ecclesiology* 17.3 (2021): 325-347.
- Paul, Herman, and Bart Wallet. *Oefenplaatsen: Tegendraadse Theologen over Kerk En Ethiek*. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2012.
- Roest, Gert-Jan. “Op zoek naar de toren in het midden: Verzoening in de Westere context. In: *Hoe kan Jezus’ kruisdood ons verlossen?: Christus victor en verzoening door voldoening in verleden en heden*. Buijten & Schipperheijn, 177-186.

- Roest, Gert-Jan. *The Gospel in the Western Context: A Missiological Reading of Christology in Dialogue with Hendrikus Berkhof and Colin Gunton*. Brill, 2019.
- Schroeder, Roger. "Prophetic Dialogue and Interculturality". In: *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*. New York: Orbis books, 2020, 158-165.
- Six, Ruth. *Bread for the World*, 23 November 2022, St.Martin-in-the-Fields.
- Six, Ruth. "Research Report Theme-course Church Renewal", January 2023, 1-42.
- Stoppels, Sake, and Reitsma, Bernard. "Begrensde openheid: reflecties op het thema bounded of centred set" In: *Inspirare, 2022-04*. Amsterdam, 57-60.
- Stoppels, Sake, and Reitsma, Bernard. "Tussen grensbewaking en grensvervaging over insluiting en uitsluiting" In: *Inspirare, 2022-04*. Amsterdam, 3-5.
- Stoppels, Sake. "Concentrisch denken rond geloof en kerk". In: *Inspirare, 2022-04*. Amsterdam, 5-13.
- Stoppels, Sake. "Heil zien in missionaire initiatieven: Een zoektocht naar de theologie achter nieuwe vormen van geloofsgemeenschap". *Lezing CHE Zingeving in (geloofs)gemeenschappen*, 2019.
- Toren, Benno van den. *Vertrouwen delen: excentrisch leven in Gods missie. Oratie bij aanvaarding van de leeropdracht 'Wereldwijde perspectieven op de lokale missionaire roeping*. Utrecht, 2023.
- Van den Toren, Benno. "Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?" *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, edited by Rob Haskell and Matthey Cook, WEA, Pasadena, California, 2010, 91–108.
- Van den Toren, Benno and Hoare, Lize. "Evangelicals and Contextual Theology: Lessons from Missiology for Theological Reflection". In: *Practical Theology* 8, no. 2, 2015, 77–98.
- Van den Toren, Benno. "Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation." *Exchange*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2015, 123–143.
- Van den Toren, Benno. "The Relationship between the Creation Mandate and the Mission Mandate:" *Is Africa Incurably Religious?*, 2021, 157–174.
- Van Den Toren, Benno. "The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology of Religions." *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2012, 263–280.
- Van den Toren, Benno. "Openness, Commitment, and Confidence in Interreligious Dialogue: A Cultural Analysis of a Western Debate." In: *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2023: 439.
- Van Driel, Edwin Chr. "Sharing in Nature or Encountering a Person: A Tale of Two Different Supralapsarian Strategies." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2022, 193–206.
- Wall, Philip R. "Salvation and the School of Christ: A theological-ethnographic exploration of the relationship between soteriology, missiology and pedagogy in fresh expressions of church." Thesis, King's College London, 2014.
- Walls, Andrew F, en Cathy Ross. *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Ward, Pete. *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church*. Baker Academic, 2017.
- Wells, Samuel. *What Anglicans Believe: An Introduction*. Canterbury Press Norwich, 2011.
- Wells, Samuel, et al. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Baker Academic, 2018.

Wells, Samuel. *A Future That's Bigger than the Past: Catalysing Kingdom Communities*. Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019.

Wells, Samuel. *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

Wells, Samuel. *Being With: A Course Exploring Christian Faith and Life – Leaders' Guide*. Canterbury Press, 2022.

Wells, Samuel. *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

Wells, Samuel. "What Are We Really Trying to Do?" 6 November 2022. <https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/what-are-we-really-trying-to-do/>

Zonnenberg, Chaim, Vermeulen, Wim. "HeartEdge krijgt voet aan de grond". *Woord en dienst*, januari 2023, 12-13.

Zwanepol, K., and C.H. Van Campenhout, editors. "Dordtse Leerregels." *Belijdenisgeschriften van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*, Protestantse Pers, Heerenveen, 2009, 192–226.

Declaration Sheet Master's Thesis

Name student: Ruth Six _____

Title master's thesis: Surprised by Abundance _____

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that the aforementioned master's thesis consists of original work. The thesis is the result of my own research and is written only by myself, unless stated otherwise. Where information and ideas have been taken from other sources, this is stated explicitly, completely and appropriately in the text or in the notes. A bibliography has been included.

Place, date:

Signature:

Amsterdam, 17 June 2023 _____



DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I hereby agree that the aforementioned master's thesis will be made available for inclusion in the library collection after its approval and that the metadata will be made available to external organizations and/or published by the PThU.

Furthermore, I

do

do not

authorize (the library of) the PThU to include the full text in a database that is publicly accessible via the world wide web or otherwise. (This permission concerns only the publication of the master's thesis as described, without further transfer or limitation of the student's copyright.)

Place, date:

Signature:

Amsterdam, 17 June 2023 _____



Data Management Plan

General information

NAME OF STUDENT: Ruth Six

NAMES OF THESIS SUPERVISOR: Benno van den Toren DATE: 17 June 2023

VERSION: Final Version

General information about research and subject of the thesis

(PROVISIONAL) TITLE OF THE RESEARCH / THESIS:

Surprised by Abundance

SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND METHOD(S):

A study to prevalent views on the missional calling of the Protestant church in the Netherlands in intercultural dialogue with the contextualized soteriology of the missional community of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, on the basis of existing academic literature and data from a conducted participative research.

TYPE OF RESEARCH DATA TO BE COLLECTED:

Academic literature and data from conducted participative research (Interviews and logbook). PERIOD IN WHICH THE DATA WILL BE COLLECTED:

October – November 2022 and April-June 2023

Technical aspects of the data storage

HARD- & SOFTWARE:

Documentation in Word.

FILE FORMATS:

Written text.

SIZE OF THE DATA (ESTIMATELY IN MB/GB/TB):

- 0,55 kB

STORAGE OF DATA DURING CONDUCTION OF THE RESEARCH:

Local storage on a password protected personal laptop

STORAGE OF DATA AFTER COMPLETION THE RESEARCH:

Local storage on a password protected personal laptop

Responsibilities

MANAGEMENT OF THE DATA DURING CONDUCTION OF THE RESEARCH:

Local storage on password protected laptop.

Access to the data will be granted, under the condition of consent of the respective persons and organizations (St. Martin-in-the-fields, HeartEdge and CityKerkAmsterdam), a citation to the thesis and the opportunity to see how the data is used before publication.

MANAGEMENT OF THE DATA AFTER COMPLETION OF THE RESEARCH:

The management of the data shall be transferred to the PThU library.

Access to the data will be granted, under the condition of consent of the respective persons and organizations (St. Martin-in-the-fields, HeartEdge and CityKerkAmsterdam), a citation to the thesis and the opportunity to see how the data is used before publication.

Legal and ethical aspects

OWNER OF THE DATA:

Ruth Six

IS THE DATA PRIVACY SENSITIVE?: YES / NO

No.

IF YES: HOW WILL YOU ARRANGE SAFE STORAGE AND CONSENT OF THE PERSONS AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN YOUR RESEARCH?

It was permitted by the interviewees to use the data from the interviews for this thesis. The respective persons were asked to fill in and sign an 'Informed consent form'.

When needed, the data has been anonymized.

I will only grant access to the data to others, under the condition of consent of the respective persons and organizations (St. Martin-in-the-fields, HeartEdge and CityKerkAmsterdam)

=====

(The following has to be filled in by the thesis supervisor:)

X Approved

Not approved, because: _____

Name Benno van den Toren __

Signature: _



Date: _17 June 2023 _