

# Prepared for a missionary ministry in 21st century Europe

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## RÉSUMÉ

Il est largement reconnu que l'Europe est devenue une « terre de mission ». Pourtant, la plupart des unions d'Églises n'ont pas intégré ce fait dans la formation théologique qu'elles dispensent à leurs futurs pasteurs. Cet article commence par définir les contours d'un « ministère missionnaire ». Ce ministère doit viser à équiper les saints en vue du service. Il considère ensuite certains traits typiques de l'Europe post-chrétienne ou séculari-

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## SUMMARY

It is widely believed that Europe has become a 'mission field'. However, most denominations have not really processed this in the theological training they give to their future ministers. This article defines first what a 'missionary ministry' entails. It sees the task of ministers as equipping the saints to ministry. Secondly, it reflects

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Es ist eine weithin verbreitete Überzeugung, dass Europa zum ‚Missionsfeld‘ geworden ist. Die meisten Denominationen haben jedoch diese Erkenntnis noch nicht in der theologischen Ausbildung umgesetzt, die sie ihren künftigen Pastoren angedeihen lassen. Dieser Artikel definiert erstens, was einen ‚missionarischer Dienst‘ ausmacht, und sieht die Aufgabe von Pastoren darin, die Heiligen zum Dienst auszurüsten. Zweitens betrach-

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## Introduction

In this article I will set out some thoughts on the theological training of future ministers in the context of secular Europe.<sup>1</sup> This theme is located at the intersection of three important questions: 1) What is 'mission?', 2) What is ministry?, and 3) What

sée et la compare à une divorcée. Il présente et analyse la réponse chrétienne à apporter en termes d'adaptation, de conservation et d'innovation. Il reconsidère enfin quelle formation on donne actuellement aux pasteurs dans ce contexte et fait quelques propositions pour l'améliorer. Les pasteurs doivent être des étrangers dans la culture occidentale, profondément enracinés dans les Écritures, expérimentés au plan pratique, et à même de servir de guides spirituels.

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on some characteristics of post-Christian or 'secular' Europe which is compared to a divorcée. The Christian responses of adaptation, conservation and innovation are analysed. Finally, the current training of pastors in this context is reviewed and some suggestions for improvement are made. Ministers must be strangers in Western culture, deeply rooted in the Scriptures, familiar with practice and spiritual guides.

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tet er einige Charakteristiken des nachchristlichen oder ‚säkularen‘ Europa, das mit einer geschiedenen Frau verglichen wird, und analysiert die christlichen Antworten von Angleichung, Bewahrung und Neuerung. Schließlich überprüft der Artikel in diesem Zusammenhang die gegenwärtige Ausbildung von Leitern und macht einige Verbesserungsvorschläge. Pastorale Leiter sollten nicht in der westlichen Kultur, sondern stattdessen tief in der Schrift verwurzelt sein. Auch sollten sie mit praktischem Dienst und geistlicher Leiterschaft vertraut sein

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is our modern European context? Together these three questions sharpen our focus on the issue of missionary theological education for pastors in 21st century Europe. Only after we have tried to answer them, we can draw some outlines of how pastors may be prepared for their task in today's Europe.

## 1. What is mission?

So, what is mission? Unfortunately, our problems start here, right at the outset. Mission and evangelism<sup>2</sup> today suffer from a lack of clarity and purpose.<sup>3</sup> We must take some time, therefore, to consider what we mean by ‘mission’ and ‘missionary ministry’. (Is there also a ‘non-missionary’ ministry?) Is it something we *do* or first and foremost something we *are*, an essential identity mark of the Church? Does mission happen overseas or can it be done in Europe as well? Does mission include social justice advocacy or should it be limited to evangelism? I cannot conduct these discussions here. Let me just list seven brief statements that sum up what I believe about ‘mission’:

1. Mission begins with God who sends out his people in the world to call his chosen to discipleship and to gather them in a community of his followers, called to worship God, to serve and love their neighbours, and to care for God’s creation. The term *missio Dei* has often been misconstrued and it carries the burden of a thousand definitions. Yet, it is a wonderful term to indicate that mission is primarily the work of the Trinity and not ours. Mission is first and foremost the great work of the sovereign God and his love for his creation, urging him to elect, call, save and reconcile human beings. In mission we do not bring an absent Christ to an abandoned world. God is already ahead of us in mission, through his Holy Spirit. However hostile and resistant our world may be, it is essentially not an alien territory: it is God’s world.<sup>4</sup>
2. God’s primary instrument of mission is his Church. The Christian Church cannot be but a missionary church. Its very identity is to represent and give witness to God, the creator and ruler of the universe. Our mission is witnessing to this good news of God’s love as it has been revealed throughout the Bible, but ultimately in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every word, every deed that bears witness to this story of God working his purposes in the world is in principle missionary by its very nature.<sup>5</sup>
3. We need both words and deeds to do this act of witnessing. Mission is therefore wider than evangelism. It is everything the Church has been called to do in the world as witness of Christ. This does not involve each and every possible good deed, but especially those that

were the focus of Christ’s own work on earth as he announced the coming of the Kingdom: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, attending to the prisoners, prophesying against injustice, reconciling broken relationships.

4. However, without evangelism there can be no true Christian mission. This was the core of Jesus’ incarnate life and that of the work of the apostles. It is the essential criterion of mission that we ‘name the Name’ where it is not known and invite non-believers in the community of Jesus’ disciples. We cannot talk about the Kingdom of God in any meaningful sense if we leave out the one who represented this Kingdom among us.
5. All this means that the entire life of the Church has a missionary purpose or dimension. But this purpose can be recognised most clearly when the Church reaches out beyond its inner life and bears witness to the Gospel in the world. Christian mission is most visible where it happens at the frontier between faith and unbelief, as an act of costly witness.<sup>6</sup>
6. Mission presumes a local community that in its very life reflects the Gospel of the Kingdom. The medium is the message, or, in the words of Lesslie Newbigin: ‘The congregation is the hermeneutic of the Gospel.’ As soon as mission is cut loose from a loving, graceful community, it tends to become a ‘programme’. It runs the risk of being understood in terms of methods, effectiveness and measurable results.<sup>7</sup> This is why the Church should never outsource her task to parachurch movements, even if those organisations can be necessary at certain stages of the missionary process.
7. When we understand what mission is, we must not limit ‘mission’ to countries far away. What ‘mission’ is, is not defined by an address or geographical location. Since the early twentieth century it has increasingly been recognised that it is impossible to divide the world in ‘Christian’ and ‘pagan’ territories. Europe is a mission field just as every other continent is the object of God’s mission. It may be a very special mission field, one with a unique history, but mission is in principle never finished. As long as Christ has not returned, this is the time of God’s favour, the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2). When Johann Hinrich Wichern, the 19th century German evangelist, founded his *Innere Mis-*

sion ('home mission') he said: 'Mission in our times in this country is nothing but the continuation or the resumption of what the first missionaries had begun in Europe.'<sup>8</sup> I agree. Training for mission that comprises our western culture will require that we approach this frontier in missionary rather than in pastoral terms.

## 2. What is ministry?

Again, I will try to keep this section as concise as possible and just state what I think about this, without too much argumentation. In doing this I will be informed by my own Reformed background, but I believe that the following remarks may also be relevant for evangelicals who would not count themselves within this particular tradition. I want to make three points: 1) ministry must be distinguished from discipleship, 2) the ministry of the Word is the most essential ministry of the Church, and 3) the task of this particular ministry is to equip the saints for mission.

Sometimes the word 'ministry' seems to mean virtually everything a Christian does in his or her life of discipleship. (This has been caused, partly, by identifying it exclusively with the Greek *diakonia*.) But if it means everything, it does no longer mean anything special.<sup>9</sup> Ministry is not equivalent with general Christian behaviour such as worshipping, praying, evangelising, helping elderly people and so on. These are all aspects of discipleship, but not every disciple is a minister. Ministry implies a calling, a public recognition and an appointment for a certain task. Ministers (in the general sense) are people with a special responsibility. Ministry depends on the definition of gifts (*charismata*) by the community of Christians.

To be clear about this: having a gift of praying or serving or evangelising may result in an appointment into ministry for this special task. I am not suggesting that ministry is to be reserved for preachers, elders and deacons – or whatever we call our formal leadership.<sup>10</sup> It may be a very good thing to recognise publicly that certain members of the congregation have a special calling within or outside the Church and to officially 'send them out' for this task. Especially people working in highly secular workplaces deserve support like this. Lesslie Newbigin believed that this stress on the calling of individual believers in the public square was a characteristic contribution of the Reformed tradition to missionary ecclesiology.<sup>11</sup> According

to Darrell Guder, it is important that the Church provides forms of instruction and spiritual formation to help *all* its members to identify a specific vocation, perhaps for a specific period of time. For him this is the only way to change structures of (passive) membership into structures of mission.<sup>12</sup>

Some ministries, however, are more essential than others for the life of the Church and its mission. Within the Reformed tradition, the 'ministry of the Word' has been recognised as the core ministry of the Church.<sup>13</sup> This is not to deny that the Gospel should be embodied or that it must be expressed in deeds. However, the Church lives by the Gospel, and only under the guidance of the Word of God can it be constantly reformed. This is essential: if the Church is not continually experiencing the life-changing power of the Word, it cannot do mission. There are several ways to express this priority of the ministry of the Word. Reformed churches have expressed it, amongst other things, in the ordered offices: special ministries without which a church cannot function properly.

The ministry of the Word does not need to be confined to one single person. On the contrary, in Ephesians 4:11-12 five instances of this 'office' are mentioned: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In the Reformed tradition these dimensions have been concentrated in the office of the minister of the Word, the pastor-teacher. But already Calvin was quite clear about the fact that for him this was a matter of listening to the times (*necessitas temporum*) and acting accordingly. The centrality of the ministry of the Word is a Reformed doctrine; the solo pastor is not. It is important to underline this. For more than one reason the ministry of the Word in today's missionary Church should be embodied in a *team*, a fellowship of faithful men and women,<sup>14</sup> with shared responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>

Anyhow, from Ephesians 4 it appears clearly what the function of this ministry is: 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry' (v. 12). This means that all the formally structured offices of the Church (i.e., those who have been appointed to the ministry of the Word) as a mission community are defined in terms of that mission. The offices must be functional to the Church's mission and they can be reorganised if the mission of the Church requires this. However, regardless of its organisation, the ministry of the Word always has these five dimensions: it is apostolic, prophetic, evangelising, pastoral and instructive. All five dimensions are needed to equip the Church for mission.

### 3. What is a missionary ministry?

So what is a ‘missionary ministry’? As far as I can see, this word can mean two things:

1. In a general sense, it may mean every special vocation in the area of mission. Although every Christian is called to be a witness, some Christians may have specific missionary gifts and responsibilities. Of course, we can think of missionaries and evangelists, but we do not need to stop there. For example, the church may recognise that some of her members who work in education, health care, the government, the army, business or the arts need special training and spiritual guidance in order to make the most of their witness in these circumstances. Sadly enough, many churches fail badly in this area.
2. In a specific sense, ‘missionary ministry’ is the ministry of the Word as it functions in its apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral and instructive dimensions, to equip the people of God for mission. At the risk of stating the obvious, this is what makes this ministry ‘tick’. There is no such thing as a ‘de-missionary’ ministry of the Word. Whoever uses this ministry to equip the saints for something different than mission is not ministering the Word of God. And whoever thinks that ‘mission’ is an optional ‘extra’, not intrinsically connected with the ministry of the Divine Word, is mistaken.

The above may sound a bit overdone. Surely, there is more than ‘mission’? So many church leaders focus almost exclusively on the needs and interests of believers, especially in the ‘religious department’ of their lives. So many sermons hardly (if ever) encounter the questions of unbelievers. So very few ministers of the Word are actively involved in evangelism or any other mission the church is called to do. So many church councils limit their pastors severely with respect to the time they are allowed to spend ‘on the street’, searching for lost sheep. Would I suggest that all these honourable people fulfil their office in a dysfunctional way?

As a matter of fact, yes. Even if this is the default mode of our theology and practice of the offices, and although I would never blame individual ministers for this inadequate fulfilment of their task (systemic errors must not be blamed on individuals), nevertheless we must state that this is a very harmful distortion of the ministry of the Word. Here we wrestle with the heritage of centu-

ries of Christendom. Mission was something that happened far away, ‘out there’. It was an optional ‘extra’, something for special occasions. In Europe everybody was a Christian, even if he or she needed further instruction and formation. Church leadership was conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations but not as a missionary way of being.<sup>16</sup> Today we see this inward focus of church ministry revealed in the tendency of denominations to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in places where there are still enough Christians available to support them. This not only accelerates the decline, it is also the opposite of a missionary strategy, which would send ministers where they are most needed – where Christian presence is weakest.<sup>17</sup> In the words of Lesslie Newbigin:

Ministerial leadership for a missionary congregation will require that the minister is directly engaged in the warfare of the kingdom against the powers that usurp the kingship.<sup>18</sup>

I am very happy that today we can see some good models of this fulfilment of the ministry of the Word. To mention a few examples I have seen in the Netherlands:

- More and more ministers, following the lead of men like Tim Keller, embark on the adventure of preaching missionally. They really want to minister the Word in such a way that unbelievers, seekers and young Christians are challenged, built up and instructed (cf. 1 Corinthians 14).
- More and more ministers want to be involved in evangelistic work and require substantial time from their elders for this. They refuse to be completely swallowed by the pastoral needs of church members.
- I know of ministers who deliberately join secular clubs (sports, arts, business) or remain involved in secular professions (tent making, bi-vocational pastors) as part of their missionary ministry. They do not want to lock themselves away within the safety of the church walls.
- More and more ministers dedicate themselves to instructing, encouraging and coaching small groups of young Christians to help them find their way in God’s kingdom.
- More and more ministers apply themselves to the task of revitalising or replanting congregations that have withered away.
- Church planting is increasingly becoming



a respected occupation for Reformed pastors. An assessment for future church planters in the Netherlands (February 2011) was attended by twelve young theologians, some of them already working in the ministry, others still looking forward to it.

Humanly speaking, Christians will only be involved in mission when their ministers lead the way. They must be challenged, encouraged, supported, instructed to answer God's call to love their neighbour and to take care of his creation. This must be done, first and foremost, by ministering the Word of God to them, communally and individually, by gifted people who have experienced the grace of God's mission in their own lives.

How do we educate such ministers in Europe today? That is the main question in the remainder of this article. I will first spend some words on Europe, our shared context.

#### 4. Europe today

Europe is a mission field. As I have said above, there is nothing strange or unexpected in this statement. If God is a missionary God, if the Church is a missionary community, the whole world is and will remain a mission field until Jesus returns and the kings of the earth throw down their crowns before him. The current secularisation of large parts of Europe is only a reminder that there will never be such a thing as a fully 'missionised' society. In fact, the division of the world into 'mission fields' and 'mission bases' has become obsolete.<sup>19</sup>

However, Europe is a special mission field (and therefore a special mission base as well!). It has a long history of Christendom. Once church membership was a duty for citizens in most European countries. Long and bloody religious wars have been fought in Europe. Many of our institutions and laws carry the vestiges of our Christendom history. Even today the majority of the Europeans are formally church members and believe in 'God' (however defined). Europe is also a large and very diverse continent. In terms of religion it contains some of the most religious countries in the world (like Poland and Northern Ireland) but it is also home to the most irreligious countries on the face of the planet (like France and Sweden).

In this article I focus on what we might call the 'post-Christian' (or secular) parts of Europe.<sup>20</sup> It is here that traditional assumptions of church leadership are challenged most. Characteristic of a

post-Christian society is on the one hand its determination by Christianity; on the other hand its resistance to it. C.S. Lewis once compared this to a divorce: a woman who has divorced her husband is not just an unmarried woman. She is in a very specific sense 'post-married', determined by marriage experiences, yet currently not married and very wary of future marriage.

Post-Christian European culture is the consequence of a long historical encounter between Christianity and modernity.<sup>21</sup> Out of this encounter new forms of Christianity and secularity have emerged, forms that we are all familiar with. Let us first look at modernity. I think we all have some idea what is meant by that word. Here I follow a list presented by the sociologist Yves Lambert.<sup>22</sup> He defines seven interrelated trends of modernity: 1) the primacy of reason, 2) the omnipresence of technology (representing control and power), 3) individualisation and freedom, 4) mass movement (mobility), 5) capitalism (market and consumption), 6) functional differentiation (autonomy of separate spheres of society) and 7) globalisation.

What about Christianity? Lambert and other social scientists mention four characteristic 'effects' of modernity on religion: 1) decline, 2) adaptation or reinterpretation, 3) conservation or resistance, and 4) innovation. In missiological terms we might say that options 2) to 4) represent different dimensions of *contextualisation*. For Christianity to contextualise in the current European culture it needs to adapt and to be reinterpreted in order to be understood. It needs to resist and conserve in order to keep its integrity. It needs to innovate and find new cultural forms in order to transform social life in the light of God's purposes. (Let me notice, in parenthesis, that most evangelical Christians in my observation are better in adaptation and resistance than in innovation. We tend to define adapted and conservative forms of religion as 'real' evangelical options, while we tend to be suspicious towards innovative forms of religion.)

#### 5. Modern religious patterns in Europe

How does this work in practice? If we combine the seven trends of modernity with the four effects on / responses of religion, twenty-eight different religious and anti-religious pathways of modern Europeans emerge. Let me give two examples to illustrate this.

Take the 'primacy of reason'. Modernity has developed rational, evidence-based ways of

speaking and arguing, science being the ultimate example. Revelation and religious authority have become unreliable sources of knowledge for modern people. This has resulted first of all in the *decline* of religion (Christianity) since many Europeans felt that reason and religion were opposed to each other. One of the most vigorous spokesmen of this position today is the Englishman Richard Dawkins.<sup>23</sup> Modern atheism is a consequence of this, although only a small minority of Europeans (around 5%) are forthright atheists.

But this was not the only effect. Christianity has also *adapted* itself to the age of reason. It developed ways to show the rationality of faith (apologetics). Protestants in particular resisted magic and mystery, they applied rational methods in the exegesis of the Bible, and so forth. Thirdly, Christians have *resisted* the rule of reason, for example in the Pietistic movements, in Pentecostalism, but also in the Roman Catholic emphasis on liturgy and sacraments. All this pertains to an underlining of the non-rational elements of faith or even to stressing that Christianity is per definition not a philosophy or theory (Kierkegaard). Finally, modernity has forced Christians to develop new forms of Christianity or it has invited Christians to find new, 'rational' expressions of their religion. Within Protestant Christianity (and Islam) we may think of creationism as a typical modern form of believing ('evidence-based' as it were). But Deism is another example. In a rational world, controlled by human power, it seems hard to believe in a personal God who is always close at hand and prepared to answer our prayers. Increasingly, Europeans believe in an impersonal God, 'something out there'. Both can be explained as forms of *innovation*: finding new ways to maintain a religious life view in a rational world.

A second example is 'individualisation and freedom'. Modern people emphasise their individuality to such an extent that they have said goodbye to collective arrangements, institutions and traditional authorities – religious or otherwise. Again, this has led to the *decline* of Christianity, because many people believed that they could only be free and responsible individuals if they broke with religion. It was a matter of human dignity to become an atheist or a secular humanist. But it is a well-known fact that Christianity has *adapted* itself, especially in its Protestant versions, to this new reality. Many analysts would even say that the Reformation was one of the first cultural expressions of this new individuality in the West. Protestant

Christians have stressed personal piety and experience at the expense of liturgy and sacraments. They have elevated the priesthood of all believers and downplayed the importance of institutions and authorities. Then again, Christians have also tried to *resist* this trend. Especially in the most conservative parts of evangelical denominations there is great emphasis on obedience and collective arrangements, and a great suspicion of individuality. But the Roman Catholic Church too maintains its very critical stance towards individual religion. Finally, in terms of *innovation*, we may think of all those new religious practices today that show an increased sense of self-awareness and self-development. Denominational mobility, permanent 'seeking', do-it-yourself religion and certain forms of spirituality are among these new religious trends.

From cross-pressures like these the typical post-Christian European landscape emerges. This is the field where today's ministers of the Word have to equip the people of God for mission. Yves Lambert mentions six features of this landscape. Here I mention only three of them. New religious forms of modernity are characterised by:

1. This-worldliness: the dominance of technology, science and human control has led to a very strong immanent orientation of most Europeans. If religion is anything worthwhile, it has to prove itself in the arena of everyday life. This has affected Christianity as well. The importance given to other-worldly salvation has collapsed. Generally, Christians tend to be more world-affirming than world-rejecting. They emphasise the consequences of faith for this life and speak less and less about the afterlife. An important consequence of this-worldliness is the disassociation between sin and guilt and one's fate after death (desoteriologisation) which leads to the collapse of the concept of sin or to a more 'this-worldly' interpretation: sin distances one from God in the here and now and prevents one from benefiting from his grace, from being fully happy, from communicating with the deep inner self, from finding earthly peace and harmony, and so forth.
2. Self-spirituality: the desire for freedom and liberty combined with empiricism, in a pluralistic environment. In an unstable environment, surrounded by so many alternative options, the believing individual looks for firm evidence that they are right after all. This

supreme spiritual authority can be the inner self or some form of 'divine within'. Even if external beliefs, scriptures, norms or authorities are accepted, they must be legitimated through personal experience. This applies to morality, for example. One-half of the Europeans say that the churches offer answers to spiritual problems, while only one-third believe this to be true for moral, social and family problems.

3. Pluralism, relativism, probabilism, pragmatism: this is the consequence of modern trends such as the supremacy of science, the desire for freedom (personal religious choice), democracy and globalisation (confronting us with so many other worldviews). They encourage pluralistic, relativistic forms of faith, or in reaction, trends that reassert the certainties. With extreme demythologisation, this can end in complete 'liberalism' (symbolist faith: Jesus' resurrection is a necessary symbol but not a historic fact). Generally, modern believers have a 'seeker spirituality': even if they are devout Christians, they need space for exploration, experimentation and mobility.

When we reflect on this post-Christian culture, we may become aware of a major pitfall. Whenever theologians analyse modern culture they tend to oppose 'theology' (or the 'Gospel') to 'culture', as if it were possible to discuss these two separately. This problem is reinforced by the tendency of our seminaries and universities to do theology exclusively by books and lectures. We discuss our culture as if we are unaffected outsiders, representatives of a pre-modern past, looking at this foreign tribe of post-Christian Europeans. Consequently, we develop a missiology out of our a-cultural convictions and 'drop' this missiology into our culture, as if from a Platonic world of Ideas.

However, we need to see that all our answers are contextualised answers. They are negotiations with modernity. All our theological or missiological approaches of post-Christian Europe are examples of adaptation, conservation or innovation. Regardless of whether we are aware of this, we present our analyses and answers as late-modern Europeans. Even if we claim that our answers must be exactly the same as those of our ancestors, we say different things because we live in completely different circumstances. For instance, speaking of the 'covenant' sounds very different in an individualised

society compared with a much more traditional and collective society some centuries ago. This is true, even (or especially) if we would say exactly the same things as our theological ancestors.

Thinking about 'missionary ministry' today, we must be aware of our own responses to modernity. We must be aware of the extent to which our own practice and belief is determined by this-worldliness, self-spirituality and relativity. We need to reflect on this and to ask ourselves what in our missiology is necessary adaptation, what is actually Christianised modernity, and what is healthy innovation. We need to know where to bend to modernity, where to resist it and where to design new Christian beliefs and practices, incorporating the true insights of modernity. The modern missionary movement was born out of strong convictions of the absolute truth of Christianity combined with belief in the absolute superiority of Western culture. It is very difficult for most modern Christians to maintain these convictions with the same force as previous generations. Consequently, some authors today speak of a 'post-missionary' age. We need to do mission within a changed world, as people who have changed.

With this in mind, let us finally turn to the issue of missionary education of ministers of the Word in Europe today.

## 6. Preparing for mission?

In what follows I concentrate on the formal theological training of pastors in a Reformed setting – the setting I know best. In my country this usually means the completion of a university degree after four to six years of study. Of course, there are many other ways to study theology: evening classes, Bible schools and Sunday schools, TEE and so forth. What I am about to say about theological education relates to these types of education as well, generically. However, my own experience lies with university training, professional and academic.<sup>24</sup>

Does this training prepare students for missionary ministry? The missiologist Wilbert Shenk recalls that in 1990 and 1991 he conducted a survey in several Western countries to determine 1) if there were programmes whose object was the training of missionaries to the peoples of modern Western culture; and, if so 2) what the curriculum comprised. His conclusion was: 'I never advanced beyond the first question.'<sup>25</sup> There were occasional courses on missiology or evangelism, to be sure,

but nowhere was there any sign of a complete rethinking of the theological curriculum in terms of the missionary identity of the church.

Speaking for my own country, the Netherlands, there have been some improvements since then. In most theology departments, especially those connected to a church denomination, missionary competencies have been included in the profile of future ministers. It is recognised that a minister of the Word today is inevitably a kind of missionary in his own culture. This insight has to some extent been translated in the curricula of universities. The Protestant Theological University, for example, has included two or three missionary modules in the training of future pastors of the largest Protestant church in the Netherlands. And the Theological University in Kampen (Free Reformed) offers a full year (60 European Credits) of missiological training which may be included in the three year Master's study of future ministers of the Word as a year of specialisation.

But overall it is still possible to become a pastor in one of the Reformed (and most other) denominations in the Netherlands without much missiological training of any substance. Even now the curriculum reflects that mission is for those who are interested in it, for special people, 'practical' people – but not for 'real' theologians. Why is this still the case? Let us consider some causes:

1. Old habits die hard. A theological curriculum that has been developed in centuries of Christendom is not likely to change overnight. To quote Newbigin once again:

... it seems clear that ministerial training as currently conceived is still... far too little oriented toward the missionary calling to claim the whole of public life for Christ and his kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, theology is something that is done within the Church, as far away from the world as possible. I sometimes wonder how many students take theology as their route, just to be in a safe, predictable environment. And how many professors do they meet who seem just to reflect this position? Wonderful, faithful and learned people, but 'hospitalised' to such an extent that they lack the competence to communicate with anyone outside the walls of their seminary, let alone with unbelievers.

2. A gap between mission and theology. Here is a serious difficulty in Western theology:

it considers mission, and especially evangelism, as something that is indispensable in practice but not really interesting from a theological perspective.<sup>27</sup> The evangelistic tradition, on the other hand, has increasingly been hijacked by marketers, sales managers and church growth gurus. There is a deep hidden covenant here between theologians and evangelists: they both know that theology and evangelism are not really interested in each other. We may confess that all good theology is born in mission, out of reflection on the Gospel crossing new borderlines, but this insight has hardly been processed in our theology. Whoever has studied Jonathan Edwards knows that mission experiences can produce very strong theology. Today the same applies in many non-Western contexts. But when our students are really interested in theology, they opt for systematics or biblical studies. Missiology or evangelism is for 'practitioners' – for the less intelligent perhaps?

3. A lack of exercise. This is partly due to the Christendom system. Most theology professors have been educated within this paradigm. This means that they have loads of experience in the field of preaching (for Christians, that is), pastoral work and church politics, but very little in social justice advocacy, leading Alpha courses and creative evangelism. As a consequence, they speak with confidence about matters that concern the inner life of the church and hesitantly, abstractly and without much inspirational force about mission. But the same applies to the students. Even if they have personal experience with mission, they lack the opportunity to reflect on these experiences in class. Their practice and their theology remain separated. The organisation of the curriculum reinforces this problem, since our theological education is focused on books and classroom work. Doing social research, being involved in, for example, leading a Christianity Explored course or doing volunteer work in the Red Light district of Amsterdam are not part of the curriculum. Thus, these practices will not become sources of theological reflection or help students to develop a missionary spirituality. They remain enclosed in a predominantly middle class, family-oriented, white, Christian environment, the cultural rules of which they have incorporated to such an extent that they



easily identify it with ‘biblical’ Christianity.

So there is a double challenge here. First, we must overcome a very strong tradition of inward-looking theological education. Second, we must find ways to understand and do mission in a post-Christian, post-missionary context, full of uncertainties. I believe this leads us to the following programme of theological education today.

## 7. Programme of theological education

In this last section I mention five programmatic fields in the theological education of pastors. Ministers of the Word in post-Christian Europe must be:

1. *Strangers again*. A missionary is a guest, not the owner of the house (cf. Luke 10:1-16). This is easier to accept when we are sent to foreign continents than in our own. ‘We who are indigenous to this culture too easily accept the dubious assumption that we know it in its depths’.<sup>28</sup> I believe becoming a stranger has three different dimensions:
  - accepting our marginalisation without losing our love: our post-Christian situation may teach us that Christians are never truly at home in the world. The fact that Christian pastors have lost their status and respectful position may teach us something about the wisdom of the cross. Learning to become a stranger again begins with joyfully accepting our marginal position as a minority in secular Europe but without losing our love for God’s world. We do not need to control our societies in order to love our neighbours and to pray for our governments;
  - developing curiosity for the unknown and rejecting rash judgements: especially those who are thrilled by everything new and those that are abhorred by it, tend to judge too quickly. If we learn to become strangers again in our own culture we will be more impressed by its complexity. We will accept that the only way to know it is to be involved in it, and that it will take years before we can understand it somewhat;
  - developing critical sense and resistance against the dominance of modernity: becoming a stranger again helps us not to be impressed too quickly by the modern attitude towards our religion. Western

culture is powerful, all-pervasive and saturated with irony. This can be very discouraging for every missionary. We must learn to see through this mask of self-confidence. How? First and foremost through relationships with Christians from other parts of the world, especially those parts that suffer under Western power. Secondly, by forging relationships with the marginal people of our own society. For example, reflecting on the issue of trafficking and sex slavery has helped me to see the dark side of the city where I live, Amsterdam. This is a city that is determined by consumption. Everything seems negotiable, there seems to be no room at all for a firm conviction about anything. But at the same time this city takes in a lot of money by advertising its Red Light District. If we do not develop the attitude of committed strangers in our own culture, we will end up being absorbed by it or being so revolted by it that we become sectarians. Missionary consciousness entails that we realise that all cultures are human constructs, full of sin and grace. None, including the culture of Christendom, approximates the Kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup>

2. *Deeply rooted in the Scriptures*. Newbigin once said that every missionary must learn to speak two languages: his first language is the language of the Bible and his second language is that of the culture where he is sent. Some time ago I was deeply impressed when I met a group of Brazilian theology students. When a Dutch theology professor asked them what would be their ‘theological’ response to the Health & Wealth Gospel that currently pervades their country, I saw all of them immediately grasp their Bibles (so much for trained instincts!). When they opened them, I saw that all these Bibles were full of underlining and colour. It was obvious that their Bibles were their tools, not just sources of data. After this we had half an hour of discussion, that is to say: the students very gracefully exchanged Bible quotes (sometimes very unexpected ones but virtually always to the point), compared Scripture with Scripture, and made some astonishingly wise remarks. Everything showed that they were people highly trained in using the Bible, not just as a box full of texts that can be used in whatever

way we like (usually to manipulate others), but as a way of communal reading aimed at shared challenges. I must admit that my students rarely bring Bibles to their classes. Somehow we have learnt that quoting the Bible directly in a theological university is too simple, bordering on naivety. Of course, we believe the Bible and we do read it, individually, but we are so aware of hermeneutical difficulties, historical problems and the dangers of biblicism that one of the things our students may learn is never to use the Bible to solve practical problems in ministry. In recent times I am trying to change this. Whenever I discuss a theological issue in class (say, conversion or ecclesiology or secularisation) I ask my students to prepare this at home by looking up passages from the Bible that they feel to be relevant for this discussion. Then I set apart the first 30 or 45 minutes of every course to discuss these passages together. I believe it is important to be aware of hermeneutics and historical analysis, and sometimes I insert remarks on this into our discussions, but we must never forget that the Bible has been given us first to transform us and not to inform us.<sup>30</sup>

3. *Acquainted with practice.* As I said above, it is indispensable for theological education to immerse students in missionary practice. They are sources for theological reflection and invaluable opportunities to learn to become strangers again. They invite us to study the Bible together. They help us to be theologians of the Church. They give us credibility when we address others, Christians and non-Christians.
4. *People of paradox.* Every good book on leadership will tell us that paradox is an important ingredient of effective leaders. They must be capable of being close to people but without being swallowed up by them. This is called 'self-differentiation': a minister should not be dependent on the approval of people for his own identity, but neither should he be cold and indifferent to them. Intimacy without fear, that is the gracious quality of a Godly leader. However, I believe that this same quality also applies to us as cultural beings. Post-Christian culture is paradoxical at heart. Modern trends and religious responses to them are not uniform; they point in a wide variety of directions, often contradicting

each other. Liberalism and fundamentalism are both *modern* religious positions, and we often find them in our own immediate environments – or even in our own soul. To do mission in this culture we must be so close to it that we feel the relativity and the pluralism in it, without losing our hope and desire for God's glory. We must be people of the paradox. We must accept that we will never completely understand our own culture and its effects on us. We must certainly accept that we will never control it. Especially for evangelicals this is a hard lesson to learn. We like consistency; we are good at building logical systems. We believe that everyone whose opinions on an issue are not cast in iron must automatically give way to relativism on other issues as well. But people of the paradox know how to 'muddle through': they like to think and work step by step. They seek consistency but they accept that this is often a futile search. Post-Christian missionaries will always look for the high ground but they know that we often have to wade through swamps to get there.

5. *Spiritual guides.* In a recent survey Dutch people were asked which associations they had with 'spirituality'. These associations were generally positive; many modern people are looking for more spirituality, for a sense of meaning and purpose. But when asked for persons and institutions they would go to in their search for spirituality, hardly anyone mentioned the church. Churches are not spiritual; they are moralistic places, dull, teaching doctrine instead of experience. Much can be said about this. I do not want to suggest that this judgement is correct but I believe that it is not very helpful to become defensive about this. The first Christians were considered as very peculiar and sometimes dangerous people but they were never seen as dull. If people look at the church as a place where spirituality is extinguished, we do have a problem. I believe that in our culture of 'seeker' spirituality we need to be on the road where people are. I wish that ministers of the Divine Word would be seen again as 'those strange guys outside the camp who seem to know how to knock on heaven's doors'. Spiritual formation needs to be included in our theological curricula, both in theory and in practice. Our students need to know how

to help people who ask questions like ‘how can I pray?’, ‘what will happen if I become a Christian?’, ‘why can’t I control my temper?’, ‘how can I find more balance between my work and my life?’ and ‘what does your faith have to say about family feuds?’. They need to become sensitive to the pathfinder spirituality of modern people and to find ways to be on the road with them. ‘We do not want to lord over your faith’, Paul writes, ‘but we work with you for your joy’ (2 Corinthians 1:24).

These five fields of attention are pivotal in the theological training of our ministers. I hope that they will inspire us to reform our ministerial training and to contribute to the formation of the next generation of servants of the Divine Word.

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### Notes

- 1 Originally this article was a discussion paper for the European Conference of Reformed Churches (EuCRC) on 22 March 2011, Kampen (the Netherlands). I have only made minor adaptations.
- 2 To keep the discussion as simple as possible, I will not discuss the term ‘evangelisation’. I take this more or less as an equivalent of ‘mission’ and thus as a wider concept than ‘evangelism’.
- 3 James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church & Kingdom: comparative studies in world mission theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1987) 35.
- 4 Cf. Paul Avis, *A ministry shaped by mission* (London: T&T Clark, 2005) 7.
- 5 Cf. J. Andrew Kirk, *What is mission? Theological explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999) 20-21.
- 6 Scherer, *Gospel*, 37.
- 7 Darrell L. Guder, *The continuing conversion of the church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) ix.
- 8 See Stefan Paas, ‘The making of a mission field: paradigms of evangelistic mission in Europe’, *Exchange* 41 (2012) fc.
- 9 Avis, *Ministry*, 44ff.
- 10 Luther’s emphasis on the ‘ministry of all believers’ may be mentioned here. I am not altogether sure how to explain this notion. It is derived, of course, from 1 Peter 2:9, where the Church as a whole is called a ‘royal priesthood’. Here, the term does not seem to imply that every single believer is a priest (this is, in my opinion, not the issue of Peter’s dis-

course) but that the Church has a mediating role in the world, representing the world to God and God to the world. Luther’s phrase was aimed at the equality of all believers: we do not need human mediators (priests) between God and us. However, this does not exclude the presence of (special) ministries in the Church, and as far as I know Luther never took that approach either.

- 11 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 229-231; cf. Michael Goheen, *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000) 403-405.
- 12 Guder, *Conversion*, 176-180; cf. Newbigin, *Gospel*, 230-231.
- 13 Guder, *Conversion*, 161-164; Avis, *Ministry*, 49.
- 14 Here I do not intend to take a position as to the ordination of women. It is perfectly possible, in my opinion, to have ordained and non-ordained people in such a team. The ministry of the Word may include preaching in Sunday worship but also pastoring the elderly, evangelising on a camping site, leading a Sunday school class, conducting an Alpha Course and so forth.
- 15 Esp. Guder, *Conversion*, 164.
- 16 There have certainly been exceptions to this rule. In the tradition of the Reformation we may point at John Calvin’s evangelistic practice in France or at the Dutch Reformed Church in the 16th century that applied a kind of ‘missionary’ membership structure. Nevertheless, these missionary attempts were seen as necessary temporary measures, aimed at a ‘normalisation’ of the situation, i.e. a Christian realm where one religion was dominant. They were not considered as permanent structures, connected with the very identity of the Church.
- 17 Newbigin, *Gospel*, 235-236.
- 18 Newbigin, *Gospel*, 240.
- 19 For more discussion, see Paas, ‘Making’.
- 20 In my opinion ‘post-Christian’ is one of the dimensions of the multidimensional word ‘secular’. I discuss this in ‘Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: towards the interaction of missiology and the social sciences’, *Mission Studies* 28.1 (2011) fc.
- 21 Actually, this is too simple. What we call ‘modernity’ is – at least partly – a product of Christianity. But for the sake of analysis I will act as if ‘Christianity’ and ‘modernity’ are two separate streams in European history.
- 22 Yves Lambert, ‘Religion in modernity as a new axial age: secularisation or new religious forms?’, *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999) 303-333.
- 23 See R. Dawkins, *The God delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006).
- 24 In the Netherlands there are two types of universities: vocational (cf. former polytechnics in the UK) and academic. Theologians who have been trained

- in a vocational university receive four years (240 European Credits; BaTh) of education of which one year consists of specialisation in, for example, pastoral work or evangelism. However, Reformed churches in the Netherlands do not accept this type of training for their ministers. They hire these theologians as church workers: pastoral assistants, co-pastors, evangelists, youth workers and the like, but not as ministers of the Word. To become an ordained minister one needs six years of academic theological training (360 European Credits; MTh).
- 25 Wilbert R. Shenk, 'The Training of Missiologists for Western Culture' in J. Dudley Woodberry *et al.* (eds.), *Missiological education for the twenty-first century: the book, the circle, and the sandals* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) 120.
- 26 Newbigin, *Gospel*, 231.
- 27 Cf. William J. Abraham, *The logic of evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- 28 Shenk, 'Training', 125.
- 29 Shenk, 'Training', 125.
- 30 Cf. Brian Brock, *Singing the ethos of God: on the place of Christian ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).