

Pioneering Spots in the Netherlands: A Missional Mainline Church's Turnaround and The Discovery of Innovative Ways of Communicating the Gospel in a Pluralistic Society (A research overview on the years 2012 – 2020)

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Abstract

The article analyzes the recent missional mainline turnaround in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands, founded in a re-discovery of the basic Christian values of what church is about and opening up new ways of being church in a highly secularized, pluralistic society by starting “Pioneer Places/Pioneering spots.” The article combines reflections on church memoranda and research reports, including personal interviews with pioneers on-site in both urban and rural settings. From this perspective the article encourages a fresh approach for mission and evangelism within societies of Western imprint.¹

Introduction: “I feel noticed and welcome”

When it comes to understanding mission and evangelism “the right way” I have often heard the phrase that it would be just about “sharing the pure gospel.” But, as missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin reminds, there is no such thing as a pure gospel – there is only a gospel enfolded in a given cultural context.² And Andrew Walls, historian of Christian missions, points out: “Divinity is translated into humanity, but into *specific* humanity, at home in specific segments of social reality. If the incarnation of the Son represents a divine act of translation, it is a prelude to repeated acts of re-translation.”³ Churches around the globe are called to partake in those repeated acts of re-translation of the Divine message represented in the Scriptures into the given social contexts of our day and age. Moreover, denominations should learn from each other in this concern. The present article suggests taking a closer look

at the recent missional turnaround within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) that led to the founding of “pioneering spots” as new forms of Christian communities, thus having a remarkable impact on individuals as the following example may indicate:

Barbara Jikai de Zoete (53) first met pastor Hinne Wagenaar while she was in a clinic, recovering from a fractured leg. Through him she became involved in Nijkleaster, a monastic pioneering spot in the Frisian village of Jorwerd. At first, she was only interested in *the stones*: “This was my chance to see the church of Geert Mak.” However, she is deeply touched by the morning prayers that are being held there every Wednesday. Her involvement in Nijkleaster marks the beginning of a big change in her life. “I had a small social network, now there is a large group of people I completely trust.” She was not against the

¹ Dedicated in gratitude to Paul Revere Ervin Jr., partner in ministry and fatherly friend, in honor of his 80th birthday.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 4.

³ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, (New York: Orbis, 1996), xvii.

Christian nature of Nijkleaster, but was at first not very taken by it either. Nevertheless, she grew interested. “To my own surprise I found out that I developed a belief in God. This is something I wrestled with for a long time. In the end I decided to give in.” At Easter 2019 Barbara was baptized. Through Nijkleaster Barbara developed a new social network. To her it is important that Nijkleaster is a group of people where you can share a lot with others in a safe way. “We are in conversation. We listen to each other. Nijkleaster has a rule of life: listen each other into being. I have never felt any obstacle to completely be myself. I have never felt judgment. I feel noticed and welcome, without obstacles. I don’t need to leave any part of myself behind.” Through her involvement in Nijkleaster she has gotten more involved with people in her own town Appelscha. She also got involved with the church there and is a volunteer in the local nursery home. “It has given my life a different direction. I was desperately looking for a steady job, the standard homely bliss. Now I am no longer reaching for great things. When the sacristan calls because he needs help to move some chairs, I get on my bike. My idea of what is valuable has completely changed. I never thought that I would volunteer in a nursery home. I have completely changed.”⁴

A Missional Mainline Church’s Turnaround

When it comes to reflecting new ways of being a missional church in our day and age, the discussion is often related to the movement for Fresh Expressions of

Church in Great Britain.⁵ In comparison, the pioneering activities in the Netherlands seem to be fairly unknown. It is in the 2012 vision memorandum of the PKN “De hartslag van het leven” where the word ‘pioneering places’ is mentioned for the first time.⁶ Since then, the church has made remarkable efforts to change the game for a long-term declining denomination, by re-founding itself afresh in a missional theology and by taking the risk of starting a significant number of pioneer ministries which go beyond the traditional parish system.

On a recent research trip to the Netherlands in early summer of 2020 I was taken by surprise, as one of the first sentences my B&B host in Groningen quite casually remarked: “Y’know, we’re all atheists up here.” Indeed, Holland has not been known for a blooming church landscape lately - on the contrary. Conservative Roman Catholic Archbishop Willem Jacobus Eijk of Utrecht in 2013 complained that “100 churches had to be closed annually, 1,000 in the last 10 years” and spoke of a “future without churches” for his country as a result of the “errors of local churches...and abandonment of evangelism.”⁷ Five years later, the Bishop predicted that in 2028 only 15 of the 280 churches in the Archbishopric of Utrecht would still be in use.⁸

On the Protestant side it does not look much better. In contrast to the Anglican Church in the UK, the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* is not a state church, but a rather recent coalition that surfaced in 2004 from the merger of three predecessor churches.⁹ In the deeply secularized and ideologically pluralistic Holland, conclusions have been drawn from the recognition that the classic “vessels” of church work no longer reach the majority of the people, especially not in the cities and within the younger generations. According to recent statistics, the Protestant Church has lost around 3% of its members, which means 50,000 – 60,000 people each

⁴ Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, *Pioneering: State of Affairs: The Impact of Pioneering on Social Cohesion and Religious Development*, (Utrecht: 2020), 4.

⁵ Cf. Michael Moynagh with Philip Harrold, *Church in Every Context. An Introduction to Theology and Practice*, (London: SCM, 2012) and Michael Moynagh, *Being Church – Doing Life, Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens*, (Oxford: Monarch, 2014.)

⁶ Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, *The Heartbeat of Life. Memorandum concerning the vision for the life and work of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands*, (Utrecht 2012).

⁷ <https://katholisch.info/2013/07/04/sie-nennen-sie-die-toten-kirchen-christentum-in-den-niederlanden/>, retrieved August 10, 2020.

⁸ The magazine *Trouw* reported that in summer 2019 in the Netherlands 1,400 of 6,900 (i.e. every fifth church building) was in use for non-religious purposes (municipal center, museums, apartments, theaters), <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/22129-schon-jede-fuenfte-kirche-in-den-niederlanden-ist-zweckentfremdet>, accessed August 12, 2020.

⁹ The Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN) was founded on 1 May 2004 as a merger of the former *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* and the *Evangelical Lutherse Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*. Today it represents about 10% of the Dutch population.

year over the past decade.¹⁰ This is why the church leadership was coming to the realization that their outdated parochial system doesn't fit into all spheres of society. The 2016 memorandum *Church 2025: Where there's a Word, there's a way* admits:

It is a fair statement that the idea of a people's church in the sense of omnipresence is no longer tenable. It is not good to maintain the camouflage of the parochial system. In a positive sense, "open areas" say something about the missional calling of the church and the explicit responsibility of the church for areas where there is no longer a 'normal' religious presence.¹¹

Over the last eight years, the topic of "pioneering" in the PKN has become increasingly important - even a matter of necessity. In this church one does not speak of "Fresh Expressions of Church," but of "pioneer places" or, more recently, "pioneering spots" (Pioniersplekken). The aim is to emphasize the new and the unexpected, as well as the courageous and challenging nature of the cause. In the 2016 memorandum *Church 2025*, a new focus on a missional ecclesiology is recognizable:

First and foremost, this means that the heart of the church is in the local congregation. Wherever two or three people gather together, Christ is among them. The local congregation consists of the faithful in communion with each other. The faithful are the disciples of Jesus. They are the living body; they live through God's Holy Spirit. The church is therefore not a service-based institution where professionals serve a public audience. The church is the congregation of the faithful, the followers of Jesus who are called by Jesus himself and who are privileged to be a part of his body.¹²

This statement may sound unspectacular, but it is definitely not. Such a radical "mainline turnaround" is quite remarkable. Literately taken, *Church 2025* reaches down to the roots (lat. radix) of the church. The memorandum breathes a spirit of humility and a note of

deep regret. It starts with reminding the church of Jesus sending the disciples two by two with light baggage on their way (Mk 6:7-9) and confesses: "As a Protestant church, we have become heavily laden. ... It's as if we have become trapped in our own church culture. Many see us as a governing church. How can we step forward onto the lighter path on which Jesus once sent his disciples?"¹³ At the same time, the document breathes a spirit of profound hope and an ultimate dependence on God, when it calls for change:

The challenge ... is to keep bringing this life back on track, to blow the dust off the church or to let it be blown off, to rediscover and experience anew those sparkling images of the church described in the New Testament, and to go back to the basics, back to the heart, and rediscover what it is about.¹⁴

First and last, the policy paper reminds the church of its origin in Jesus Christ and faithfulness to his calling:

It is important that the church remains "Christian," living in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. No matter what the church organisation looks like, this obedience to Christ and his Holy Spirit is the guiding principle and must stay that way in order for us to be a church at all.¹⁵

This is why "Church 2025 is not a signal to become gloomier and whinier, but to devote ourselves with joy to God and his church. It is not a signal to go and sit in a corner, but to be willing to answer the call to God's mission in this world."¹⁶

The Church's Decampment: Pioneering

Answering the call to God's mission in the world involves strengthening existing congregations, but also involves stepping out of the comfort zone of a *come-structure* to a *go-structure*, which seeks to branch out to where people are. Since 2012, more than one hundred "pioneering spots" have been started nationwide, every month new projects are being initiated.¹⁷ The pioneering report "op hoop van zegen" provides detailed

¹⁰ Statistische Jaarbrief 2015, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download1562/Statistische%20jaarbrieff%202015.pdf>, accessed August 5, 2020.

¹¹ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025. Where there's a Word, there's a Way*, (Utrecht: 2016), 25.

¹² Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 15.

¹³ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 3.

¹⁴ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 6.

¹⁵ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 14.

¹⁶ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 13.

¹⁷ A graphic overview of the actual pioneering spots can be found here: www.lerenpionieren.nl/maps.

information on the theological background and offers the following definition:

A pioneer place is a new expression of being church for people who don't attend church. Pioneer places vary greatly. Being attentive to the context, working from a shared faith within the team of pioneers and lasting community building are essential.¹⁸

The PKN's approach to pioneering is inspired by the British Fresh Expression movement as represented in the work of Michael Moynagh. He summarizes a "service-first journey" of pioneer ministries focused on de-churched people with the following scheme:

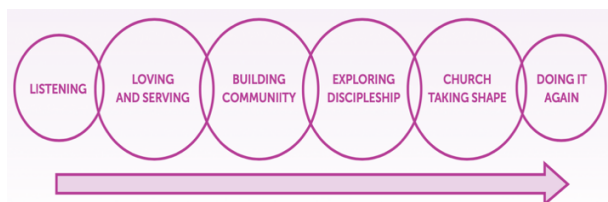


Fig. 1: The pioneering path¹⁹

The "ideal" path of a pioneering journey is being imagined like this: 1. The founding community prayerfully listens to God and the given context. 2. The community begins to build loving relationships and engages in acts of services, the way Jesus did. 3. Building trust and a sense of belonging. 4. Sharing the gospel in a life-relevant way, exploring what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ here and now. 5. Discover what it means to be church in the given context and develop a sustainable Christian community. 6. The new church will reach out and serve its context; this may lead toward initiating another new pioneering spot.

Of course, this is just intended as a means of orientation, not as a fixed rule: "During the pioneering trip various processes overlap; taking a next step does not automatically mean stopping the previous step. We hope to end up with a new Christian community of people who weren't church-goers before."²⁰

How does a pioneering journey look in practice? Geloven in Moerwijk is a pioneering spot within a

district of The Hague (Den Haag), where seventy percent of residents are living on or below the poverty line.²¹ The report Exploring Pioneering notes:

Bettelies Westerbeek has been pioneering in the middle of the Moerwijk district in The Hague since 2014. "Dire poverty," is how she characterizes the district. And multicultural. The focal point of the pioneering spot is a house with a vegetable garden, where people from the neighborhood can go. There are all kinds of activities: working in the garden, neighborhood meals, sports, Bible study, walks. "Being present against all misery." Is it a church? To Bettelies it is clear: "The church is a place where people meet God. That happens here. Many people in Moerwijk come from other countries and are used to growing their own vegetables. In the crowded apartment buildings that is not possible. By having a vegetable garden as the heart of the pioneering spot people can grow vegetables themselves and meet others as a matter of course. This is how Geloven in Moerwijk connects to the context."²²

The project originated as a neighborhood outreach program of the local Marcuskerk, called MarcusConnect, but soon became a social network hub within the wider neighborhood. Its name is its program: "Believing in Moerwijk is a young house-garden-and-kitchen church in a neighborhood where everything happens; Moerwijk!"²³ When I visited the project during May 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic overshadowed everything: In such deprived neighborhoods, problems such as poverty, domestic violence, educational disadvantage and unemployment were increasing exponentially. Bettelies Westerbeek and her team had been working tirelessly over months, distributing food and clothes, offering prayers and bible readings as well as providing counseling and career guidance. In a personal interview, the young theologian remembers how it all began:

¹⁸ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed: Developments, lessons learnt and challenges after eight years of pioneering*, (Utrecht: 2017), 6.

¹⁹ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 17. The Dutch pioneering journey is an adapted version taken from Moynagh with Harrold, *Church for Every Context*, 208.

²⁰ Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, *Exploring Pioneering in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands*, (Utrecht: 2019), 10.

²¹ www.geloveninmoerwijk.nl, accessed August 5, 2020.

²² Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 11.

²³ <https://www.geloveninmoerwijk.nl/wat-we-geloven/>, accessed July 3, 2020.

I didn't want to start with church services or Bible classes, because that already exists and that's not working. So, let me start with something else, something that people would understand and that's something people could join. The area behind the church was a mess. There were a lot of drug dealers and it was just a very dark place. We came up with a plan to turn it into a community garden. It was a very practical example of what we want to be as a church. We want to show that the love of God has the power to transform something dark into something peaceful and beautiful, and that everybody is invited to join and to help. Maintaining a garden like that is a lot of work, I couldn't do it on my own. People increasingly enjoyed joining in, because they saw that there was space for them to be useful. From building up that garden a small community grew. Then I connected with some Christians who are already living here in the neighborhood, they also became part of that community. It was a very good mix of people who were new to Christian faith and people who were already Christians and living in the neighborhood. We're not only the church but also the neighbors. And I think that's a big difference. In a strange way, people do trust the church. They do trust the community, as we advocate for the rights of the people here and point out what's not going well and what needs to be done.²⁴

What had begun as a dicey experiment just a couple of years ago, pioneering has now become the new normal within the PKN. In the report *Exploring Pioneering*, Secretary of the General Synod René de Reuver states the following:

One cannot imagine the Protestant Church without pioneering. This pioneering is a striking activity at a time that many congregations are shrinking. The conclusion is therefore clear: the church is on the move. The church is becoming smaller, goes back to

basics and develops new forms of being church.²⁵

Two Phases of Pioneer Ministries

In the development of the new communities of faith, two phases can be distinguished, first- and second-generation pioneering spots. The phase of the first generation started in areas without an actual church presence, mostly in large new neighborhoods - that is, on account of geographic criteria.²⁶ In 2014, four of these first-generation pioneer places were analyzed more closely to learn for the future, with two results. First, Sunday worship, as the central event of the congregation, is important for volunteers but shows little missional potential in comparison with weekday activities. Second, neither financially nor organizationally is it feasible to have an independent community within just three years. It takes more time as well as simpler concepts of church life.

At the end of 2012, the PKN Synod had made the far-reaching decision to launch another 100 pioneer places, but now, in the second generation, starting from a more sociological approach (that is, church for those who have not previously ever been to church). The first step was a campaign of special days to identify support and potential for pioneering, held in 30 locations across the nation. For the first half of 2020 the latest research document *Pioneering: State of Affairs* reports a total number of 147 pioneering spots (in preparation: 26; active: 107; discontinued or continuing differently: 14).²⁷

Many of these pioneering spots started on a small scale and were run by volunteers as a paid minister was not financially feasible. Nevertheless, the development moved away from the classic church planting by a pastoral pioneer to more contextual and volunteer-based initiatives, as the following overview indicates:

²⁴ Interview with Bettelies Westerbeek, Marcuskerk, May 31, 2020.

²⁵ Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 19.

²⁶ Examples among others are: CrossPoint (Nieuw-Vennep), De Binnenwaai (Amsterdam-IJburg), Boei90 (The Hague-

Wateringsveld), Kerk op de Kop (Rotterdam), and Nijkleaster (Jorwerd), including the internet church MijnKerk.nl (launched 2013).

²⁷ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 5.

FIRST GENERATION (BEFORE 2013)	SECOND GENERATION (2013 ONWARDS)
No church present (geographically)	For non-churchgoers (sociologically)
Largely initiated by national church	National church supporting local initiative
With paid theologians	Focus on teams with volunteers
Limited support of pioneers	Training and support for teams
Quick start of Sunday celebrations	Starting point is listening, loving and serving
Subsidies up to €100,000 per annum	Subsidies up to €15,000 per annum

Fig. 2, Two generations of pioneer places²⁸

Which Types of Pioneering Spots Have Emerged?

Similar to the UK, the style and culture of the pioneer communities are also very different in the Netherlands.²⁹ Their plurality includes theology, cultural design, average age of participants, urban and rural locations, and much more. There are more contemplative communitarian groups, lively neighborhood communities in hip neighborhoods, open-plan café churches, social-diaconal initiatives in hotspot areas, intercultural bible talk groups in pubs, and others. Recently, the most successful form has been “Kliederkerk,” inspired by “Messy Church” in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.³⁰ Nowadays, the PKN speaks of a *Mozaïek van kerkplekken*³¹ (mosaic of church sites) in order to describe the larger vision for the future:

Moved by the desire to bring the gospel to more people, a large diversity of ways of being church is necessary. These new forms of being church form a mosaic, with stones in different shapes, dimensions and colours. Seen from a

distance, they form a colourful image of Christ’s love for people. We hope that pioneering spots contribute to let people experience God’s love in their lives, in word and in deed.³²

What kinds of undertakings take place at pioneering spots? The graphic below shows responses on “types of activities” from 66 pioneer places documented in a 2016 research survey alongside the following explanation: “For each location many answers were possible. Some 68% hold celebrations. Almost the same number hold community meals. Half of them have diaconal or helping activities. Of these, 45% hold artistic or creative activities. And one-third have monastic activities, for example moments of silence or walks.”³³

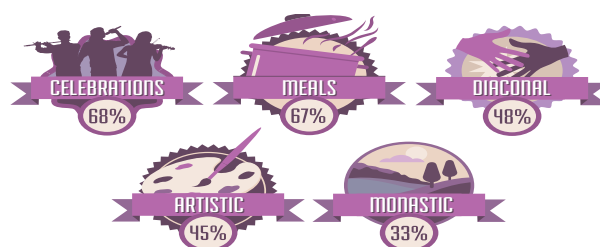


Fig. 3: Types of activities in pioneer places³⁴

The research document *Pioneering: State of Affairs* takes a closer look at 12 pioneering spots and provides insights from 42 personal interviews with participants. The results indicate that the participants in these new forms of church benefit from it most of all in terms of

²⁸ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 4.

²⁹ Cf. George Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (Sheffield, UK: Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016) and Hamish Leese, Andrew. Orton, and Graham Horsley, *Methodism’s Hidden Harvest? The story of the first fifteen years of Methodist involvement in fresh expressions*, (London, UK: Methodist Publishing, 2019).

³⁰ *Kliederkerk* is a form of church in which young and old together discover the meaning of Bible stories in a creative way. A kliederkerk lasts an average of two hours and consists of three parts: discover together, celebrate together and eat together. Nelleke Plomp, project leader of Kliederkerk says: “We can only conclude that the Spirit of God also works through glitter glue, figure saws and rensing games. By a blessing under a colorful parachute cloth and eating pancakes. From and in the madness, the chaos of existence, God binds people of all ages together.” The Protestant Church wants to increase the number of Kliederkerken up to 300 in 2023. Kliederkerk is inspired by the English *Messy Church*, an initiative of the Bible Reading Fellowship. Kliederkerk is part of a now global ‘messy

family,’ from Sydney to Los Angeles and from Cape Town to Stockholm about 4,000 local Messy Churches can be found. “Kliederkerk is succesvolle aanvulling op reguliere kerkdienst,”

<https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/nieuws/kliederkerk-is-succesvolle-aanvulling-op-reguliere-kerkdienst/>, accessed June, 13, 2020. Cf. Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk, *Kliederkerk: creative kerk-zijn met alle leeftijden*, (Utrecht: 2019).

³¹ René de Reuver en Martijn Vellekoop, *Mozaïek van kerkplekken: Over verbinding tussen bestaande en nieuwe vormen van kerk-zijn*, (Utrecht: Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk, 2019), <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/download8174/LWK%2019-01%20Mozaïek%20van%20kerkplekken%20synodeversie%20april%202019.pdf>, accessed August 5, 2020.

³² Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 21.

³³ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 6.

³⁴ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 6.

social relationships and faith development.³⁵ A young woman expresses her faith journey as follows: “I call myself religious now and that was not the case five years ago. Now I say that I believe, but for a long time I found it hard to say that. Religion gives me something to hold on to and through religion I live my life more consciously.”³⁶

Who Has Been Reached?

All pioneering spots taken together in early 2020 reach around 19,000 people with an average of 52 persons closely involved. The participants encompass 63% women and 37% men.³⁷ According to the research document *Pioneering: State of Affairs* the rate of previously unchurched people involved in pioneering spots is 59%. The authors conclude: “This means that pioneering spots succeed in reaching people who did not have an active relation with a church.”³⁸

Many projects address the group of emerging adults, especially from the creative start-up scene, those who generally have little access to conventional congregations and in church sociology are often referred as the “lost generation”³⁹. The report *Fingers Crossed* states: “Many people between 20-40 years are involved in over half of the all the pioneering spots. This is a significant feature and important to existing local congregations because this generation is often not present in existing local congregations.”⁴⁰

In spring 2018, the 26-years-young ecumenical theologian Nick Everts started working as a “monastic pioneer” at the *Stadsklooster Groningen*, a place of silence and reflection in the heart of the university town, originated as a pioneering spot of the PKN three years earlier.⁴¹ In our conversation, he explained that most of the people he is involved with are emerging adults on a restless quest of meaning-making and are searching for orientation in a pluralistic world.⁴² Everts is convinced

that silence and re-connecting with the rich spiritual sources and practices of the mystic Christian tradition can provide help and orientation. The City Cloister’s programs are reaching mainly middle class, well-educated “white” people in their thirties to fifties, or, people who have power in the community. Everts articulates: “The problem of the church is that it has just been focusing on the helpless. But what do you have to do in church when you are successful and well-paid? I think there is a spiritual need: When you are in power, what do you do with your power? How can you become a leader who is trustworthy?” The city of Groningen hosts 60,000 students from all over the world. How are they being addressed? The former church dropout and now “monastic entrepreneur” may surprise with his approach: “The churches always ask for something, but they have to work a lot, next to their studies – they have enough to do. We don’t want to ask but embrace them. We just welcome: You don’t have to do anything here, just join us.” One of his tools in working with students is “Writefulness,” encouraging the participants to write a sort of spiritual diary: “For some people it is a wonderful way of coming close to their inner feelings, hopes, and dreams. For some theologians, this is difficult: they want to talk with me about what to write. I say: ‘No, it’s about silence, about being focused on *your* thoughts!’” Although in Holland there are only about ten comparable pioneer spots with a neo-monastic approach, their practices do inspire many in the wider church. Everts speaks about a recent meeting with 150 national church leaders: “They are adapting a lot of our forms within their traditional churches. During the Coronavirus pandemic, traditional churches couldn’t meet as usual and were looking at the pioneers: What did you do with the modern media? Can we go on a pilgrimage, outside of the church building? In some ways, we are role models for the established church, not only concerning forms, but also in terms of content.”⁴³

³⁵ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 10–15.

³⁶ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 16.

³⁷ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 8.

³⁸ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 7.

³⁹ Cf. Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 8.

⁴¹ <https://stadskloostergroningen.nl/>, accessed August 5, 2020.

⁴² All following statements and quotes are taken from the author’s interview with Nick Everts, “monastic entrepreneur,” Groningen, May 26, 2020.

⁴³ In August 2020 the PKN published an article “Toward a lighter church”, authored by the General Synod’s Secretary René de Reuver, that underlines the pioneer’s statement, <https://www.protestantsekerk.nl/verdieping/naar-een->

Being asked about the Christian profile of City Cloister, the young pioneer describes his very open understanding of mission and evangelism: “The monastic approach came up from a different point of view than most other pioneering spots. We will not fight each other when we talk, but maybe we can find each other when we meet in silence.” Everts argues for a new interpretation of being a Christian in our day and age: “Most of the church leaders in the Netherlands are from your generation. But people like me, we do not have this background, including all the battles between the churches. So, we can have a fresh interest in asking: ‘What shall we do? What does it mean to live a Christian life?’ Before the Coronavirus pandemic for young Dutch people everything was possible, you could choose whatever you wanted. On the flipside, a lot of pressure comes out of this. Many young people have symptoms of burn-out. So, from that side, people are looking back to tradition, the church and a monastic way of life. But one problem is, that they want to ‘use’ it, so that they can continue with their active lives, without changing from the inside. They want to integrate the newly found spirituality as a product like others. Thus, the central question about being a Christian is: ‘Is it about a product or a way of life?’”

No established church nor new pioneering spot can reach out to everyone. In a pluralistic society, the diversity among people needs to be mirrored in a multitude of missional approaches and community forms. Most pioneering spots emerge from personal, trustful relationships. This is why the personalities and theological mindsets of the pioneers play an important role for shaping the identity of the pioneering spots, which may attract participants and invite them to join in. The report *Pioneering: State of Affairs* recognizes the given diversity in this concern, at the same time it underlines the importance of a recognizable Christian basis:

The world of pioneers is just as multicoloured as the Protestant Church itself. There is a large theological diversity. This is among others visible in the way they are aimed at conversion of non-Christians. At some places this is the

spearhead of the spot, while other places have almost an allergy against conversion...Most spots are not strongly aimed at converting people. We see a combination of clearly presenting the Christian tradition and offering space for people to make their own choices. Within this large diversity of theological convictions we see at the same time a shared basic principle, which is clarity about the identity of the spot. There is no inclination to gloss over their Christian identity or to disguise that in any way...Pioneers are enthusiastic about their faith, are not afraid to talk about it, but let others free to choose.⁴⁴

What Role Does the Church Play as an Organization?

The church report *Exploring Pioneering* states:

“A pioneering spot starts with people in their own place and context who are motivated to share the Christian faith in word and deed with others. Their desire is the basis of pioneering. It can start at a church board meeting or with one enthusiast who starts a pioneering team. ...Experience shows that it helps to get the national church office involved in the preparations of a pioneering spot from an early date.”⁴⁵

In practice, a pioneering spot cannot be originated without the agreement of the existing local congregation(s) in the respective area. This is why pioneering spots are started with church approval and support, in connection with an existing community of faith. The report *Fingers Crossed* notes: “Increasingly, we discover that it is not about copying the most fashionable expressions, though this does occur. More importantly, pioneering identifies and raises essential issues about the church’s identity, functioning and future.”⁴⁶ The church purposefully invests in “pioneer training”⁴⁷ for emerging leaders (both lay and clergy), and the pioneer teams are being accompanied and

lichtere-kerk/?utm_source=nieuwsbrief_protestantse_kerk&utm_medium=nieuwsbrief&utm_campaign=030820, accessed August 17, 2020.

⁴⁴ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 17.

⁴⁵ Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 15.

⁴⁶ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 12.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.lerenpionieren.nl/home/pionierstraining/>, accessed June 26, 2020

mentored by professional “pioneer companions.”⁴⁸ Most recently, pioneering spots in their planning phase are being supported by a “starting coach,” and then, after the project has been launched, a “pioneer counselor” who takes over as “the first point of contact for both the church board and the pioneering team.”⁴⁹

Finances are always an important matter, likewise in pioneering: “The development of a pioneering spot to maturity often takes about five to ten years. It is therefore important to arrange the financing from the beginning in such a way that it is also sustainable in the long term. This will involve limiting spending and stimulating a personal contribution by the people from the pioneering spot.”⁵⁰ There are projects that do not need financial support, for example, because they are run by volunteers and because the activities take place in living rooms. In such cases there are no (high) costs. Elsewhere, financial support is necessary in order to pay a full-time pioneer and carry expenses like rent, insurance, and so on. Grants can be requested from the national PKN office and the Mission Board (Maatschappij van Welstand); the condition attached to both grants is a local contribution. Financial support and coaching are provided by the church for three years, then each pioneering spot is evaluated in terms of sustainability. If the prospect is promising, the project is supported for three more years. The support of the national church is limited to six years.⁵¹ Among the actual 107 active pioneering spots, the first seven have been led toward financial and organizational independence. For the majority of the fairly young communities, a long way lies still before them. Compared to the early projects, new ones now have to start at a smaller budget and have to ensure that there is a greater chance of becoming financially independent.⁵²

During my research trip I visited pioneering spots which seem to have a solid financial basis, and others with an obvious need of more funds in order to be able to continue their ministry. In talking with pioneer Bettelies Westerbeek of *Geloven in Moerwijk* I learned that the support of the national church ended according to schedule in April 2020. This means that the future of

this pioneering spot is precariously at risk in the midst of a rather desperate situation in the given neighborhood. The pioneer doesn’t hide her disappointment and suggests: “The church should rather just start half of the new pioneering places and provide a longer-lasting support for those who try hard.”⁵³

Indeed, there are signals that longer-lasting monetary support may come in the near future, as the document *Pioneering: State of Affairs* suggests: “Until recently support was offered for 6 years. Research showed, however, that growing into a self-supporting community often takes 6 to 12 years. Therefore, it was decided in January 2019 to offer 4 more years of support to pioneering teams.”⁵⁴ The subsequent sentence, however, lowers the expectations right away: “However, the national church in principle offers no more financial support to pioneering spots after 6 years, just support concerning content and the pioneering network.”⁵⁵ From an outsider’s perspective, it’s hard to tell which direction matters will take in this particular concern.

What Has Recently Been Learnt in Terms of the Reform of the Church?

In 2017, the PKN church board offered four lessons learned since the start of the pioneering spot program, which are briefly summarized in the report and quoted here:

a) [The] Pioneering team is crucial

What are the right conditions for a pioneering initiative to grow into a mature faith community? There are many factors, but the pioneering team proves to be crucial. If within that team, warm relationships do not grow, how can a warm community come into being? If within that team, faith cannot be discussed, how can faith play a role in the pioneering place? A pioneering team is more than just a committee for planning activities; they are the seed from which the faith community grows. This is why we currently give more attention to the culture of beginning teams.

⁴⁸ See

<https://www.lerenpionieren.nl/home/pionierbegeleiders/>, accessed June 26, 2020.

⁴⁹ Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 21.

⁵⁰ Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 21.

⁵¹ Protestantse Kerk, *Exploring Pioneering*, 21.

⁵² Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 8.

⁵³ Interview Bettelies Westerbeek, Marcuskerk, May 31, 2020.

⁵⁴ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 8.

⁵⁵ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 8.

b) Listening leads to relationships

We can frequently be too quick in organizing activities. In the preparation of a pioneer place, we stimulate teams to take plenty of time to listen to their context. This sounds passive, but in practice it is active. This way, new relations happen – the beginning of a network. Listening is shaped by interviewing, conversations, and observations. More often than expected, an openness to talk with people about the Christian faith reveals itself, although the pioneers often don't expect this to be the case.

c) Making room for entrepreneurs

Whilst a team is indispensable in the first phase of pioneering, matters can come down to someone taking the initiative. This person is someone who has a vision, sense of calling and an entrepreneurial spirit. Quickness, the willingness to take risks, enthusiasm, and flexibility all help to set the tone. In the church, our culture and structures don't allow much room for entrepreneurial people. This can mean that local congregations don't always initiate a plan themselves, but 'adopt' someone else's plan. Pioneering has become more about starting something 'from the bottom up,' without too much control from the top.

d) More time is needed than expected

Establishing a pioneer place takes more time than expected. It is evident that more time is needed even in the first stages of preparation. Initially, it was thought that the preparing and signing off for pioneering would be within six months, but often one to two years are needed (for team building, support, and listening). After that, it takes quite a few years to let a faith community grow. Experience teaches us that pioneering spots usually need five to ten years before they can be self-sufficient.⁵⁶

Open Questions and Critical Remarks

The turn of a mainline denomination toward a missional ecclesiology and consequently initiating

pioneer ministries requires courage and the willingness to take risks. Furthermore, it involves the commitment to undergo a continuous learning process on the part of pioneers, teams, and local church leaders as well as the national church's oversight. The official documents of the PKN on pioneering reflect the general line of a positive, "successful" development in recent years, which indeed is remarkable. During my research trip, meeting pioneers and team-members on-site, I have been impressed by their personalities and their wholeheartedness in faith and love. In our conversations, joys and worries of the practical work were shared, including open questions and suggestions for improvement.

Pioneering Spots – Inchoate Forms of Church?

According to the research report *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, the development of self-sufficiency of the first pioneering spots revealed that it is almost impossible for pioneering spots to become "normal" congregations: "For example, in order to become a 'normal' congregation it is required to have seven ministers (pastor, elders, deacons) and three governing bodies (church council, board of church stewards and board of deacons)."⁵⁷ This brings up the question of the ecclesial status of pioneer spots within the PKN.⁵⁸ Are they being considered as developed or inchoate forms of church? The question reaches even deeper: What actually is a church? Does it need the traditional church offices such as elders and deacons? How many members does it take to be a church? Is celebrating Communion an indispensable part of being church? Does every form of church need worship? When a group of volunteers have started a *Kliederkerk* (Messy Church) and there is a request to baptize a child, are those volunteers allowed to administer the sacrament or is it required that an ordained minister carry this out? In my conversations with pioneers, questions related to the official status of their ministry have been posed quite often.

⁵⁶ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Fingers Crossed*, 13.

⁵⁷ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 20.

⁵⁸ The report *Pioneering: State of Affairs* (2020) addresses this issue as follows: "Pioneering spots have a difficult time with the existing possibilities in the church order. The degree of organisation of a regular congregation often is too high. The undesirable alternative can be that pioneering spots feel

compelled to form a foundation outside the church. For that reason, an effort is being made to establish an extra option for pioneering spots, to offer them fitting accommodation within the Protestant Church. That is the option to become 'kerngemeente': an option that offers both a lesser degree of organisation and sufficient self-support." Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 21.

Pioneering – a Simple Success Story?

A national church that risks promoting change and starting all kinds of new missional projects across the country has to look into professional evaluation and communication. In this concern, theological memoranda and research reports, printed and digital media detailing good-practice examples as well as personal testimonies from participants are indispensable. What if mistakes or projects which were not met with success were also highlighted and discussed? In 2017, special research was conducted among those pioneering spots that had been discontinued.⁵⁹ According to the pioneers involved, the main causes to stop the project were: a) The relation to the sending congregation was unfavorable; b) The team didn't match up successfully with the target group; c) The pioneer has not given enough room for other pioneering team members.⁶⁰ On the other side, the research has identified six essential contributing factors for the persistence of pioneering spots: "1. Continue to be driven by religious passion, 2. Deeply rooted in the neighborhood or target group, 3. Entrepreneurship, 4. Suitable income and expenditures, 5. Shared leadership in the team, 6. Well embedded within the church."⁶¹ Findings like these may be helpful to remain aware of the fragile nature of pioneer ministries and yet move forward with confidence. In addition to affirmative learning from projects demonstrating good practices, critical learning from struggling or even perishing pioneering spots can contribute valuable insights for future endeavors.

Self-sustainability in a Few Years – a Realistic Goal?

For newly emerging communities of faith, the national church's objective target is very clear from the beginning: "The goal of pioneering spots is that they develop into self-supporting congregations."⁶² From what I've read in the documents as well as what I've perceived in my visits, pioneering teams seem to have to met high expectations. The church's quest to make the pioneering spot self-sustainable as soon as possible is understandable but may include a problematic tendency. It may and sometimes will put pressure on the pioneers and their teams. In conversations with some during local

visits, it felt like the fear of losing the church's funds was often hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles. The quest for early financial independence suggests that the economical category of measurable success has high priority as a criterium for sustaining support. But being a community of faith on the ground involves much more on the immeasurable side: faith, hope, love (1Cor. 13:13). This is especially true when it comes to representing God's faithfulness to those living in deprived neighborhoods, serving with people who aren't and won't be able to contribute much to the monetary support of the respective pioneer spot. In this concern, the memorandum *Church 2025* can be a reminder of the church's assignment:

The church is a diaconal community, not only for itself but for all those who cross its path. In the society we live in, this takes on fresh meaning...People experience problems relating to work and money, with marginalization and poverty as the result. Older people in particular feel lonely, and caring for the vulnerable is also an urgent issue. The diaconal presence of the church is especially relevant in these areas.⁶³

Nationwide Church Renewal by Pioneering?

In 2016, the memorandum *Church 2025* shared an ambitious vision for the Protestant Church as a whole:

The church is a church with a mission. Or rather: God has a mission. This began with the election and mission of Israel. The purpose is the dawn of the kingdom of God in our world. The church is engaged in this mission. As a church, we are called to be 'servants of God.' Because it's God's mission, this mission is focused on the world.⁶⁴

The quest for a missional church being relevant in today's society applies to both established and new communities of faith. What role do pioneering spots play for the actual renewal of the church? Is there a fruitful mutual inspiration from both sides? Since the pioneering movement in the Netherlands is fairly young, the expectations shouldn't be too high at this point in time.

⁵⁹ Martijn Vellekoop, *Pioniersplekken die doorgaan: Wat de kerk kan leren van de verduurzaming van social startups* (2017), www.lerenpionieren.nl/kernthemas/bestendigen-en-doorgaan, accessed August 5, 2020.

⁶⁰ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 7.

⁶¹ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 8.

⁶² Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 8.

⁶³ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025* 10.

⁶⁴ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 24.

Nevertheless, there are indications that established churches and new communities of faith do stimulate each other in a positive way. In conversations with church representatives on-site during my research visit, I found confirmation that the pioneers hold an important role as “scouts” and “entrepreneurs” in a reform process in which the whole church is involved. In 2020, the research report *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, states:

At the start of the pioneering program a secondary goal was a renewal of the church as a whole through the practice of pioneering spots. Locally many examples of this renewal are visible. Research shows the following influences: the missional awareness of the existing congregation is strengthened, the type of activities changes, and it sparks new reflection on the identity of the congregation. But renewal and learning often goes hand in hand with friction.⁶⁵ Through the memorandum ‘Mozaïek van kerkplekken’ the renewal that is caused by pioneering spots has also reached the national level.⁶⁶

It is understandable that the PKN prefers to report on what happens at the pioneer spots. Nevertheless, it would be desirable to learn more about what happens in the existing traditional congregations as related to church renewal and missional outreach.

Conclusion: What Can Be Learnt from Holland for Other Church Contexts of Western Imprint?

Taking a closer look into the recent development of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and their approach to pioneering from an outside perspective has been a challenging and a rewarding experience for which I am deeply grateful. For this reason, I’d like to conclude the present research overview with a few personal remarks.

Mission Is Possible

In my view, the most encouraging insight from the reflection of the missional turnaround within the

Protestant Church in the Netherlands is modified from the title of a blockbuster film: “Mission possible!” The pioneering spots in the Netherlands indicate that even in a highly pluralistic, post-Christian society, individuals can and will find liberation, orientation, and meaning of life through faith in Jesus Christ. This can be understood as an affirmation that God’s creative spirit works in bringing formerly unchurched people together in emerging communities of faith, love, and hope. The most recent time in Dutch church history indicates that by re-discovering a firm trust in God a fresh ecclesial self-esteem can be found: “The church stands or falls with faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. That faith is the secret of the church. The time is past for frantically defending that faith against attacks ‘from outside’... In a secular culture, the church is challenged to become bolder and franker when it comes to talking about faith and God.”⁶⁷

Church for People Who Don’t Already Know Everything

No less than the conscious confidence in God’s redemptive work in our day and age, it takes courage to perceive the social reality and to face up to the question: What does it mean to be church here and now? In talking with pioneers and their teams I found confirmation that, even in the significantly liberal and individualistic Dutch society, questions concerning the religious dimension of life are anything but obsolete. Sijbrand Alblas, pastoral leader of the pioneering spot De Plaats (Hollum, Ameland Island) explained:

For me it starts with relationships and asking what is significant for young people. This is why the meals are so important. During a meal you have conversations about everything in life. There are a lot of young people with questions, looking for ‘more’ in their life and longing for God. The word ‘God’ is not a problem for them. But they don’t have a place where they can talk about God and learn how to experience faith. That’s what we provide in *De Plaats*.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ In this concern, the report *Pioneering: State of Affairs* summarizes as follows: “a) Fruitful connections between new and existing churches is not a matter of course. It takes an effort to let that work and be fruitful. b) Many new communities need equality and being awarded their own space within the church as a whole to function well. c) Church ministries are viewed differently and demand

renewal, but they are of essential importance if the new communities are to be accepted as full members of the church.” Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 9.
⁶⁶ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 9.
⁶⁷ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 9.
⁶⁸ Interview with pastor-pioneer Sijbrand Alblas, De Plaats, Hollum, May 27, 2020. For more information about the

Relatedly, the memorandum *Church 2025* suggested at a broader level:

The time is also past for securing a jealously guarded remnant of what is still acceptable for postmodern people. The word ‘still’ (can we ‘still’ believe this?) should ideally be discarded. It’s about having the open-mindedness and receptivity to invite in the rich Christian teachings and traditions and to let them be spoken anew. It is clear that not all do believe in the same manner. However, we do need each other in order to come to a renewed insight into the liberating power of the Gospel, the Word of God and the Christian tradition.⁶⁹

Indeed, church seems to be for people who don’t already know everything but expect everything from God.

Form Follows Function

The intent of this article is to give an idea of the PKN’s significant efforts in implementing change and renewal since 2012. As to be expected, during the process of initiating new communities of faith, questions around structures and offices have emerged which reach deep down to the roots of what a church is all about. As the report *Church 2025* stated:

...It’s tricky to find the minimal structure necessary to hear and share the Gospel, to be a congregation, and to be a witness for God in this world. What can we discard, and what do we want to preserve or even acquire? When it comes to pioneering areas in particular, care should be taken to avoid saddling them with rules that do not suit a new situation. Life comes before rules, even though rules can help to give life form and content.⁷⁰

From what I’ve read, heard and seen, I’d like to agree that “it is considered courageous that the Protestant Church openly discusses bottlenecks and is prepared to make adjustments in being church.”⁷¹ As the observations above may imply, it might be a long

journey that still lies ahead of the Protestant Church in this concern. Fashioning new wineskins for the old story is quite a task. This is true for any church that is serious about adapting its structures according to the principle *form follows function*. The church’s function is participation in God’s mission, the *missio Dei*⁷²: “How we structure the church is not a separate issue; it follows from how we are Church and how we want to be Church in [the] future. The organisation follows the ‘organism,’ the church as the living body of Christ.”⁷³

Participation as a Means of God’s Grace

As in the UK and elsewhere, many of the Dutch pioneering spots involve a great deal of volunteers. They often have numerous contacts beyond the church steeple and, by their lifestyle, make a positive contribution to the street credibility of the church, which in the public perception quite often is reduced to an “institution.” I am convinced that the encouragement and empowerment of volunteers (in beneficial cooperation with paid ministers and staff) is one of the key aspects of the future of the church. The church needs to become more colorful and diverse if it wants to reach out to people with their individualities and to make them feel included in an existing or emerging community of faith. In my conversations with pioneers, it was mentioned quite often that they do indeed come into contact with people who are expressing their wish to be useful in some way. Not all of them are believers, not every one of them may be reliable or ready to make a long-term commitment. But their willingness to contribute some to a greater whole, to make some difference in their neighborhood community within the scope of their possibilities, should be taken seriously. If people find a warm welcome as they are, joining a pioneering spot can lead to an experience like one testimony shared in the *State of Affairs* report:

“I can recharge my heart here. For a long time, I lived evasively because I avoided all social interactions. That helped to feel less

pioneering spot see <https://deplaats-ameland.nl/nl/>, accessed August 17, 2020.

⁶⁹ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 9.

⁷⁰ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 10.

⁷¹ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 9. Other impressions from international observers have been summarized by the authors of the respective report: “There is also appreciation for the way the learning community for pioneering teams is organized, with among others training

sessions, a website and local pioneering coaches. What is also considered special is that the focus of the training sessions is on the teams and that there is not always a need for an ordained minister to be part of the team” Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 9.

⁷² Cf. David M. Whitworth, *Missio Dei: A Theology of Participation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), see esp. 51–76.

⁷³ Protestants Landelijk Dienstencentrum, *Church 2025*, 13.

exhausted. But I became very lonely. And I felt worthless. I really had the feeling that if I'd die now, very few people would notice a difference in their lives. I didn't like that feeling. So I went looking for a kind of meaningfulness, a place to go to. Then I found this place."⁷⁴

Looking closely into appropriate ways of moving volunteers into the leadership of communities of faith is a crucial aspect of attaining the protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.⁷⁵ On the individual level, participation should be understood as an effective means of grace through which the Holy Spirit leads persons towards faith in Christ and into the fellowship of a community of faith.⁷⁶

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⁷⁴ Protestantse Kerk, *Pioneering: State of Affairs*, 15.

⁷⁵ Cf. Sabrina Müller, *Gelebte Theologie: Impulse für eine Theologie des Empowerments*, (Zürich: TVZ, 2019).

⁷⁶ Cf. Achim Härtner, "Teil nehmen – Teil haben – Teil sein: Partizipation als Gnadenmittel. Ekklesiologische Reflexionen

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