Kerkvernieuwing. Een praktisch - ecclesiologisch onderzoek naar de betekenis van 'Gemeenteopbouw' voor de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk.

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‘Church renewal’ (summary)

The immediate stimulus prompting this study is the commonly heard remark that the so-called ‘Samen op Weg’ process, a Dutch church merger movement, should result in more than the mere sum total of the two or more participating churches. The common desire is that the process of integration will serve church renewal. Such a wish for ‘integration at a higher level’ is not without precedent in the Netherlands Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk). In the period 1940 to 1950 a movement under the name ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ sought the same. It could prove worthwhile to look into what the ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ movement was seeking to accomplish in that decade, with special attention to those elements which might prove instructive for the present church situation.

The name ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ could be literally translated as parish or local church development. But one of the questions in the present study is whether the movement of the 1940’s is comparable to contemporary theories of church development. It might turn out that the ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ movement was guided by a different mode of thinking. Therefore the name will be used untranslated.

Furthermore it is worth noting that ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ started its activity in 1940 shortly after the invasion of the Netherlands by the German army. The initial intention of ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ included a spiritual mobilization against the threatening ideology of the nazi-regime.

The present study begins with an investigation of the roll played by ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ in the Netherlands Reformed Church and of its contribution towards a concept of church identity which found expression in the church order of 1951. The description thereof serves subsequently as a starting point and frame of reference for a further inquiry into the theoretical and practical meaning of the term ‘church renewal’. In this manner the study intends to be an example of practical-ecclesiological research.

The description and evaluation of ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ movement provides the following results. ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ was a renewal movement which sought to define the identity of the church in relation to the world, especially of the Netherlands Reformed Church in her relation to Dutch society. A key to this project was the urgent appeal: ‘Church, become who you are in Jesus Christ!’ By means of this appeal ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ wanted to serve as the conscience of the church, and wanted to move the church to become the conscience of the world. ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ was able to fulfill that conscience function because it was included within the structures of consultation (‘Kerkelijk Overleg’) which operated during the years of the German occupation (1940-1945) and alongside the governing bodies of the Reformed Church. ‘Gemeenteopbouw’ represented as it were the new church within the old. Consequently it was a movement that did not work bottom up, but top down as a centrally managed renewal movement of which initially church ministers were the primary moving forces.
The strategy of the movement involving personal contact with and supervision of local church councils had been previously tried out by the inspirer of the movement, Hendrik Kraemer.

The subject matter of the movement shifted rather quickly from 'spiritual mobilisation' to solving the problem of the conflicting theological factions and spiritual orientations within the church. In practical activity (more than in theory) the aim of the movement shifted as a result from mobilisation to establishing community. This shift remained within the grand vision of Kraemer, combining the themes of mobilisation and community under the motto of obedience to the Lord. This unifying appeal was intended to reconcile the spiritual direction of the various factions at a higher level. From a theoretical perspective, however, the abstractness of such a higher orientation forms a hindrance for a more empirical analysis. That proves to be the case in the present study of 'Gemeenteopbouw'.

As stated above, it was primarily Kraemer who determined the message and strategy of 'Gemeenteopbouw' in the initial years.

The identification of the movement with the three names of Kraemer, Banning and Gravemeijer is only partially correct. The triumvirate may serve as a model for the intended unity of the Reformed Church in the cooperation of the various factions and orientations, as a model therefore of the vision of 'Gemeenteopbouw', but it would be a mistake to suppose that the respective interests of the three were equally represented in the Reformed Church in the period 1940-1950 and thereafter. 'Gemeenteopbouw' contributed to the desired integration by lending support and credibility to the link between the church’s mission ('apostolaat') and her confession and by supporting cooperation between the ministries of the church and worldly expertise. Those are the elements which characterize the church order of 1951.

The influence of 'Gemeenteopbouw' in the local churches was generally less than its significance for the new church order would suggest. In the approximately seven years that 'Gemeenteopbouw' was active, the influence varied greatly among the several classes and provinces of the church. The influence was greatest in those provinces with the greatest variety of factions and orientations. The influence was the least where there was one dominant orientation.

This above description and evaluation of 'Gemeenteopbouw' serves subsequently as the starting point for two lines of reflection.

The first concerns the self-understanding furthered by the church order, particularly the use of the terms 'mission' and 'ministry' as ecclesiological definitions of the church's external and internal relations respectively. The second line of reflection concerns a more theoretical consideration of the concept of church renewal, an undertaking all the more urgent in view of the description and evaluation of 'Gemeenteopbouw'. In order to pursue the formerly mentioned line of reflection systematically and adequately, the latter consideration of the concept of renewal will be first need to undertaken. The undertaking includes first of all a semantic analysis of the concept 'church renewal'; secondly, a biblical-theological investigation of the term; and finally, a dogmatic orientation in the context of christological and pneumatological languages respectively.
A semantic analysis of the word renewal demonstrates the possibility of attributing a threefold meaning, i.e., replacement, improvement, transformation. The actual intention depends on whether the use is situational (referring to the situation as it is) or more normative (the situation as it should be) or a combination of the two. The same pattern is discernible in the biblical language. Renewal in the sense of conversion can be understood as replacement, but also in the more processmatic sense of reorientation and enrichment of one's view of empirical reality.

In the dogmatic reflection the tension between the normative and situational approaches recurs in relation to the identity of the church. H. Berkhof, a theologian with a pneumatical orientation, generally integrates empirical facts more readily than the more christologically oriented G.H. ter Schegget. Regarding the identity of the church, we discern by the latter the exclusive right of the proclaiming identity. There arise for the church in this respect no real problems. One is reminded strongly of Kraemer for whom the worldly analysis of the church made no substantial contribution to the understanding of her essence.

Remarkable about Berkhof is that he deals with the renewal of man and with the renewal of the world, but not with the renewal of the church. The church is for Berkhof simply 'the new community'. Therefore for Berkhof as well, though to a lesser extent than for Ter Schegget, the situation of the church in the world says nothing of vital importance about the essence of the church. These systematic theologians make us again aware of what we see as an isoluable tension in the church's being. By that we mean the tension between the norm (the orientation towards the spiritual source) and the need to relate the two both theoretically and practically.

When we speak about church renewal, that relation must remain in the foreground. If we include in our understanding of the situation the implication that the context of the world qualifies the church's being, than that context will also exercise its influence on the internal and external relations of the church. By 'internal relations' we mean the relation of leaders and members to each other (in ecclesiological terms: the position of the ministry and offices of the church). By 'external relations' we mean the relation of the church to the surrounding world (in ecclesiological terms: the vision on mission). Mission and ministry form the ecclesiological constants for the self-understanding of the church.

What can, at this point in the investigation, be said about the renewal of the church, especially the self-understanding of the Netherlands Reformed Church? In order to answer that question attention is paid to the official publications of the general synod in its reflection on mission and ministry.

With regard to mission the publication 'Gemeente-zijn in de mondiale samenleving' ('The local church in the global society') from 1988 deserves primary attention. The vision on mission that is developed therein seeks to be a transposition of the vision that underlied the church order of 1951. The continuity with 1951 is to be found in the concept of theocracy, i.e. the conviction that the whole of creation has one Lord. The discontinuity is to be found primarily in the breach in the relation of church and culture, especially the decline of the central position of the church in society. The 'theocratical' responsibility must in the present situation...
take the form of solidarity with the victims along the lines of conflict in the global society.

The conclusion of our analysis of the synod publication is that it represents a normative rather than a situational approach, despite the fact that its conception was stimulated by the changing situation of the church in the (Dutch) society.

With regard to ministry it can be said that the position of the ministry and of the offices in the church is primarily determined by the position accorded to the official church councils (boards and assemblies) in the new church order. (The Netherlands Reformed Church is of Calvinist origin and its government is presbyterian in form). The council — whether as a local or regional governing body consisting of both professional pastors and non-professional, yet ordained elders and deacons — represents the whole of the Church and represents thereby the office (ministry) of the one Lord.

A synod report on the ministry (of pastors, elders and deacons) published in 1968 provides a starting point for further reflection. We underline the suggestion therein for the institution of one office, being that of the elder (‘oudste’). Such an option provides the possibility of broader participation by church members in various working committees, without the necessity of categorizing the various sorts of work in accordance with the three offices or of appointing all of the participating members to an office. From each group one member could participate as elder in the local church council.

In the final chapter of the present study the phrase ‘the service of the church’ is taken as a unifying framework for the further development of the identity of the Reformed Church. A choice is made for dialogue as the fundamental form of the service of the church. That implies a correction of the present self-understanding of the church with regards to both her missionary proclamation as well as her ministerial government. Such a correction can already be seen in the modification of article VIII of the church order regarding the mission of the church. Concerning the relation to Israel it is stated: ‘The church seeks the dialogue with Israel...’ There is every reason for applying the term ‘dialogue’ to the whole of the church’s relation to the world as described in article VIII.

From the perspective of dialogue it is possible to do equal justice to both normative and situational aspects. In addition dialogue can serve the renewal of church government by functioning as the fundamental form of that government. In the years immediately following the second world war the emphasis on the representative function of the ministry served emancipatory purposes and provided those in office, especially the non-professional leaders, with a degree of esteem. In the present situation, however, the non-official participation (i.e. without ordination) of the members should be structuralized, in the local congregations as well as in the order of the church. That participation will have to take place by means of group formation, in as much as the traditional group ties such as family, Christian organizations, and neighborhood through which participation previously took place have lost or are losing their significance.

The connection between representation and participation also receives theoretical attention in the language of which participation in the language of which the term ‘representation’ is actualized in language of which the term ‘representation’ is actualized in...
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The ministry and of the church order. (The government is presbyterial consisting elders and deacons in the office (ministry) of the church.) Such an option members in various the various sorts of the participating will of the participating participate as elder in the office of the church’ is one of the identity of the fundamental form of the fundamental self-understanding as well as her function in the modification of the church. Concerning dialogue with Israel...’

The present study is concluded with a survey of four models for local church development. Such development was the intention of ‘Gemeenteopbouw’. However, like mission and ministry, the concept of church-development has been further developed since 1951, especially in the direction of professional, agogical work. It is not the intention to sketch that development, but to see how the four models interrelate the double themes of representation and participation and of leaders and members. The models of H. Kraemer, G. Schneider, J. Fowler, and R. van Kessel are discussed. The conclusion is reached that of the four models in question the concept of the public church, which we encounter in the work of Fowler, can best serve the Netherlands Reformed Church at this moment.