CULTA *Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders*

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"Building bridges at the grassroots". Research report for the Dutch section of the Grundtvig CULTA project

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Introduction

There is extensive research being done with regard to the theme of interreligious dialogue. Yet, to our knowledge, empirical research in interreligious contacts at the grassroots level or intentionally created interreligious dialogue or interreligious celebrations of people in local multicultural and multireligious communities stays somewhat behind. There is not much research into bridging between groups from different ethnic backgrounds or from different countries. Local 'bridge building' refers to ´activities intended to increase interpersonal contacts between diverse ethnic, faith and nationality groups´ (Harris & Young 2009). The role that leaders of religious communities in the Netherlands play in connecting people to each other, i.e. "building bridges at the grassroots" is the topic of this research report. We did not do ethnographic research on bridge building activities as such, for example how they are managed, financed and run. By examine the role, the initiatives that religious leaders take, we hope to contribute to the concept of 'bridge-building'. We show the range of groupings involved, the activities encompassed and some of their organizational features.

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The Dutch religious context

Before presenting our findings, we first provide some figures with regard to recent developments in the Dutch religious landscape. In terms of the basic resources needed for church vitality, i.e. members, leadership (professional and volunteers), money and time, the two major churches in The Netherlands, the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PCN) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) demonstrate an overall process of shrinking during the last four decades. From 1970 to 1998, a sharp decline in churchgoing members can be observed. For example, in 1970 regular churchgoing was common among 41% of the population; in 1998 the percentage had decreased to 14% and even to 4% in a city like Amsterdam (Becker & De Wit 2000). During this period congregations crumbled at a high rate. In Amsterdam alone, thirty church buildings have been closed, Protestant and Roman Catholic. Today in The Netherlands, the flood of church closures has not abated. In the last ten years alone, the RCC went from 1782 buildings in 2002 to 1654 in 2012. In roughly the same period, the PCN went from 2877 to 2638 buildings (Bisseling, De Roest and Valstar 2011, 14). In ten years from now approximately 25% of the RCC and PCN church buildings will have become superfluous. At a rough estimate, that is about 1050 buildings (out of about 4200) by 2023.

June 2011 the PCN had 1.762.000 members (2005: 1.943.676), of which 376.000 (21%) can be considered ´regular churchgoers'(2005: 460.000). The Roman Catholic Church had 4.091.000 members (2005: 4.532.000) of which 245.000 (=6%, that is 1, 5% of the entire Dutch population) are regular churchgoers (2005: 343.860). The percentage of the population that calls itself 'unchurched' or 'not-affiliated to a church or religion' is growing and reached the level of 70% in 2012. Every following generation has fewer members. The country becomes highly secularized, although we hasten to add that there is a growing

interest in new forms of spirituality. The 'spiritual revolution' that is documented in the United Kingdom and in other countries is also taking place in The Netherlands.

The story that we tell about the mainline churches is not the whole story about religion in the The Netherlands. There is small Jewish community and in multicultural neighborhoods, particularly the presence of Muslims is a feature of everyday life. Currently there are around 950.000 Muslims (6% of the population) and 450 mosques in The Netherlands. In these same neighborhoods often also Christian migrants live. The last decades their number has increased too. In 2012 their number is estimated around 700.000. It is difficult to give precise numbers but from these migrants 150.000 can be considered regular churchgoers. There are 930 different congregations.

Let us focus on one city. In 2010, the wider picture of protestant Amsterdam shows an immense variety, particularly in South-East Amsterdam. This part of the city has more than 80 protestant churches. Some are not bigger than ten members. These came into being from immigration growth, founded by immigrants themselves, or by Dutch Christians and churches in an attempt to offer hospitality, or to evangelize among immigrants (Jansen & Stoffels 2008,19). In the so-called 'churches-assembly-building', or 'multi-church building' called 'The Candlestick', fifteen churches are assembled. On January 1, 2008, South-East counted 78,922 inhabitants (vs. Amsterdam's total of 748,290), of whom 63.4% had a non-Western background, 8,2% a Western background and 28.4% a Dutch background. In Amsterdam as a whole in 2005, 10% of the population (75,000) consisted of Christian immigrants, of whom 24,000 are regular churchgoers (Euser 2006). There are church services in 37 languages. In a recent dissertation Mirella Klomp states: '*Every Sunday afternoon a cacophony of sounds spreads over the area. In churches, car parks and school buildings, dozens of Christian congregations gather for worship*' (Klomp, 7). From the limited

empirical research that has been done, it seems a rather adequate estimation that 3,5% of the people in Amsterdam can be considered regular (protestant) churchgoers, 24,000 immigrants-mainly in Amsterdam South-East-and 2,500 non-immigrants Euser 2006,40), attending one of the mainline Protestant churches in Amsterdam, for a grand total 26,500 people.

The aforementioned figures are characteristic of Amsterdam, but practically in every city in The Netherlands there are multicultural and multireligious neighborhoods. Now, the last decade we see an increase in contacts between migrant and non-migrant Christian churches. The numbers of cases of cooperation that can be found are relatively small (30-50 in the Netherlands), but growing. With regard to the quantity of interreligious activities (i.e. local mosque-church), more research needs to be done.

Methodology

Sampling & interview type

For the research we decided to interview a sample of different religious professionals with experience in interreligious and / or intercultural dialogue. These persons were found based on an internet research where we looked for groups that showed evidence of being involved in interreligious and intercultural communication. We also looked into our own networks of people we knew having this kind of experience. Our institution is affiliated with the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and as such we know of a number of people that are active in this field. We contacted these people by phone to determine whether they had actual experience with intercultural communication, and if so, made an appointment for a face to face interview.

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Most of our respondents are affiliated with the Protestant Church, either as a minister working in a multi-cultural neighborhood, or as a professional worker with a special commission to work in the intercultural field. Some of our respondents were members of other churches, such as the RCCG, a Nigerian-based international Pentecostal church, the Vineyard church, a neo-pentecostal church that originated in the USA, and the Remonstrant Church, a liberal Arminian-style church.

All of the persons we interviewed had a Christian background. Although we didn't ask anything about their theological positions or personal faith, all were clearly affiliated with communities in the Christian stream of thought.

With regard to the interviewing style, we used a method somewhere between the semi-structured and structured interview (see Bryman 2008, ch. 8 and 18 for a comparison of these two types of interviewing). The questions were designed together with the other Grundtvig partners, and were asked precisely as previously formulated, and in the same order with each interview. However, the interviewers asked also different questions, to probe more deeply the thoughts and ideas of the respondents. The respondents were encouraged to elaborate on the answers, to give examples etc. Also, if respondents didn't seem to understand the question, the interviewer would rephrase the question or give additional information explaining the question.

Coding strategy

When the interviewing was done, the interviews were transcribed. We analyzed the ten different interviews using the Atlas.ti program. This program makes it easy to create a cross-sectional indexing, a method of applying "a uniform set of indexing categories

systematically and consistently to data" (Mason 2002, 151). After indexing the data we identified several categories that came up as prominent in the interview material.

Some notes concerning the validity and representativity of the results

The results of this research are in many ways preliminary. The research therefore is not yet fit for scholarly publication, although it certainly is a good first step towards this goal. Before we proceed with presenting the results, we should first take note of the limitations of the current research.

First of all, we simply have a limited number of cases. There are many more people involved across the Netherlands in the process of intercultural and interreligious communication.

Secondly, the sampling has a bias for professionals. We explicitly selected experienced religious professionals to interview. This makes the results an impression of the ideas and perception of the professionals, who may have blind spots for certain things or overestimate the importance of their work. The work of intercultural and interreligious dialogue also takes place in informal settings with persons that meet people from other cultural and religious background by accident, or at least not with the intended goal of interreligious communication as the professionals do.

Thirdly, we did not achieve (yet) a complete interpretive validity (Mason 2002, 191). We for example haven't checked the results with stakeholders and involved persons in the field to see whether our conclusions and analyses hold.

And fourthly, all our respondents did have a Christian background. So, we only see the opinions on interreligious and intercultural dialogue from one side of the table.

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Considering the preliminary status of the research we haven't for example tried to quantify the different positions, to identify general patterns nor to make sweeping statements about the process of intercultural and interreligious communication.

However, the results do yield an interesting crosscut of current ideas and positions of the people in the field. The analysis offers some basic positions and ideas that play a role in the field under scrutiny. As such, it can function as a basis for the preparation of the following phases of the Grundtvig research project. It offers interesting material for the course for religious professionals wanting to learn about intercultural and interreligious communication and the manual, which will function as the basis for the course. It also offers a good starting point to further enquiry. The results and findings of the following phases will help this research to gain a better interpretive validity, as the intended participants in the course are religious professionals with an interest in becoming an experienced participant in interreligious and intercultural communication.

Analysis

Introduction

In the following we will give a thematic analysis of the prominent themes in the material. We use quotes from the interviews which are typical for a certain position of idea.

Four axes of interreligious dialogue

Although we have stated that our material doesn't allow too general statements about patterns in the material, the material we have gives reason to assume that interreligious contact takes part along four different axes: celebrating together, the formal circuit, informal contacts and the diaconal field.

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Religious feasts and taking part in each other's rituals and communal activities is a primary way of getting in touch with persons and organizations with different religious backgrounds. The respondents report a wide range of activities that can be done together, such as organizing worship services, reading the Bible and Koran, celebrating the end of fasts, having a barbeque, playing games, eating together.

According to one Protestant minister who is specifically appointed as "missionary" with a special focus on interreligious contacts are the activities he organizes "intended to bring about durable contact." He says:

"We [Muslims and Christians - ed] are neighbors of each other. This awareness of the fact that we are present together in the neighborhood works for the better. And, we don't have hidden agendas in this."

So these meetings help to establish links between people. Often the idea is that these links help to find each other when it is needed, for example in times of crisis and interreligious and / or interethnic tensions.

The professional platforms of dialogue are often filled with people who are representatives of their faith communities. However, quite a large distance can exist between the professional and his or her faith community. The professional may for example be appointed by a national or regional body and not be attached to a local faith community. Or he or she may be a retired minister with a personal interest in dialogue, without an official backing of the religious group he or she is representing.

Another important way is the professional, formal circuit of platforms, foundations and committees that bring representatives of different religious groups together for an intentional interreligious dialogue. In many different cities, provinces and even on the national level one can find these groups that meet with the explicit intention of having a

religious dialogue, staying in touch with each other and sharing information to promote understanding between different groups. In Rotterdam for example there is a "platform" with representatives of a wide range of worldviews, including the humanistic one. It meets every two months and took the initiative to an activity where religious leaders of different religious communities were invited to preach in each other's services. n another interview from the Rotterdam context we read that a particular church cooperates with an Islamic foundation: "There is a constructive cooperation with them. It is possible to be partners." (P6

In addition to participation in formal circuits, a number of interviewees stress the importance of *informal* networks and contacts. According to the pastor of the Laurenskerk: "That is where you meet each other. When it becomes necessary you know how to find each other. It creates a foundation for common activities that emerge from what goes on in a colorful city" (P3).

We add that in more 'strict' religious communities there may not be a formal relationship with other religious communities, but there can be an awareness that informal relationships matter. In the Christian Reformed Church in Groningen we learn: "There is not … a formal relation. I know that one student worker is reading at this moment with group of Muslims and they are reading the Bible and the Quran. And... this he does on his own initiative. I have also been to a meeting called the Phillipus project and this project is reading the Bible with non-Christians. As a church, we are thinking about engaging in this project - reading the Bible with er…it can be a Muslim or a Jewish or an Atheist." (…) There can be people from our church who can be engaged in such cooperation. But as I've said it is not on the organized side" (P1). A Pentecostal church also emphasizes that there are informal relationships with, in this case, Muslims from the Turkish mosque, but they "occur while we

are celebrating barbeques, and supply our neighborhood with food just as Muslims do after Ramadan" (…) Other informal relations occur between their children and ours. During holidays, children come together to play games in the church and to clean streets." (P4). The activities of 'strict' communities have a diaconal character, but there is an evangelistic undertone: "In addition, we also have Karaoke's where we invite musical bands to lead the youth into dance. My friend, the administrator in sports gets teenagers from the neighborhood involved in the leagues. We have seen God redeeming His own people through these matches." The final purpose is to draw people in: "They started to come here three months after we had invited them in the last July's barbeque, this feels good."

A more strict religious community also seems refrained to establish formal contact due to the experienced differences. Even when an outsider would say that the differences are small, they can be substantial for the insider. The interviewee from the Pentecostal church: "We have had contacts with ECG (Evangelical Contacts in Groningen). This is a group of evangelical churches in Groningen. Formal meeting with them have not worked out very well. We realized that churches come up with different opinions in their favor. (…) We want to maintain our autonomy" (P4). This does not imply that there are no contacts at all: "We do not have a clear formally shared mission with the ECG but we interact amicably in social occasions." The leadership of a religious community may also be unaware of informal contacts or even forms of cooperation that may exist 'below the radar'. Particularly when the congregation is large it is almost impossible to have a full overview of what takes place in everyday life: "The non-organized side - that's not easy to tell about. They are informal and there are a lot of people in the congregation, I'm sure of that, who are making a difference in the environment in the way they live" (P1). Informal contact, getting acquainted, can also be a 'first step' in establishing a formal relationship. It can be stepping stone toward a platform.

Thus one of the interviewees asserts: "So I just went a number of times to the Turkish mosque, drank a cup of tea, said that I belong to the church and then, well again, do you remember me from the last time? That is how it grew" (P2).

A fourth reported nexus of interreligious and intercultural contact is diaconal help. Diaconal organizations across the Netherlands are involved in helping people of non-Christian origin, for example asylum seekers. This forms an important point of intercultural and interreligious contact that should be mentioned alongside the intentional moments of dialogue. We should emphasize however, that offering help, for example to immigrants, does not necessarily leads to dialogue with other religious communities. In Pentecostal churches, in their identity comparable to some migrant churches, these interactions with asylum seekers can be quite common: "As the administration, we actually connect the asylum seekers in the church with lawyers in our congregation; lawyers who are experts in European law. These lawyers give proper advice to the asylum seekers on how they can present themselves to the government. In the case of illegal immigrants, we try to support them through giving them food, housing, work and not money. Where need be, we advice them to go back to their countries because it is not right to be an illegal resident, with no legal documents" (P4).

In offering help and support the religious communities in or research often indicated that they cooperate not only with other religious communities, but with governmental and non-governmental, secular organizations. This includes the more 'strict' religious communities: "We cooperate with non Christian organizations to give care in the community. We have a Dutch law that puts emphasis on social support to the community. Such support includes: improving people's housing, giving women shelter and clothing for their families, dealing with cases of domestic violence and so on. We work together with the

secular organizations like the police to do all these tasks.(..) We try to get involved in the neighborhood through working together with the governmental aids which include child protection and police aids to offer proper housing and clean neighborhoods." (P4).

Critics like Evers (2008, see also the paragraph "Discussion") argue that interreligious dialogue is sometimes characterized by hobbyism of professional people who are already convinced by the necessity of interreligious dialogue. However, there seems evidence that the different axes of interreligious dialogue are not clear cut, hedged pathways of contact. Often they are mixed. And one pathway of contact may become a stepping stone for another, more intensive form of contact.

Take for example the Platform for Religion and Worldviews in the province of Groningen. Members of a wide range of religions -- from Baha'i to Hindus to Christians to Freemasons -- meet regularly in official meetings. But once a year the groups meet for a communal celebration. One of the participants of the platform, a Remonstrant minister, tells how they do this: "Since a few years we organize a celebration with the members of the platform. Always in the Advent season, just before Christmas. [The celebration] starts with a Sufi ritual where several candles are lit. En then, a Christian lights a candle for another religion, and a Muslim also lights a candle for Judaism for example. Well, this goes back and forth and several candles are lit and after this one candle is lit for all people who kept the flame burning, so to say. 'For the light of truth' one has to say officially, but we found this a bit too ponderous"(P6).

This interreligious practice is considered to be very beautiful and special. But it is also fraught with difficulties. It is difficult to get people out of their own religious community. And there is always the question whether things they plan to do are "allowed". Not everything is possible in the spaces that are sacred to a religious community. An external

organization, such as a platform for interreligious dialogue has to thread with care to make its festivities and events a success for everybody. Again, the Remonstrant minister:

"Everybody really likes to take part in this. And every time people come with the most beautiful contributions. This is very special. Last time we were present in the mosque. This was in itself very special. It is always difficult to get people out of the mosque to invite them to other worship services. It is not that they don't want to do it, but apparently the threshold is too high. Then you notice we are worlds apart. But this year we asked: 'can we do it this year in the mosque.' And they said: 'yes, of course, what do you need.' Everything was possible and everything was allowed. That was really special" (P6).

But despite the differences, the worship service can function as a place where "things can happen" and the threshold between groups is lowered. The Remonstrant minister again:

"After the celebration a representative of the Jewish community got in to a conversation with the imam. I thought: 'darn, why can't this happen in other places too?' This is what it is all about, I think. These are beautiful things happening as a result of the platform. These things one doesn't contrive beforehand, but they make it possible that the thresholds between groups become a little less high." (P6)

Religious communities

What kinds of communities take part in interreligious dialogue? Most of the relations with other religious communities that the respondents report involve relations with Muslims. This is probably a consequence of sampling -- we interviewed people that happened to be in touch with Muslims -- but it also reflects the fact that Muslims are by far the largest non-Christian religious group in the Netherlands. An estimated 850.000 Muslims live in the Netherlands (Van Herten and Otten 2007). Other partners for interreligious and

intercultural contact are other non-Christian groups and Christians from other backgrounds, such as migrant churches (from the perspective of non-migrant respondents) or non-migrant churches (from the perspective of migrant respondents).

Muslims

Interestingly, several respondents mentioned interreligious dialogue as especially important because of the tense "political situation". After the incidents with Muslim terrorists, such as the 9/11 attacks and, specifically for the Netherlands, the killing of filmmaker and artist Theo van Gogh and politician Pim Fortuyn, a political climate came into being in the Netherlands where Muslims were under close scrutiny and criticized by several politicians and prominent opinion figures. Because of this some respondents saw a special urgency in dialogue with Muslims. One member of a platform for interreligious dialogue formulated it like this:

"The Islam is quite a story apart in this, because of the political situation etc. We have had special attention for Muslims. Because we said: this [dialogue] with Muslims shouldn't snow under in the wider range of religious conversations. They need some attention." (P2)

According to the minister the platform has been set up after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001, over ten years ago. "We felt this coming, the populism in politics and an anti-Islam feeling. We thought, it is important to be in conversation with each other as religions." (P2)

It isn't just liberal Protestants who find it important to have good connections with Muslims. According to the Pentecostal RCCG pastor we interviewed the explicit policy of his church was to establish friendly relations with Muslims:

"You will see that the church national-wide encourages interactions with Muslims and other immigrants. The idea in the magazines is to view immigrants as friends and as people in need of our love. In fact, most of immigrants from Muslim countries seek refuge in Europe due to hostility from their own countries." (P4)

Other religious groups

Jews were several times mentioned by respondents as partners in the dialogue. Other religious groups were not mentioned often.

In many cases interreligious dialogue takes place in platforms with different religious groups present at the same time. This is an intentional form of interreligious dialogue (see above) where religious groups get mixed and a place where diversity can be explored and encouraged.

Incidental versus long-term relationships

Even when the contacts between religious groups are formalized, this in no way means they always have a long term character. Contacts are often incidental. For example the Laurenskerk, a Protestant church community in Rotterdam, the second city of the Netherlands located in the Western part of the country, reports that they have incidental connections with Muslims and Jews. They participated with other churches in the Kerkennacht ("Long Night of the Churches"), a night in which several churches are open for visits. The Jewish community also participated in this event, but the Muslim communities did not. However, the church reported they were in touch with Muslim mosques to celebrate the end of the fasting periods, both the Christian fast of 40 days before Easter and the Muslim fast during the Ramadan.

The role of local governments and politics

Local governments do play a role in formalizing relations between religious groups. They have a vested interest in making different groups work and live together harmoniously (see for example Van der Meulen 2006 for a specific case). The Laurenskerk, the church we mentioned earlier, reported taking part in citywide interreligious activities, where for example religious leaders of different religious groups were invited to preach in the temples, mosques and churches of other religious communities. These activities were actively promoted by the city council of Rotterdam, which, according to the respondent "expressively wants to be in contact with the whole spectrum of religions, and not just with churches" (P3).

Christian religious organizations do stimulate these formal contacts in the official circuits. For example, one respondent reported that the diaconal organization in their city had stimulated Jewish, Christian and Muslim cooperation. The organization had asked representatives to present to the city council their story of how they worked together for the common good of the city. (P11)

Attitude

One of the indexing categories that seem to have particular salience is the category that we called "attitude". The respondents, being asked about how they view other religious communities, with several, generally positive words. Additionally, missionary motives com to the fore as a major reason for getting in touch in the first place.

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Respect versus openness

Respect and openness were two of the words that were mentioned most often as describing the attitudes respondents had towards other religious groups. Interestingly, there seems a clear divide between the more conservative, evangelical and Pentecostal respondents and the liberal respondents. The conservatives spoke of "respect", while the liberals used varieties of the word "openness". (P1)

The Vineyard (evangelical / Pentecostal) church clearly defines respect:

"Respect is that…you don't have to have the same opinion or the same lifestyle er…but…er when you er…when you see that er..it is not a reason to say or to behave as I don't like you or I hate you or you're going to hell or something like that. So, it's: let's talk - you can name your things and I can say my things, so it's not a conflict but it's a dialogue."

Interestingly, right after his definition of respect, he says:

"That is one side, but because I'm a Christian, I also tell the Gospel and when you tell the Gospel and when you listen to the Gospel there can be, because of the Holy Ghost, er, someone making a choice for Jesus. So, dialogue but also sharing the Gospel." (P1)

This is a pattern we also see with other religiously conservative respondents: they were careful to mention that interreligious contact would not stop them to talk of Christ and salvation.

Trust

Another often mentioned word was "trust". This is the word that respondents used who already had developed a relationship with people from other backgrounds. So, while respect and openness may be seen as attitudes that offer starting points for contacts, trust is the attitude that sustains the relationship.

An employee of a foundation that emerged from a interreligious contact in Amsterdam saw trust as one of the fundamentals of intercultural community organization. She organized an intercultural women's group about people who have family member (son, sister, husband) who are addicted to drugs or alcohol. The sharing of stories proved to be a powerful way of building trust and helping each other to deal with the situation. "[The sharing of stories] gives an entirely different perspective than just talking about your faith." (P11)

Missionary attitude as a point of contact instead of separation

Interreligious dialogue and mission often are seen as contradictory. However, surprisingly, several respondents didn't saw it this way.

In Rotterdam a missionary minister of the church has a special commission for getting in touch with Muslims. He doesn't see mission and interreligious dialogue as ruling each other out. His church has multiple relationships with Muslims. In the past these contacts predominantly were with the mosques in his neighborhood. He describes these contacts as "difficult", especially after the murder with Theo van Gogh. Nowadays he mainly organizes activities with a Muslim foundation that is called INS, "human". This foundation has a missionary drive, but, the cooperation with them he describes as "constructive": "It turned out that we can be partner in many areas."

One of the things they do is organizing a monthly meeting of Christians and Muslims. Around 10 to 15 persons are present in the meetings. "In the conversations we found mutual recognition. There is a lot we have in common, such as our faith in one God. In the same time, these conversations help oneself to think about one's own characteristics. Sometimes

in conversations you bear witness of your faith, without this being direct at the 'saving of souls'." (P10)

The evangelical / Pentecostal minister of the Vineyard church sees their mission work toward non-Christians as a way to build relationships that allows God to do his work:

"Well what is important is build relationships because out of the truth comes the truth and they will see the difference. It is our desire to be a light, to be a bridge, and through relationships allow God to change the heart (P7).

Help with problems

A strong motivation to help people, a sense of being called to give support, is characteristic of the Christian faith communities in our research. For the more 'orthodox' or 'strict' communities this dimension cannot be untied from an evangelistic agenda: the ultimate purpose is to reach out to people in order to bring Christ to them. An illustration of this can be found in a quote from a leader of a migrant church: "As deacons, we have made attempts to visit the prostitutes in the city What motivates me in this ministry is the realization that some are not victims of prostitution by will, they end up in this lifestyle out of being trafficked, and since they have nowhere to work in the Netherlands, they end up in the business. I realized that only few prostitutes are Dutch. A great number comprises of international groups from Spain, Romania, Africa, and other parts of the world. We have at least learnt their greetings and can now joke around with them while passing by. I think we have already created a rapport with them but *it is discouraging that so far, none have received Christ* (P5). Another illustration comes from a Vineyard Church, an international church which in which we observe the same intention *behind and mixed with* the motivation to help: "We've been involved in the immigrant population, the Jade. They are asylum

seekers and in the past *the church also helped in finding settlement* for such people. (…) The group of black guys and some girls that you see them in church are the ones that belong to Jade. Some of them come to the Netherlands to escape from prostitution; some of them have been trafficked to Europe. The largest area of our social action is providing them a place where they can meet other believers and worship God" (P7). When it comes to volunteers in work with prisoners, we see the same semantics. It is about 'reaching out'. Sports are an instrument for evangelization: "Through Athletes in Action there is a soccer team where a group of people try to *reach out* to those in prison through sports" (P7). On the other hand, in this church an evangelistic agenda is not always at the surface or seems to be absent. Taking action can be a response to a perceived emergency: "In the past we had to deal with sexual harassment and *we had to take action*. It became a big issue and as a leadership team when we try to deal with this kind of issue we begin by confronting the issue, helping the people involved to deal with the issue, and we try to get them to seek help"(P7).

Short discussion

Looking at the results of our research, we want to make better sense of them by submitting them to some theoretical perspectives.

Reflections with regard to the themes

First, in many contexts in the world, the climate for interreligious relations has become rougher. Violence can be religiously motivated. Religious symbols and ideas can be used to instigate hate and dissension among groups. Fundamentalist tendencies constitute a challenge for advocates of interreligious dialogue (Evers 2001, 246). There is also an 'old

accusation' against dialogue that it brings together adherents of religious traditions that are not grounded in these traditions. They are seen as unfaithful. The accusation is that for them, their community and tradition have lost their existential importance (Evers 2001, 246). In our research we did not find this accusation in its literal sense, but we did find a *restraint* to establish formal contacts among the interviewees from the more 'strict' communities.

Second, to start with, the interviewees expressed a commonly held conviction that often only those members are involved in interreligious dialogue that have positive experiences with it. It implies that the range of people within religious community that is engaged in interreligious dialogue or even cooperation on a formal level remains relatively small. We are 'doing a bit of a dialogue'. As Evers writes: "The most common objection to the whole project of interreligious dialogue is that those who usually attend these meetings are people who are already "converts to the cause of dialogue"" (Evers 2008, 242). We will return to this point when we reflect upon what is still missing in our research, because in our view it does not only have to do with being motivated to be involved in interreligious or multicultural contacts, but also with scarcity of time.

Third, in our inquiry, we found in our research material that the occurrence of *critical incidents*, like the murder of Theo van Gogh or the 9/11 attack, contributes to the motivation of religious leaders to meet each other in order to formulate a response. It corresponds with findings in other contexts. One of the experts in the field, Georg Evers reports that there has been spontaneous interreligious cooperation on many occasions in the cases of natural calamities, e.g. in Myanmar, where the cyclone Nargis devastated vast areas in the Irrawaddy river delta in May 2008, killing more than 70,000 people. In a similar way, there

were several examples of interreligious cooperation after the tsunami disaster in 2004 in Sri Lanka, India and Thailand (Evers 2008, 229).

Fourth, with regard to the role of *governments*, it seems that advocates of interreligious dialogue are time and again looking for reasons to convince others, including authorities of the importance of interreligious contact. Thus for example, Evers writes: "When viewing the many activities in the field of interreligious dialogue and cooperation, religions play a role in fostering understanding and in helping to build up forms of living together in mutual understanding and solidarity" (Evers 2012,   ). In a report with recommendations to President Obama, we read: "In many areas of the world, religious communities have the best developed, largest, and most enduring social infrastructures. Further, they can be among the most credible and reliable partners" (A New Era of Partnerships 2010, 71).   The report seeks to promote 'multistakeholder partnerships' that include religiously affiliated actors and can "foster social cohesion and help transform sectarian tensions into habits of collaboration based on mutual respect" (A New Era of Partnerships 2010, 72). Multistakeholder partnerships with the U.S. Government are expected to build "a healthy culture of pluralism, marked by respect for distinct religious communities, active and positive relationships among them and nonreligious communities, and a commitment among all groups to build a healthy, diverse, and shared society" (A New Era of Partnerships 2010, 72). The report explicitly states that it is not up to the (local) government or to non-profit organizations to coordinate the assets of religious communities. It is a responsibility of the communities themselves to "convene their own forums" so that they can "unleash the potential of their respective and combined assets, which are spiritual, moral, and social" (A New Era of Partnerships 2010, 74).

Fifth, how much influence do encounters and interreligious meetings have on events in social arenas? From our interviews only, this question is impossible to answer. More methods should be used to assess effects. Presumably, a multi-moment approach would be necessary. So we have to be less pretentious and ask how we can interpret the statements of interviewees in which they evaluate the interreligious or multicultural encounters. What effect do these encounters have on the participants? As for the results or outcome of interreligious contacts for the participants the optimal inter-group contact hypothesis of Allport (1954) posits that, under the right circumstances, frequent interactions with those who are dissimilar may reduce prejudice. A large meta-analytic study of intergroup contacts by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) provides support for this optimal contact hypothesis. Contact effects "emerge across a broad range of outgroup targets and contact settings. Similar patterns also emerge for samples with racial or ethnic targets and samples with other targets. This result suggests that contact theory, devised originally for racial and ethnic encounters, can be extended to other groups." In addition intergroup contacts reduce fear. The reaction of fear to an unknown other religious or cultural world can be overcome when there is a readiness to leave the closed world of one's own group and to meet the other in a hitherto not yet charted "open space" (Evers 2001, 239).

What is missing in the analysis

In further research we would have to pay more attention to questions with regard to finances of religious communities and with regard to buildings, i.e. places that are suitable for meetings, celebrations and cooperation. We would also need to focus to the resource that underpins all others in the life of a religious community, that is, time.

Religious communities can be viewed as public utilities, in that can provide services free at the point of need and by living in solidarity with those who have no choice but to live in this place (Cameron 2010, 149). But then resources like space, people (both professionals and volunteers), money and time are not to be overlooked. They provide the conditions, not only for outreach or help with problems but also for interreligious contact, dialogue and cooperation. Do people set aside time to undertake the work of a religious community on a voluntary basis? There is a preciousness of leisure time. Then it is also a matter of structuring the available amount of time. One could pay someone to coordinate the unpaid efforts of others or to formalize the management of volunteer time (Cameron 2010, 51). These responses are intentional. A problem with giving time, to interreligious contact of whatever kind, would then be the unspoken assumptions that can surround it: someone may be worried about too much being expected of him or her.

In addition to time, it could also be noteworthy to ask for the influence of technology in establishing contacts, that is, social media have increased the possibility of spontaneity. Since we found that informal contacts may precede formal contacts and also that critical incidents may contribute to a sense of urgency, social media as resource should be investigated. Informal gatherings can be arranged in minutes over the Internet. It can be connected to a commonly esteemed value that to be free to be spontaneous is 'cool', while having to be somewhere on a monthly basis can be perceived as a bind.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that there are several distinctions that are of interest for further research into the topic of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The field seems to be promising, both for research and for the actual practices of religious communities.

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With regard to the latter, interreligious activities enable religious communities to become better rooted in their respective local contexts. Awareness of social problems is increased, possibilities for learning are enhanced. And prejudices are confronted.

In this research project we hope to contribute to establish bridges so that people can connect with each other, in order to alleviate possible tensions that might arise between different ethnic and religious groups in local neighborhoods. We – they oppositions are remedied by this interreligious dialogue.

The material uncovers multiple distinctions, tensions, ideas, positions and values that help to educate future leaders of religious communities and enhance their competences to deal with multicultural differences.

We hope that this material will provide stepping stones in the following process of the Grundtvig CULTA project, in which the Life Long learning course will be developed and tested.

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