# Foreword

The UPCB is a small Protestant church in Belgium, which is traditionally a predominantly Roman Catholic country. Unique to this particular location, the church consists of three parts, each corresponding to one of the languages used in Belgium. The Protestant church has been present in Belgium from the time of the Reformation. Among the first martyrs of the Reformation were Augustinian monks from Antwerp who were put to death in Brussels. Facing severe persecution, many Protestants fled to the north during those times, and only a few remained. With the creation of the state of Belgium, Protestantism and Judaism were recognised as religions alongside the Roman Catholic majority.

This means Protestantism plays a significant role in this special country. The Protestant tradition of emancipation and responsibility linked to the personal appropriation of the Bible stories is part of Belgium's national heritage. Yet, comprehensive knowledge about this main cornerstone of the Christian religion is nevertheless virtually absent. In practice, Protestant churches are a marginalised phenomenon.

Because of this position and the associated conscious choices made by this church tradition, Protestants form close-knit communities. In those communities, secularisation was underestimated for a long time. The decline of the institution concerned the people's church, not churches based on choice and conviction. This fact may have slowed the process to a certain extent, but the decline in interest and members has not bypassed Protestants all together. The changing orientation towards the search for meaning, meanwhile, is causing the UPCB to become an increasingly smaller institution.

While pressure is mounting on the faltering institutions, the market of meaning is growing in abundance. Contrary to what has long been thought, secularisation does not appear to be an autonomous process that stops only when religion completely disappears. Meaningfulness has become a private matter and is attuned to individual identity. Concerning religious traditions, this means that one can speak of transition rather than disappearance. That transition does not automatically mean that some will remain, this could

be an evolving situation. It is also quite conceivable that the whole church that exists now will eventually disappear and new forms and emphases will develop.

For any church and its associated theologians, this situation of transition leads to the task of reflection. While it is impossible to settle on one clear perspective, because the outcome of the changes theologians are experiencing is unknown, there is a need to weigh up what the next step might be.

In recent years, the VPKB has shaped these considerations through regular reflection based on substantive preparation. This preparation, in the form of reports, formed the basis of the conversation. The theological faculties affiliated with the VPKB, the French-speaking FUTP and the Dutch- and English-speaking FPTR collected a number of notes in the spring of 2023 as contributions to the conversation in the church. In this volume, those notes have been elaborated and compiled into a series of articles.

In doing so, the authors and editors of this volume hope to contribute to the ongoing reflection on the process of transition.

# Introduction

**Johan Temmerman & Leendert-Jan Parlevliet**

This volume is a compilation of a series of reflections by theologians belonging to the network of the faculties of protestant theology in Brussels. These reflections all take as their starting point the changes taking place within the United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB). The editors of the volume have no other goal than to support the movement underway with responsible theological reflection. This publication is primarily aimed at everyone involved in this small church. We also hope to reach others interested in the changes taking place within the churches.

An earlier compilation of these articles in a very preliminary version was put together by the two faculties affiliated to the UPCB: the Dutch- and English-speaking FPTR and the French-speaking FUTP. This initial edition was presented to the church in the context of a synod meeting where the future of the church was discussed. In this volume, the texts have been elaborated and supplemented by reflections from other authors.

In recent decades, the Protestant church in Belgium has decreased in size. It could not escape the wave of secularisation, whose effects became apparent among Protestants later than among the people's Roman Catholic church. A church with its own signature where membership is a choice, such as the UPCB, created a strong sense of loyalty among its members. However, such a church was also affected by general, societal developments, and large groups became alienated from the church. Even for the Protestant minority, the church was no longer the only place to seek answers to questions of meaning. Now that secularisation has given way to the post-secular society, in which religion has again become a regular feature, the church remains small and marginal. Resistance to institutions ensures that the Church will not return to its former standing. However, this change does provide a new perspective on the feared disappearance of the Church. Society is changing dramatically and churches are part of this change. People speak of transition because the changes are so fundamental, and so this volume follows suit. In short, the Church is not disappearing, but it is undergoing a transition.

Even though the UPCB is small, it is a complete church with a synod, a church order and a large number of activities both on a national and an international scale. In good Protestant tradition, the core of the church is formed by the congregations. Belgium's two major linguistic regions each have their part of the church – L'EPUB for the French-speaking parts of the country, and the VPKB for the Dutch-speaking population. The German-speaking congregations form a small section within the French-speaking part. The two fragments of the church work together but are also differentiated by tradition and influx.

The VPKB has deep roots in Belgium, where it has been present since the Reformation era. The Flemish section has also always had a direct link to the Netherlands, and traditionally, there are also many members who are of Dutch origin. With no link between them, this part of the church has been decidedly progressive in recent decades. Politics and emancipation made their way onto the agenda and engendered robust debates, which made the church more pluralistic and accustomed to dealing with differences.

The French-speaking part of the Protestant church also enjoys great diversity, aided by the influx of members connected to emigration from Africa.

Currently, the church consists of 100 congregations spread across the country in a ratio of one-third Dutch-speaking and two-thirds French-speaking, plus approximately three German-speaking congregations completing the institution.

## City pastors and pioneers

In the past, during the church's heyday, various diaconal initiatives were developed and commitments made from the 1970s onwards. The Protestant Social Centres (PSCs) are the visible consequences of this. Such diaconal centres were established and have flourished in several Belgian cities. They have slowly but surely distanced themselves from the church because their intention was not to evangelise but to meet practical needs.

The city pastors initiative dates from the same time and originated from the same drive, pulled by the call to be present, on behalf of the church, to people on the fringes of society. Out of that assignment, it grew to become its own form of church, bringing the Gospel to society and thus transcending the walls of the institution. Thus, urban pastors have become part of the alternative forms of ministry that can be summarised as chaplaincy. Alongside other actors, they form the church on the move, which also includes the pioneers whose mission is to encourage that movement.

## Brussels City Chaplaincy

In 2021, FPTR launched a project that sought to initiate reflections around how the church could be present in new ways. The initiative for the project was inspired by Airport Chaplaincy, a forward post of the Christian tradition in a completely anonymous inter-religious context. That form of occasional, brief pastoral contact, which turned out to meet a huge need, drove these reflections: something like this should also be possible in the city. City Chaplains, as we called them because that gave them the freedom to be unattached spiritual Caregivers, would connect people all searching for meaning in networks. This connection could occur along different paths, spiritual or activist, cultural or diaconal. After a number of study days and a smooth start due to the great enthusiasm surrounding a new venture, the project is now in the phase of steady growth, although still facing occasional resistance.

The appendix of this volume contains a detailed account of that initial period and several contributions refer to this project, which is expanded in more detail below.

Before we introduce the contributions in this volume individually, we want to describe the vision behind this work to impact society and religion.

The underlying framework of thinking about society and religion on which this volume rests is twofold: inspiring the church to be inclusive in its service and developing a sustainable vision for the future.

## Inclusive service

It may be obvious when we say that there is a great tension between traditional concepts of meaning and postmodern culture. Tradition points to compassion and community, while the postmodern world mainly encourages self-actualisation and individuality. A closer look at this field of tension reveals parallel tendencies at both ends.

Traditional concepts of meaning are under pressure from, on the one hand, a growing regressive tendency, which seeks to re-actualise the ancient foundations of unabridged and pre-critical faith; and, on the other, from the observation that more and more people can appreciate traditional meaning but no longer need an institution to do so, a tendency Grace Davie aptly calls 'believing without belonging'.

These tendencies are also visible in postmodern culture. We are experiencing an increasing polarisation between the regressive tendency due to increasing globalisation and diversity, on the one hand, and the ideologisation of minorities and neo-colonial redistributive mechanisms on the other.

The recognition of this dual tendency on both sides of the philosophical spectrum should enable our service to work on easing the tension between tradition and future. In recent years, research at the FPTR has focused on two areas: firstly, the broad social issues surrounding religion in a post-secular society, such as our studies on religious radicalism, diversity and human rights; and secondly, the specific context of church in transition, and the change in community formation in the context of the traditional framework of Christian meaning. This broad social and inner-church perspective of research at FPTR brings us to the second pillar underlying this volume.

## Developing a sustainable vision for the future

To develop a sustainable, long-term vision regarding the church's place in society, we must dare to ask ourselves some pressing questions: How will Christianity evolve in a post-secular and globalised society? What place will the Bible have in a fragmented culture? And what place will we give to the confessional scriptures? By reflecting on these questions, we can also consider the multipolar world, the advances of AI and transhumanism or economic inequality. We don't have all the answers, but we're happy to make some suggestions, addressing the tension between the traditional construction of meaning and a postmodern worldview. We would like to put forward three steps or suggestions:

1. Recognising the limitations of the scientific worldview through a reappraisal of the speculative reason that lies at the heart of traditional values. Simply put, faith and science are complementary. This is already reflected in teaching and research at FPTR and forms the backbone of this volume.

2. A solid analysis of the meaning vacuum that is the cause of contemporary polarisation, as mentioned above, in both traditional and postmodern worldviews. The legitimacy of theology in the future will be reflected in a holistic approach to meaning. God is not in our inside pocket, but makes himself known to our mind, in our creative and emotional capacity for empathy or love. Churches in transition require a frame of mind that can think 'out of the box'.

3. Our third suggestion - we underline 'suggestion' - involves ethics. This concerns an appreciative borderline between AI and a Christian perspective on transhumanism. We are thinking here of a vision of the purposefulness of humanity, theologically expressed as eschatology; the philosophy of religion speaks of spirituality. It involves hermeneutics or the question of whether we can interpret Pentecost as a timeless event rather than a momentary one? For us, the evocative challenge lies in the affirmation of Pentecost as timeless event. Hence we emphasise the creative and holistic qualities of theologians in the 21st century.

By recognising, analysing and daring to use critical hermeneutics, this volume aims to promote inclusiveness and sustainability from a theological frame of mind, in order to serve the church in transition.

## The response of the Protestant church in Belgium to changes in society

The church is responding to the changing place of religion in society on several levels. First, there is the response of local congregations. Here, we can see the usual repertoire that organisations deploy during crises. The initial reaction can be characterised as the conviction that we need to do better than we are used to doing. Different ways of communicating, different music, more variety. Secularisation then turns out to be a much more profound change in society than thought. Adjustments in form have little or no effect.

The second step is to professionalise the alternative. Pioneers are being appointed following examples from abroad to help vitalise the church. Great things are being done in different places, but only a small number of them stick.

Then, the reflection began. The synod appointed a Contemporary Church committee in 2014, tasked with conducting a study and compiling a report that would help set a course for the coming years. In 2020, they finished their report entitled *Connection and change*. The document was discussed at the Synod of 2021.

This reflection is now in full swing. The synod has decided on a twofold course of action: congregations are to work on revitalisation following the example of a number of successful projects, and efforts are to be made regarding forms of chaplaincy.

Part of the church is entrenched in the past because the renewal of the church is to be expected from the Spirit. This part embraces the concept of rest, which is backed up by solid biblical papers, and has an affiliation with Evangelical and African churches. The conservative course taken on ethical issues does not hinder this sympathy. Another part of the church is committed to pluralistic, diaconal congregations. Finally, there is a small number that are successfully following church renewal models such as that of Willow Creek.

The questions of how the *Connection and change* report has been received and how these differences in direction are being navigated is discussed in several places throughout this volume, most notably in Dicou and Delen's contribution on the UPCB.

## The contents briefly explained

The volume opens with a contribution focusing on the future of the Church and concludes with a plea for a church without thresholds. In the chosen order, the contributions move from contemplative to practical.

The first chapter is an adaptation of the lecture given by Armin Kummer at the launch of the Brussels City Chaplaincy project. During a well-attended study day, he provided the foundations for reflection on this new form of church presence. He began his reflection on the future with a thorough consideration of the current state of affairs. That reflection now also makes up the opening of this book.

In the second article, Edwin Delen outlines a framework for thinking about the different actions a church in transition needs to perform at the same time. On the one hand, preserving tradition and, on the other, connecting to people who are searching for meaning. He coins two terms for those two movements: cathedral for preserving and chapel for connecting.

In the third chapter, Bert Dicou supplements the model outlined by Delen. He gives this idea an ecclesiological basis. In an overview of developments in church renewal in recent decades, he makes connections to the cathedral and chapel model.

Chapter four explores a conversation with connoisseurs of transition and institutions to learn lessons for the church in transition. Transition science appeals to the church to change and to do so systematically. The reflection on institutions puts this into perspective, because institutions are permanent and change with the times. The conclusion leads

to a twofold policy, which already exists in practice: preserve what has been entrusted to you and commit to renewal.

Chapter five initiates a consideration of the underlying theological concepts. Johan Temmerman's reflection on the changing church starts from the question of credibility. In his contribution, he argues for a hermeneutics of imagination in order to strengthen the credibility of the biblical message in church and theology. He analyses the fault lines that have dominated biblical hermeneutics since the enlightenment. Finally, he points out the need to design critical hermeneutics. This mainly involves recognising the imaginative nature of religious transmission. God operates through human imagination.

Rémy Paquet shows that there is merit in the creative ideas put forward by Martin Bucer. In the time of the Reformation, there was plenty of room to try out new forms of being church. The forms seen in those times can provide inspiration for today.

Jo Jan Vandenheede examines whether churches change through ecumenical relations. In such relations, one has to know one's own tradition in order to be able to reach out to another denomination; and through that relationship one comes to see one's own tradition in a different way. That 'knowing' each other and oneself changes a church in a positive way.

In her contribution, Christel Meli Zogning questions whether today's multicultural church is thereby also inclusive. Her research shows that the intercultural approach is a tool that can promote inclusiveness and radical welcome in Lutheran-Reformed Protestant worship. After examining the challenges of inclusive liturgy in the organisation of worship, she sketches out the outlines of an 'intercultural liturgy'. Some brief thoughts that question usual liturgical practices will precede the presentation of a model of intercultural praxis that could constitute an adaptable 'roadmap' for the construction of an intercultural liturgy.

Bert Dicou and Edwin Delen measures the UPCB against the ecclesiological yardstick. They discuss developments in the UPCB on the basis of a number of documents. In addition to two reports on the progress of the process of transition, they analyse the lectures of the synod's president as delivered at the opening of the annual meetings. These texts are placed in an ecclesiological framework by drawing a comparison with recent authors on the development of the Church. They hope this contributes to developing a number of perspectives for the coming years.

Bernd Hirschfeldt conducted a study of the theological concepts of different chaplains in the UPCB, which revealed some striking similarities in practices. Using a thorough theoretical framework, he thereby strengthens the theological basis of this group. He typifies their work with the title of his chapter: a church without thresholds.

This image coincides with that of an inclusive, multicultural, ecumenical church moving into the future – a movement that requires imagination and enthusiasm. That is what this collection of reflections can contribute to.

# 1

Armin Kummer

# Fresh practices in tomorrow's church

## Introduction

'Church in transition', or, more broadly, the future of the Church: this is a topic that touches the heart of all Christians who confess to believe in the Church as part of the third article of the Creed every Sunday. The future of the church certainly touches my heart as a pastoral theologian, as a critical ecclesiologist, and as someone who passionately believes in the need for a fundamental reform, or shall we even say, a reformation, of the structures and processes that make up the operating system of church governance. As such, my critical ecclesiology describes, analyses and criticises the empirically existing churches as they are manifest among or around us instead of engaging in the more abstract debates on ecclesiology that are conducted in the discipline of systematic theology.

As a German, I am most familiar with the large organisations that we call *katholische* and *evangelische Kirche*. In the former case, this refers to 27 particular churches, which form part of the 2,898 dioceses of the worldwide – i.e. literally 'catholic' – Roman-Catholic Church. In the latter case, the Protestant church, this involves twenty autonomous churches in Germany, the twenty *Landeskirchen*. These twenty churches belong to an associative umbrella organisation, the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), which, despite its name, is not a church but a federation. Erroneously, many people in Germany believe there is such a thing as one *Evangelische Kirche*. There are twenty EKD member churches, plus a host of smaller and independent Protestant churches and denominations throughout the country.

My research work in Leuven has afforded me glimpses into what I would venture to call the most successful international organisation in world history. I am speaking of the

Roman-Catholic church. As a Protestant, I may have to justify what I mean by 'successful'. From a purely organisational perspective, the Roman-Catholic church is unparalleled in its global reach, its resilience, and in its capacity to reform itself.

I am not an expert in what our Anglo-Saxon friends call 'church planting'. Neither am I an expert in evangelical or charismatic free churches. (Paas) In my Lutheran tradition, we prefer to speak of 'church development' or 'church building' – what we call, in Greco-German, *Oikodomik*.[1] However, today I will not even try to make any normative statements about what the Church must do in order to achieve this or that objective. The world is not lacking in such pragma-normative 'To-Do' lists, especially in US publications (McGavran, 1977).

In this lecture, I will not be prescriptive, but descriptive. I will provide observations and reflections on trends. I hope my lecture will offer the audience a fresh perspective that is shaped firstly by my sensitivities as a pastoral theologian and secondly by my ecumenical experience in different Church traditions, namely the German-Lutheran, the Anglican, and the Roman-Catholic church.

This article consists of three parts. The first part are my 'prolegomena'. They are introductory and methodological meta-reflections. They are propositions about what we need to keep in mind when we are thinking about a 'Church in transition'. These prolegomena are meant to offer a frame of reference. The second and third parts then deal with a number of observations. In biblical language, I regard these observations as the 'signs of the time' (Mt 16:3). It is the job of the practical theologian to observe, analyse, and interpret these signs of the time in the light of the Gospel. In this lecture, I will talk about trends within society, within the church, and within theology that I believe have relevance for the future of the church.

## Prolegomena

The title of my article is 'Fresh Practices in Tomorrow's Church'. There are four words in this title, and these four words provide us with our prolegomena. I will change the order

1. The word Oikodomik comes from the ancient Greek οἰκοδομή, which literally means house building. In the New Testament the term is used in reference to the church and is usually translated as edification, or building (1 Cor 3.9 EU, Eph 2.19-22 EU and 1 Petr 2.5 ). Nowadays, 'edification' usually refers to the inner edification of the believer. When it comes to the corporate or communal perspective, the term 'church building' is used.

slightly, first discussing the nouns 'practices' and 'Church', and then their attributes 'tomorrow's' and 'fresh'.

### *Practices*

As a practical theologian, it should not surprise anyone that I will start off with a discussion of practices. First, I will consider the very subject of practical theology. Secondly, I will say just a few words on a very traditional view of, or, should I say, a bias against the talk of practices. Finally, I will briefly address the dangerous interplay between practices and hypocrisy.

### *Practices as the focus of practical theology*

Practices are the principal subject of practical theology. Investigating practices is what we mean by being 'practical'. Although this sounds intuitive, this has been rather the exception in the past (Beaudoin, 2016).

For Friedrich Schleiermacher, who in many ways may be seen as the founding father of theology as a modern academic discipline, practical theology was the theological subdiscipline that dealt with church practices. Practical theology provided a normative theory of both church leadership and church ministry (*Theorie des Kirchenregiments* and *Theorie des Kirchendienstes*). Just as university courses in law served to train lawyers and in medicine to train medical doctors, Schleiermacher conceived of practical theology as a discipline that taught Protestant pastors the *Kunstregeln* (rules of the art) of their profession. (Karle, 2020)

To date, such professional standards are still being taught in the main subdisciplines of practical theology: in homiletics one learns how to preach, in liturgical studies one learns how to worship, in poimenics one learns how to provide pastoral care. However, Schleiermacher's perspective was a normative one. It was about what people, in this case pastors, should do rather than what people were actually doing. Still today, these *Kunstregeln* are often derived by deduction from higher theological, or other[2] principles. Hence, this perspective is a deductive perspective (Dillen, 2020), and also a clerical one (Miller-McLemore, 2007). Its main interest was in the practices of ordained pastors, not of the ordinary believer.

Only in the recent past has practical theology undergone a major paradigm shift from a normative perspective on practices to a descriptive or empirical perspective. The object

2. E.g. philosophical, psychological, or sociological presuppositions.

of research is no longer to explore 'what kind of practices should the pastor perform?' but rather 'what are the actual practices that different people perform within and around the church?' Mary Moschella of Yale University, for instance, has been a key scholar promoting an ethnographic approach in the study of church life, with a strong focus on what happens at the level of the individual local congregation (Moschella, 2012). In Europe, Pete Ward, John Swinton, and Christian Scharen are practical theologians who have re-defined ecclesiology on the basis of qualitative research and ethnographic fieldwork (Scharen, 2011). Christopher James' recent work on *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil* is also a product of this particular school of thought (James, 2018). To summarise this first point: Practices are what matters most in practical theology.

### *Practices in Protestantism*

In the Protestant tradition, some may have problems with devoting so much attention to practices. The three *sola* of the Reformation project did not include practices. On the contrary, a focus on practices has always come with the suspicion of *Werkgerechtigkeit*, self-justification on the basis of good works (McGrath, 2012, pp. 115 - 140). The consequent separation of practices from faith has shaped Protestant spirituality over the past 500 years, and sometimes it has resulted in very abstract, disembodied, and thus reductionist understandings of the Christian existence (Bauman H., 1970).

### *Practice what you preach*

Practices, I propose, determine the very nature of church. For sociologists, your identity is constituted by the sum of your practices. Practices, after all, are what others can observe. No matter what 'the church', or any local congregation likes to think of itself, the public identity of the church is determined by its practices. 'Practice what we teach' was the title of the Presidential Address of Tito Cruz to the *International Academy of Practical Theology* in the summer of 2021, calling his fellow theologians in the academy to demonstrate leadership by setting a good example. The relationship, or more specifically, the distance between practices and teaching, and especially preaching, is of the utmost importance for the identity of the church. No other single issue determines the current state of crisis in churches around the world as much as the gap between Christian teaching and actual practices when dealing with cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by some of its clergy. Similarly, the theological call for hospitality, on the one hand, and a tendency towards exclusiveness in actual congregations, on the other, has threatened to damage the churches' credibility.

Jesus already raises this issue, even as early as the time of the Gospels. Jesus of Nazareth is not often depicted as judging others, but when he addresses religious groups of his time as

*hypokritai*, He is pointing to this sensitive gap between teaching and practice. Hypocrisy has always been a critical and salient issue for faith communities.

It is surprising how much of the discourse of church reform is still obsessed with questions of doctrine. In the US, the so-called mainline denominations feel challenged to revise their rather liberal doctrinal teachings in view of evangelical and Pentecostal success with doctrinal conservatism (Freudenberg, 2022). Many churches, the Roman Catholic church in particular, fiercely debate a revision of their sexual ethics in order to keep up with cultural trends in society (Vandenhoeck, 2022). In Germany, the Protestant church has this year given up its post-war tradition of pacifism in order to remain a reliable participant in the more belligerent mainstream of public debate. It remains to be seen whether and how such doctrinal manoeuvres will help to stop the decline in church membership. The future of the church, I venture to say, will be shaped by practice, not by doctrine.

### *Church*

Let me turn to the second word that is relevant for our discussion: the Church. When we speak of 'Church in transition', what are we actually talking about? The word church has many meanings. Are we talking about a theological abstraction, for example, the 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church' of the Nicene Creed? Are we talking about empirical realities? Are we referring to a certain denomination, or to a specific local congregation? Which level of church leadership do we have in mind? A fair degree of disambiguation is necessary when we discuss the future of the Church.

Yet, no matter how specific we want to be, not all of the fine distinctions we would like to draw are shared or understood by the broader public. For example, in Germany, it is possible to empirically count the number of people who have given up their church membership in a specific Protestant parish over a given period. This yields a precise number for a well-defined local context. However, when people who undertake the administrative act of leaving the church are asked why they have chosen to leave, there will always be a significant share of (nominally Protestant) church-leavers who tell you that their decision is triggered by positions or actions taken in the Roman-Catholic Church. This can drive the local Protestant pastors to despair. These people have never talked to the local pastor or attended Sunday service in their parish. Their decision to leave is motivated by what is going on in a different church denomination.

Is this a sign that theologians and church leaders have failed to explain their idea of 'church' to their members? Or is this a sign that God is holding his people responsible for

the *una sancta*, no matter whether or not they belong to a branch that has undergone a reformation?

Of course, even without this confusion about church identity, and even if it has a clear definition, a church will always manifest itself in various forms. Practical theologians describe the church as a 'polymorphic hybrid': at the same time a symbol, a social system, a movement, an institution, and an organisation (or enterprise) (Hauschildt, 2013).

### *Tomorrow*

When I speak of tomorrow's church, I am referring to the future. Clearly, not a very distant future. At the same time, I am referring to something that will be different from today. We cannot know for certain exactly how tomorrow's church will be different from today.

I am not sure what to make of the phrase 'in transition'. Transition usually refers to a process or to a period of changing from one state to another. Transition is a kind of bridge between A and B. It means we know what state B looks like, and we can determine when state B has been achieved. The term 'transition' therefore always implies an end state, a *telos*, some form of completion.

However, I would surmise that it is not easy to even agree on how we would characterise state A, the state of the church today. How much less can anyone claim to have any precise idea what state B, a new end-state of the church, will look like? Some practical theologians like to use the concept of 'emergence' to reflect the complexity and unpredictability of the change process within churches (Hartmann, 2014).

I would suggest using the concept of *ecclesia semper reformanda*. '*Semper reformanda*' can be seen as a 'nota ecclesiae', something that describes the very nature of the Church. What *semper* means is that we are not witnessing a one-time transition, but an ongoing process of re-formation, a perpetual change of form, a continuous metamorphosis. This 'shape-shifting' is an essential property of the church as a living system or even living organism. And hopefully, as practical theologians we can discern, at least with the benefit of hindsight, how the Holy Spirit is at work in these ongoing re-formations.

Finally, Christians' attitudes towards the future are shaped by hope. Not just by some vague sense of optimism, but by the confident expectation that God will bring to completion what He has started. Our reflections about tomorrow's Church should therefore not

be clouded by fear. I am speaking about 'Tomorrow's Church' because I am confident that tomorrow, there still will be a church.

### *Fresh*

Finally, let me talk about freshness. I don't like to use the word 'new'. I prefer the word 'fresh'. Firstly, it is less presumptuous. After 2,000 years of church history, it is just too ambitious, and probably not always necessary, to come up with something truly new.

Secondly, the word 'new' can be threatening. We are living in a world where we are incessantly bombarded with news and innovations. This can lead to a sense of overwhelm (Dykstra R. , 2018). Churches, in contrast to business organisations, do not need to be concerned with incessant innovation. They should, however, be concerned with freshness, refreshment, and vitality. Important biblical impulses can be found, for example, in Psalm 23:2, John 4:14, and Revelation 22. The notion of freshness is closer to the organic, agricultural metaphors Jesus uses when talking about the slow growth of the Kingdom.

Finally, the word 'fresh' has already been used in the specific historical and geographical context of church reform in the Church of England. 'Fresh expressions of church' has become a widely known term and a similarly widely copied model (Cray, 2009).

Having set up, to some degree, a framework for thinking about tomorrow's Church, let me now turn to the signs of the time.

## Signs of the time

The signs of the time are the chief data practical theologians seek and discover in the world around them (Dillen, 2020, p. 112). They may be indicative of general trends or the *Zeitgeist*, a societal or cultural consensus. In what follows, I will pick four important trends capturing the *Zeitgeist* in the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century, namely spirituality, experience, embodiment, and relationality.

### *Spirituality*

I want to speak first of all about the cultural megatrend of 'spirituality' (Zulehner, 2004). Why do I think it is a megatrend? Firstly, the mere quantity of publications on spirituality indicates that we are dealing with a significant trend. Secondly, the spirituality discourse interpenetrates what so far have been functionally segregated domains: We talk about 'spiritual care' in the healthcare context, 'spiritual fitness' in the military context, and

'spiritual leadership' in the context of corporate management, thereby reversing the functional differentiation of society which has often been used to explain secularisation (Karle, 2020, pp. 66 - 72).

Thirdly, there is an increasing number of people that describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' or 'SBNR'. This is an interesting development from the perspective of the sociology of religion (Settler, 2022). It challenges earlier theories, because the alternative to religion is no longer atheism or materialism. It raises questions about the secularisation theories that have so often been quoted to explain and justify the decline of the churches (Martin, 2012). Here, we have something unexpected that reflects both continuity and discontinuity with the Christian past. Even among self-identifying Christians, we find that the word spiritual has gained more positive connotations than the term religious. However, it has been noted how difficult it is to define the blurred distinction between the two terms (Zinnbauer, 1997).

Finally, there is growing interest in spiritual practices within Christian communities, be they from other traditions like mindfulness, yoga, tai chi, etc., or from the Christian tradition, for example pilgrimages.

If I were to attempt my own definitions of religion and spirituality, I would propose that both spirituality and religion refer to one's relationship with God (or, more neutrally, 'the sacred'). Spirituality is individualised religion and, vice versa, religion is socialised, or rather collectively organised, spirituality (Oman, 2013).

The individualistic trend towards spirituality means turning away from organised religion. This turn against solid structures and organisations has been theorised as 'reflexive' or 'liquid modernity' by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck or Zygmunt Baumann. Perhaps we can also observe some confessional differences in the reception of this trend (Ward, 2017b). It seems that among some Roman Catholic theologians, this 'liquidation' of the church is not always seen as something altogether undesirable (Groot, 2020). Be that as it may, it is simply important to recognise this trend and to acknowledge that a growing number of people prefer spirituality over religion. Therefore, churches have to think hard about what this trend means for the practices of and within the church.

### *Experience*

A second important trend is the shift towards experience.