

The Dutch ecumenical women's movement: strengths and weaknesses of the network model in changing churches.

Imagine: august 1987, the central hall of an educational institute; in the lower part of the central space a quadrant of tables; behind these tables women from all corners of the Netherlands, representing different churches, traditional women's organizations, institutes of religious education, the academy etc. On the higher parts of this hall, rows of chairs for women and a few men, spectators, witnessing the proceedings in their middle. See here the setting of the first ecumenical women's synod in the Netherlands, and probably world-wide.

I was one of the seventy women delegates – a delegate representing the university – and I remember vividly that the hall was titillating with the energy and expectations of all those women witnesses sitting at my back, their emotional stake in some of the resolutions or recommendations that were discussed by us official synod-members. Some recommendations passed easily – like the one that called the churches develop a positive action policy to increase the number of women in church office and to set up a women's desk. Other recommendations, however, raised a heated discussion between delegates and between delegates and spectators, illuminating for all present that it mattered for your political or religious views that you were married or divorced, hetero sexual or lesbian, well off middle class or on social welfare.

That day we passed 43 recommendations on all kind of issues that were important to the women and faith movement: equal representation of women in church bodies, inclusive language in liturgies, the development of pastoral care tailored to women, especially to those with experiences of sexual violence in the family and in pastoral relations; we renounced the feminization of poverty, the heterosexism of church policy; we called attention to the differences between white and black women – and to the relations to the other continents.

This first ecumenical women's synod was the grande finale of a symposium with the title 'Vrouw en Macht-Vrouwenmacht', (woman and power, women's power),¹ organized to celebrate 10 years of women's work at Kerk en Wereld, leading institute for religious education of lay persons in the Netherlands. After this first ecumenical women's synod four more would follow and the sixth will be held in 2012.

The purpose of this first synod was twofold: to make visible the power and visions of the women-and-faith movement, and to translate these views into recommendations for the different churches, political parties and many groups of the wider women's movement itself.

What has been realized of the many recommendations that were sent by this first and the subsequent four women's synods to the churches?

This question cannot be answered that easily. Some of the issues that were put on the agenda are realized: the number of women in church boards in many local parishes has increased significantly, so much so that some speak of the feminization of the church; on the other hand: the number of women in higher offices of the church is still relatively low. Another example: the discussions on sexual violence in pastoral relations has resulted in official procedures in the churches and in the organization of a network of persons of trust; and a third example: in most mainstream churches

¹ Many women who had followed a course at Kerk en Wereld had participated in the symposium and had discussed the recommendations and resolutions that were proposed to the delegates to the synod.

complex family relations due to divorce and remarriage are of the order of the day, so that the recommendations of the first ecumenical women's synod concerning the necessity to change the church views on divorce have been realized surreptitiously.

But are these changes the result of actions taken after the recommendations of the subsequent women's synods? Aren't they rather the effect of a larger societal change? and yet: when these changes would be the effect of societal change: aren't these changes brought about because gender relations have profoundly changed through the actions of the women's movements?

So again, what has been the effectiveness of the women's synods and the larger ecumenical women's movement in bringing about institutional changes in the churches?

This question becomes all the more pressing in the light of two reports by KASKI, the Institute for Applied Research on Religion on the position of women in the Churches. Especially the Kaski report on women in the PKN is interesting. For the statistics on women's participation in church boards show remarkable correspondences with a small scale investigation on the participation of women in the Gereformeerde Kerken in 1986, one of the three churches that merged to form the PKN in 2004. Seen at a glance, these correspondences seem so striking that one could easily think that nothing has changed in the churches. But this first glance is deceptive however, for on local level women are overrepresented in church boards, especially in what could be called the 'caring' functions. But higher in the echelons of the churches the number of women decreases. This brings the Kaski report to the recommendation that the PKN as well as the women's synod itself ought to examine why women are underrepresented in these higher echelons. This recommendation provoked the angry reaction that this report could have been written twenty years ago. It motivated a small group of six women to explore what has been done with the recommendations of the women's synods within the different churches and within the movement itself

Hier een paar woorden over dat onderzoek

My paper is based on the work of this group. I will focus in particular on the strengths and weaknesses of a network structure of the ecumenical women's movement in influencing the institutional churches. For our explorations suggest that this organizational form has profoundly shaped the effectiveness of the ecumenical women's movement in changing the churches.

I will start with a more general picture of the ecumenical women's movement – describing the kind of groups that constituted this movement and the nature of the connections between the different groups. I will then discuss the strengths of this organizational model, before focussing on the weaknesses of the model. In the conclusions I will try to indicate on what level – personal, collective or institutional – the ecumenical women's movement has been successful and also what we can learn of the experiences of the past for the present and the future.

The ecumenical women's movement as a network of groups, associations and individuals.

Let me begin with a short sociological picture of the women- and faith movement of the seventies of the last century.

The following list offers a picture of the diversity of the groups and initiatives that are covered by the term ecumenical women's movement. One can distinguish

- discussions and study groups in all shapes and sizes organizing meetings, courses or educational programs on feminist theology, feminist exegesis, feminist liturgy, in local parishes, regional settings and at universities;
- groups of lesbian women of faith and theologians, groups for pastoral care for women with experiences of sexual violence; networks of women of faith living on social welfare, womanist theologians; different dialogue groups; between black and white women; Jewish and Christian women; Muslim and Christian women.²
- groups that were formed for a purpose: to publish a collection of hymns for instance; or longer lasting groups as the editorial committees of the many journals, newsletters and leaflets that circulated within the movement.
- Then there were the more or less official church committees on women's issues, such as the committee on Women, Church and Society of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands – a very important one in the first ten years of the movement – and the study group Women and Church of the Catholic Council for Church and Society. The Protestant churches did not establish special committees, but established positions for women's issues.

These different individuals, associations and groups were connected to each other in a multi-dimensional web of relations of different kinds and intensities. To understand the strengths and weaknesses of this network structure it is important to pay attention to the nature of these connections between the different groups – especially in the pre-internet era, which is but fifteen years ago. I distinguish two forms of connection in this pre-internet era: meetings of every shape and size and the flow of information in the form of leaflets, newsletters and periodicals and books.

I will start with the flow of information. In the beginning of the ecumenical women's movement information was passed on through what we call now traditional media: newsletters, mailing lists and periodicals. In the beginning the stream of information was relatively small, with only one national periodical, *Vrouwen en Woord*, that was widely read. It published feminist theological articles and reports of meetings, and announcing all kinds of meetings. However, this stream of information proliferated rapidly with the growth and increasing diversity of the movement. A high number of books were published and many regional or thematically groups developed their own newsletter and in time more journals appeared for a special target group. As a consequence, one could no longer assume that everyone shared the same body of knowledge. This inequality in information played a role in larger meetings or gatherings, producing differences between women that were euphemistically called non-simultaneousness. These differences affected the effectiveness of some of these gatherings, among them the ecumenical women's synods. **I will come back to this point.**

The second form of connections within any movement are those forged in and through meeting of all kinds. And they did meet, the women of the movement: in sitting rooms, around kitchen tables, in institutes of religious education, in churches, studying, talking to each other, organizing further meetings. And in between meetings there were the telephone calls going to and fro. This generated

² Many of these groups developed from small initiatives run by volunteers to an organization with one or two paid coordinators. Some of these organizations are still in existence, like for instance the IWFT expertise network for gender and religion, which celebrates its 35th birthday in October. And another example: the VPSG – a society for pastoral counseling of women who experienced sexual violence, which celebrated its 25th birthday in November last year.

the experience of being part of something meaningful. This is also true for the larger gatherings or events, as for instance the women's synods. These too generated and generate the experience of 'belonging', which is important for all those women who experience themselves as being on the boundary of the institutional church. These experience of the meetings are moreover passed on to others. And in this way a collective memory of important moments in and for the movement is generated. From this perspective, the women's synods are very important for the inner cohesion of the movement.

But this description of the connection does not pay attention to the knots in the network – those intersections of filaments. Those intersections were formed by individual women who participated in more than one group. They constituted a personal union between different groups or different levels in the network of relations. These personal unions or knots in the web of relations were formed in particular by the large group of women professionals: theologians, sociologists, religious educators, who worked in the churches or in church related institutions for and with the women of the women and faith movement. Some focused their time on the religious education of the many local women and faith groups, supporting those groups sometime for years. Others worked for the church at national level and participated in that capacity in all kind of church bodies like the council of churches. They wrote texts and edited newsletters etc etc. Many of these professionals also met in support groups like the network Vrouw-Kerk-Beleid = women-church-policy. In and through their work they knew a large number of women that participated in different groups in the movement. It would therefore be accurate to describe them as ever so many spiders in the web, or even - changing metaphors – as the backbone of the movement.

Many of these professionals worked in part-time and temporary positions, created by the different churches in answer 'to the spirit of the times'. Most positions terminated after four or five years and were not continued despite pressure, either because churches were too afraid to be bound by Dutch law to give someone a permanent position in a time that they had to cut their overall expenses. Or they did not think it relevant enough to continue. And it has probably been a combination of both. However, this church policy had a profound effect on the movement, as I show later on.

In short, this picture clearly shows that from a sociological perspective the ecumenical women's movement has the form of a network just like many other social cultural movements. However, the interesting thing is that the women and faith movement uses the term network to define itself – to describe its organizational form. It is interesting because this choice for a network structure is not self-evident. Other organizational forms would have been feasible like an association or society with a membership, including membership fees, a board and a general meetings and such.

Why did the women in the movement choose the organizational form as a network – or why did they not choose another form? What are the strengths or advantages of the network model?

Let me mention a number of these strengths:

The network model is open and informal – any individual or group can join the movement or participate in the events or gatherings organized by the movement. The movement does not raise thresholds in the form of a membership. It offers therefore a lot of space for new initiatives to be developed in this open space that the movement provides. This open character enables many different women to experience a sense of belonging, despite their possible differences.

The network structure allows moreover for diversity :diversity in groups and initiatives; diversity in social location – rich and poor, black and white, hetero and home sexual; diversity in thoughts about the direction of the movement –for instance with respect to the relation to the churches.

Furthermore, the structure of the network model is 'light', which fits the fact that many women work on a voluntary basis in the different groups in the movement. This goes also for the women professionals who work in and with groups in the movement.

It is also flexible and fluid - it can expand and shrink and change hue in response to the dominant issues of a certain period or the weight of a discussion. This becomes clear when one studies the programs of the different women's synods gatherings. Although some issues returned at each synod – such as the issue of sexual violence in family relations or women on social welfare – other issues that are tabled might show a shift in interest or emphasis in the participants in the movement but can perhaps also be explained by the willingness of a person or group to give a workshop.

And last but not least, it corresponds with the values and visions of the women and faith movement, because it is a non hierarchical structure, in which the equality of all participants is presupposed and which aims for a radically democratic way of taking decisions. It has no strong centre; rather the autonomy of the different groups is respected. This structure corresponds therefore with the dominant ecclesiology of the movement, which has been heavily influenced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's ideas about the 'ecclesia' of women as a discipleship of equals.

But the explorations of our group suggest that the strengths of the network structure harbor also its weaknesses. These weaknesses come to light when one studies the policy making of the second and third women's synods. I spotlight these synods because they were organized at a time when the network model was most explicitly discussed and presented as the organizational form of the movement. I will discuss two characteristics of this network model that in my view prove to be both its strength and its weakness, depending upon the situation.

The first characteristic I would like to discuss is the non-hierarchical nature of the network model. This has undermined the effectiveness of the ecumenical women's movement in bringing about change. The non-hierarchical model ensured the autonomy of the different groups within the network, but it also meant that the groups were free to decide for themselves what they would do with the recommendations of the synod. Some recommendations were also passed by the meeting without a clear address, so that it was not clear who would be responsible for it. The absence of a coordinating group or centre that monitored what happened to the many recommendations of the different synods, reinforced this obscurity .

The autonomy of the different groups in the network made and makes it also very difficult to act as a political unity. In just a few cases the movement has managed to take a stand together and to make waves. One of those occasions was the protest 'De Heer kan niet meer' a protest against the decision to continue to translate the tetragrammaton with 'the Lord' in the New Bible Translation.

It is important to note that the desirability of a coordinating group or centre- preferably with some staff - has been discussed more than once. In the end no money could be found for such a centre, but there was also strong opposition to this plan, because it would break with the ideal of the movement as a radically democratic platform.

The second characteristic I want to discuss is the openness of the network model. This character comes for instance to the fore in the manner the synods were organized, notably by sending open invitations to all groups to offer a workshop. This led on the one hand to a gathering that represented the rich diversity of the movement at that particular point in time. But it led also to a lack of continuity in the subjects that were discussed at these gatherings. The open and informal character of these gatherings ensured moreover, that everyone was welcome to participate – which is a great achievement – but it also led to the situation that women who worked professionally for

the women-and-faith movement and women who participated in a local women-and-faith group and devoted most of their time to feminist bible studies were thrown together in workshops and had to formulate a recommendations for the plenary. At those moments the open character and the power of diversity with the underlying vision of the movement as a discipleship of equals proved to hinder the process of policy making. For the one wanted to move on in the discussion while the other was interested to learn something new. This difference between women for whom the synod was a place to plan for change and those women who came in the first place to participate in the gathering itself has frustrated many women, especially professional women. This difference in interest in the proceedings of the synods was reinforced by the lack of a shared body of knowledge between participants. This difference was affectionately called 'ongelijktijdigheid' or non simultaneity, but this term conceals the unacknowledged differences in power and authority within the movement, a difference that was possibly too difficult to discuss when the collective ideal was to become a discipleship of equals.

However, the weaknesses I have just discussed are not the only or even the main reason that the churches are still very much the same as twenty years ago nor that the ecumenical women's movement has decreased in number or that many groups seem to have disappeared. This is also caused by the resistance within church bodies to recognize women's issues as issues that affect the whole body of the church. This becomes clear for instance by their reluctance to widely discuss an issue as domestic violence or sexual violence in the family. It is also quite apparent in their policy to terminate the contracts of all those women who were appointed to support the women and faith movement. This practice has had a devastating effect on many groups in the movement and on the network as a whole. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether another organizational form would have prevented this process. It is quite possible that those appointments would then have been terminated in the name of gender mainstreaming.

But taking the lack of institutional change as sole measure of the effectiveness of the network model of the ecumenical women's movement would blind us to the impact of this movement at the level of the personal lives of many participants. The movement influenced the consciousness and knowledge of many of its participants not only on feminist theological points like feminist exegesis of the bible. It also sensitized them vis a vis controversial issues, such as experiences of sexual and domestic violence, homosexuality, or racism. From the point of view of consciousness raising the network model of the movement has been successful and has contributed to smaller and larger changes within church communities.

As Anne Marie Korte showed us, between the personal level and the institutional level there is the level of the community or collective. It is interesting that hardly any energy has been invested to think through how to implement the many recommendations of the women and faith movement at that level. At grass root level the issue of women's leadership and that of reasons for or consequences of the feminization of the church is brewing. It is therefore quite possible that a wider discussion of these issues will generate a new focal point that brings women and also men together to move for change.