Inaugural lecture

A dialogical network

Forty years ago, I studied at this fantastic faculty. A faculty that actually cannot exist, because there is no university to house it and no government to pay for it, but a faculty that nevertheless has existed for almost 80 years and has been educating theologians as independently as it has been. After forty years of study, this last part of my career should be teaching. Lecturing, as befits a professor. It is certainly not logical to still want to be a student then, or indeed - as I am going to claim - to want to make an effort *not to* know, to ask instead of to answer, to listen instead of to speak.

The core of what I want to say is that anyone who wants to teach others must be prepared to become a student with those others. A thought that is not new, but that has a new topicality in our times of transition. I hope to be able to make that plausible in the course of the next half hour.

I want to make the lessons I have learned over the past ten years about learning communities in education available to the Church and to theology. That is the subject of my lecture. These three steps will also determine the structure.

I will start by summarising the lessons about learning communities from education, then I will outline some possibilities for learning communities in the church, and finally I will discuss the consequences I now see for theology in this way of learning together. Finally, I will think aloud about Practical Theology and the tasks I see for myself in the coming years.

I will begin with a brief review of my development within religious pedagogy. After all, that is my specialisation within Practical Theology.

My research into new forms of worldview education and into renewing religious education started with the conviction that things could be better. This is how it always starts when practice demands change: that which exists must be better. Religious education had to be better prepared, equipped with better material, be better informed from the heart or from experience or knowledge. Anyway, better. Slowly but surely, it became clear to me that things had to change, that times had changed and that the answer to secularisation was not better. It took years for the final change to take place. Theoretically, it was soon clear: the hermeneutic-communicative model was the answer. The next step was the discovery of the world of Child Theology, particularly in Germany. Even then, it took me a while to accept the consequences. Religious education had to start with the questions of the children and no longer with the answers of the adults.

Now the PLG, the professional learning community, turned out to be very suitable for this change in religious education. What initially seemed to be an incident later turned out to be structural. The structural change that is necessary for the education of children can best be achieved for teachers in the same way: by starting with their questions. To cut a long story short: the PLG with action research and with structural attention for the personal learning and change process is pre-eminently suitable for the realisation of dialogical, child-oriented ideological education.

This is how my fascination for this form of learning arose, whereby new forms are developed and participants begin to look differently at their education and their philosophy of life. And so it is wonderful that these insights are now also being given a place in practical theology.

Lessons on learning communities in education

I now come to the lessons about learning communities from education. These PLGs fit in with the transition that our society is going through and which affects all areas of living together. I will discuss some of them. It is not a question of completeness today.

The acquisition and sharing of information and knowledge has been structurally changed by the Internet. Authority of, for example, experts is no longer given with the role distribution in the school system. A loss of authority that primary school teachers share with, for example, university professors. By extension, the role distribution between the teacher and the pupil has also shifted. Teachers are given authority by working with their pupils or students to investigate answers to shared questions. Learning through discovery and research are forms that support the appropriation of knowledge in this new relationship. The learner increasingly becomes the subject rather than the object of education, which also enhances intrinsic motivation. What starts off as an interesting didactic approach that gives pupils more space, gradually develops into a profound change in education. There is a paradigm shift. The position of the teacher and lecturer increasingly becomes that of coach and supervisor. The debate on the practical translation of these changes is in full swing. It is a difficult tangle of arguments to untangle, as substantive objections to the role of coach mix with resistance to a change that is underway.

The PLG contributes to this process of change as a form of learning that proves very fruitful for teachers. And thus also as part of the training of this professional group. The changes in education require new didactics and - more than that - new practices. Precisely because of the far-reaching change that is required, the learning process must be focused on both form and vision. Moreover, the teacher's personal knowledge and conviction must change along with it. Learning communities turn out to have unexpectedly large effects. Sustainable changes are brought about by working with a group in an investigative manner and by supporting and questioning each other, without avoiding personal questions. Those who lead these learning communities, the facilitators, must present and propagate the joint learning process in an exemplary manner. This is a wonderful task that requires some practice and, above all, requires the courage to let go and to have faith in the group.

This combination of substantive and personal learning processes has been described in the world of business and large organisations by Otto Sharmer in his Theory U, where the U stands for the learning path that must be followed. Step by step, letting go and trusting in the common conviction at the bottom, a trust in the future that reports as common intuition. From there, the development of new forms in an open process of trying things out and daring to make mistakes. A process that does not work if it is managed top-down. A process that has results if everyone feels equal and if everyone participates from their own knowledge and wisdom, from their own questions and experience.

A final aspect that should be mentioned in this context is that a PLG is a small network of professionals who together conduct research into new practices, and thus it fits into a school or training program that functions as a network.

The opportunities of professional learning communities in the church.

To put it bluntly: the church, with which we are familiar, is disappearing in the West as fast as the glaciers from the Alps. This crisis is making many beautiful and good things disappear. So much beauty is withering away; so much that could be so comforting is being abandoned; forms that counteract loneliness seem out of date. That takes a lot of sorrow and farewells. The Church is losing its power and is becoming a marginal institution. In itself, this is a position that fits in well with the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. That margin may also have opportunities.

The God of Jesus is not a power factor, not a mark on the equipment of the powerful, not a final piece in a world vision. This God is always just moving in the direction of the future. So it is in that margin of society that the church might come more to itself. The transformation that is taking place brings loss, but it also offers perspective.

The only problem - and this is no small matter - is that we do not know how this transformation will turn out. We can reasonably assume that the forms of the past decades cannot be used again. Because that, of course, is the first thought: we must do everything we did better.

What we do know is that everything that is characteristic of transition also applies to the church, at least if it does not want to be left behind in a reserve. That means: a network of convictions, authority at the base, authenticity and connection, including in relation to other religions and dialogue as a form of discussion.

What does a learning community have to offer in this crisis? The Church is not a school. Yet education has something to offer the church in these times. When there is unanimity about not knowing what the next step is. When there is an idea of direction, but the forms do not work. Then it is time to explore together, step by step, what a next step might be.

A PLG to develop new forms of ecclesial presence in dialogue with each other. And in that PLG, as far as I am concerned, the elements aimed at deep learning come together: trust, equality and letting go of the certainty of the outcomes. And by deep learning I mean: learning that aims at innovation and personal wisdom.

Participating in a PLG requires listening first and only then speaking. Not immediately saying what you think the other person wants to say, but rather delaying speaking. Each time deciding to listen first, to let the other speak first. For me, the intended dialogue is about listening as an activity and about ethical imagination, about putting yourself in the place of what the others have to say. It is an exercise in connecting and meeting.

As pompous as that sounds with all those references to Buber and Levinas, it is applied in a matter-of-fact way in a meeting. It works by applying a number of rules. In a PLG, the intangible of a meeting is captured in simple agreements. Every reaction always starts with naming what is found to be positive in what someone else says. One does not speak for another and one certainly does not think for others. A second rule of conversation is: ask questions that help the other person think further.

They are not magic tools and the outcome is not necessarily positive. What matters is facilitating encounters and creating connections between participants. This creates flow and new insights.

These rules of service apply first and foremost to the person leading a PLG.

It is a form of learning that can boast of old papers in the Church. As a twelve-year-old, Jesus sat among the teachers in this way, discovering with them what was before him.

At the same time, this form of learning will demand a great deal from the theologians within the Church. For they are used to knowing and defining, to giving answers and less to asking questions; they are more used to speaking than to listening when it comes to their profession.

I see huge opportunities and the first steps we have taken are promising, but more on that later.

In my opinion, the opportunity for the church lies in not knowing. Those who no longer know how to do things and are willing to listen to what is being said together with others, those who are willing to commit themselves to a community of learners, connect people in a dialogical network. This dialogical network could be the key. It is obvious to start with learning communities of theologians, pastors, pioneers and church workers. Behind them emerges an image of the church as a learning dialogue network, in which all those involved participate in their own way and in their own place. These networks are, of course, already in the making.

The Theological Faculty as a Learning Network

There are great opportunities for a theological faculty that develops as a learning community, because it meets some of today's challenges. I will mention some of the issues that theological education faces. With the transformation of the church, the training/education(?) of people who will work in that church also changes. Certainly if a faculty wants to train for the church that is coming, certainly if a faculty feels called to think and train for the future, then that training has to be broad and focused on the questions of today's society, then that training has to be focused on dialogue with other worldviews and religions, then that training has to be focused on continuing education, on independent, critical theologians who will be working in very different places. In this changing world, it is essential to train close to these dynamics. This requires a continuous dialogue with practice. Learning by being part of that learning practice. That is what needs to happen and that is what happens in a learning community. Together with all those involved, experienced and inexperienced theologians, young and old, conduct practice-oriented research into the innovation of religious practice. Not putting energy into the restoration of the existing church, however difficult that may be because it is a loss, but focusing on the future. That, in a nutshell, is the task we face. This emphasis on the joint effort and this direct connection with the practice that is part of the transition is elaborated in the collaborative approach. The value of practice-based research for the development of theology is internationally recognized. We are not going to undertake unprecedented experiments in our Brussels faculty. Our faculty does have some positive starting points for doing so. Many lines come together in Brussels. For Europe, it is a hub, but also globally, Brussels is a meeting place. As a liberal city, it offers enormous scope for social innovation, and there is no great history of churches. The churches in Brussels, especially the Protestant ones, have long been present throughout the city, completely fragmented. Brussels is a multi-religious city, without a majority. That too is an opportunity. And in that vast sea of people and houses stands our faculty. People with their own story, from all sorts of backgrounds and countries, are coming to join us.

The size of the faculty is also an opportunity. We do not form a world in isolation. We are, as a matter of course, part of a network of theologians and theologically interested people who, as a predominantly Protestant minority, need and can strengthen each other. This network, which is already there, now offers opportunities.

Step by step, professional learning communities can start functioning in this network. The first PLG has started in which some pioneers, pastors and chaplains are together doing action research on new forms of church presence. As in the world of education, this can be a first step in the development of a network of theologians who want to learn together and develop personally. The hope and expectation is that one PLG will call forth the next and that it will become a natural part of training together, that it will lead to joint research and professionalisation in the world of Belgian Protestantism. A world that has long since lost its sharp boundaries and that connects with all those networks involved in questions of life and faith.

Such a network is flexible but not without obligation, because those who want to learn together with others will have to be prepared to practice dialogue. And that always starts with postponing being right, being prepared to search together for truth, with the intention of first listening and asking and only then perhaps speaking. A dialogical network is about liminality, about creating a place where there is room for encounter and not for absolutes.

Forty years ago, I came here to study in Brussels and we were trained in rigour. How wonderful it was to know what was going on with God and the world and society, and to embrace debate as a way of finding out the truth. The sharper, the better, because it would bring us closer to the truth. A better, more equal world, an emancipated generation and a global network of the righteous. It has taken a desert journey to let go, to go from certainty to the core of not knowing, to let go that it does not depend on me and to accept that what I have learned over the years may be useful.

The dependency and vulnerability that are the starting point for the dialogical network fit the church and theology. They cannot be imposed or prescribed. That makes it a case of chosen naivety, which lacks power. That is the difficult consequence: there is no authority that enforces that this is the direction in which church and theology should go. All the resistance that is generated and that was already there, because things can always be done differently, cannot be countered with the rightness of this dialogical approach. You can give trust, but you cannot demand it, you have to receive it. It is like believing.

Practical theology

Finally, a few words about practical theology and the steps that can be taken in the coming years.

As I have just outlined, I see opportunities and tasks for practical theology in deploying practice-based research based on the collaborative approach, in other words, in a dialogical network shaped by learning communities. Working together with professionals from the various faith practices on innovating those practices. Learning together with students and professionals in a learning community on different levels. Both the forms and the beliefs behind them are addressed. And both are never separate from personal development. Practical theology also makes this contribution to the training and continuing education of ministers.

Good practice-oriented research cannot do without fundamental research. It is there that concepts are thought through and elaborated, it is there that substantive traces are developed and ways of classifying practice are devised. This fundamental theological reflection is first of all provided by biblical science. The Bible as the inexhaustible source of theology. Asking new questions, offering new perspectives. Again and again, these stories and other texts are read and spoken in dialogue with time. And they certainly don't always tell a pleasing story and certainly not an unambiguous story.

The other form of fundamental science extends to the field of religious studies. There, within the current scientific frameworks, the conversation about religion and religions in society is conducted. There, dialogue is necessary for society. There, it is also about practising listening, but especially about gaining knowledge of others and of other ways of looking at the world and at religion. Dialogue and encounter to learn from and with each other and to facilitate dialogues in the community. In the science of religion, the rules of generality and rationality apply; of religion as a human need or a way of looking at it. In practical theology, the theological specificity of committing to Christ and, by extension, the conviction that if you want to say something about God, you have to start with God, applies. In practical theology, the exception and not the rule applies. Practical theology keeps watch over the exception and is aware that the exception does not apply in the field of fundamental science.

Our faculty has anchored this field of tension in the two areas defined in its name: Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies. These two poles are brought into dialogue with each other and reinforce each other. Without each other they would become bloodless and unrealistic. You can see them as the outside and the inside.

In the coming years, I would like to make a heartfelt plea for the introduction of professional learning communities around the Brussels theological faculty, and then think about the various fields in which Protestant theologians work: in the VPKB, as chaplains in very different fields, and in worldview and religious education. My hope is that these professional learning communities will contribute to the further development of the dialogical network that is the congregation of Christ.