

Synthesis synodal talks second phase by and from Catholic civil society organisations in the Netherlands

A total of four organisations submitted a report on the conversations they had as part of the synodal conversation. The Network of Catholic Women made a report of the 20 conversation reports they received around the theme 'the position of women in the church', the “Verband van Katholieke Maatschappelijke Organisaties” (VKMO) organised an afternoon in which 21 organisations talked to each other on the theme 'Welcoming church'.

Two individual organisations, the “Werkverband Katholieke Homo Pastores (Cooperation Catholic Gay Pastors)” and the Marienburg Association provided separate reports in addition to their participation in the VKMO afternoon. Below are:

1. The outcomes of the conversations around the theme 'Women in the life and mission of the church'
2. The outcomes of the conversations around the theme 'Participation in a welcoming church'
3. The outcomes of the conversation around the theme 'Formation in a missional church'

This document is the synthesis of the conversations as conducted by and from Catholic civil society in the Netherlands.

1. Women in the life and mission of the church

A total of 22 interviews were conducted on this theme, 20 of which were included in the report of the Catholic Women's Network, one in the report of the Catholic Gay Pastors' Association and one in that of the Marienburg Association. For this synthesis, the report of the Catholic Women's Network was taken as a starting point, the reports of the Catholic Gay Pastors' Association and the Marienburg Association were compared with that report which led to some additions to the findings.

In advance

All interviews reveal a high level of commitment among women to the church and to the community they belong to. Many of them fulfil tasks within those communities and feel responsible for them. However, they do not feel sufficiently seen and recognised in this. In the talks, desires of many kinds are shared, but always from a constructive attitude. It could be so much more beautiful, there is talent that demands to be used and there are people who would like to participate, people who really want to be church together.

a. Synodality: "Keep listening. Don't be afraid."

Listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit's whispers as an aspect of synodality is of great significance. Too often still there is no real listening.

There is an appeal from many conversations to keep up that real listening to each other and in this way also give each other space. People then feel heard and the conversation is more intense this way.

Real listening leads to connectedness and openness and makes it possible to change minds. Where there is real listening, inclusiveness is also within reach as well as no longer assuming positions of power. Therefore, having the conversations as such is already valuable. This form of speaking to each other is valuable to hold on to. Let this not end after this synod meeting. It helps to be the future of the church together.

Bishops and priests are also asked to actually listen. This also applies to issues that are sensitive. Besides research by theologians, listening is important there too. However, it should not stop at listening. Actual listening also requires acting on what is heard from each other and from the Holy Spirit.

b. Equality and equity: "Everyone has the task of making Christ present in life"

The synthesis document takes the equality of men and women as its starting point, but does not yet attach the consequence that women can be active in all areas within the church on an equal footing as and have the same opportunities as men. Such equivalence and equality should go without saying.

That is not to say that there are no differences. There is diversity, of course. But talents are not tied to gender. So do not distinguish between men and women and use everyone's talents in the full breadth of the church, i.e. administrative, pastoral, liturgical, catechetical, diaconal. A few reports extend this appeal to people regardless of sex, gender and sexual orientation. One report mentions not allowing women to be acolytes and not allowing women to enter the presbytery.

In society, equal rights for men and women in work are normal. The different situation in the church from this in this respect is cited as a reason for people to 'drop out', with which much beauty and goodness is lost to them and they are lost to the church.

c. The ordained offices: 'Take serious steps'

It is recommended that the handling of ordination, the requirements placed on ordained persons and the exclusive powers associated with ordinations be reconsidered. This applies both to the question of whether certain ordinations could also be opened to women and to the question of whether parts of the powers associated with ordination (proclamation, baptism, anointing of the sick) could also be fulfilled by lay people. In this way, being Church can be more and more broadly based than in its present clerical form.

There is prevailing support for the idea that deacon and priest ordinations should also be open to women. However, this is not necessary from everyone immediately, nor is it the first priority for everyone.

However, do take serious steps towards ordination opportunities for women and do not leave the research to be done to this end to theologians alone. Here too, use the synodal method. And include the obligatory character of celibacy and the possibility of ordination of married people in the considerations.

Separate ordinations or even non-ordained offices for women would confirm the distinction and be rejected.

Ensure the expansion of opportunities for all well-trained laity to take on tasks such as proclamation, leading in word and prayer services, and administering certain sacraments (baptism and anointing of the sick, for example). Pastoral professionals with these tasks are sorely missed. This is a good way to keep small-scale communities formed and connected.

Doing these tasks also by women can be an enrichment in spirituality.

d. Bearing responsibility: 'Breaking the male sphere'

In fact, women bear responsibility in many places in the church and communities function because of them. It hurts to experience that they are curtailed in this.

There is a great need for women to bear responsibility on the basis of equality. The scope for women to have advisory and decision-making co-responsibility is too limited in the current constellation.

It is therefore important to review the design of governance structures to break the male stronghold and allow women to have an equal share in the governance of the church.

It is recommendable to involve lay people in the appointment of priests and bishops.

e. Inclusiveness: "Everyone is a child of God"

There is a strong desire for true inclusiveness in two areas:

Orientation and forms of cohabitation

Everyone is a child of God, created in His image. Everyone should therefore be able to feel welcome, at home and safe in the community. The rejection of people who do not live in a traditional family setting is painful and sad. For everyone, regardless of orientation and form of society, the church should provide a home. In doing so, do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender.

Language

This inclusiveness should also be able to be expressed in language. Give women the recognition that the liturgy is also about them. Also use texts written by women and let women speak. Also speak language that people understand so that everyone can really participate. Also speak the language of young people.

f. The recommendations in brief

1. Continue the synodal path, keep talking to each other in this way.
2. Really listen to what is put forward and act accordingly.
3. Do not leave sensitive issues exclusively to theologians, but let believers have input there too in a synodal way.
4. Consider equality and equal treatment of men and women to be self-evident.
5. Make no distinction between men and women and use everyone's talents in the full breadth of the church: administrative, pastoral, liturgical, catechetical and diaconal.
6. Recognise the added value of female spirituality.
7. Reconsider ordination criteria.
8. Take serious steps towards ordination options for women and include the compulsory nature of celibacy and the possibility of ordination of married couples in the considerations.
9. Refrain from separate offices for women; after all, these would confirm unequal treatment.
10. Also in the interest of local communities, expand the opportunities for trained lay people to take on tasks such as preaching, leading in services of word and prayer, and administering certain sacraments (e.g. baptism and anointing of the sick). If new offices follow from this, they should be equally accessible to men and women.
11. Review the Church's governance structures and provide, possibly through a quota, for proportional representation of women in decision-making and advisory bodies and involve women in appointments of bishops.
12. Be truly inclusive and welcome everyone regardless of sex, gender and sexual orientation into the church.
13. Speak intelligible and inclusive language and use women's texts too.
14. Invest in the formation of women and lay people in general so that those who feel called can take on tasks responsibly.
15. Invest in the formation of priests and deacons in terms of equal treatment and proper treatment of women and involve women in their training.
16. Make all training accessible to both men and women.

2. Participation in a welcoming church

The Association of Catholic Social Organisations (VKMO) organised an afternoon in which 21 social organisations participated. During this afternoon, the listening conversation was held on the theme of welcoming church. The Working Association of Catholic Gay Pastors (WKHP) itself, in addition to participating in VKMO's afternoon, also held a conversation

The reports put forward a rich diversity of perspectives and approaches on the theme of a welcoming church in a multicultural and multi-faith context:

a. Dialogue and understanding

All organisations stress the importance of ongoing dialogue and actively listening to 'dissenters'. This implies an open attitude and willingness to understand the views of others, even if one does not always agree.

b. Connection initiatives

Many organisations highlight the role of initiatives that promote connection, such as meetings, pilgrimages and joint activities. These initiatives can provide a platform for celebrating diversity and sharing common values.

c. Authenticity and inclusiveness

It is essential for organisations to remain authentic in their identity while making room for diversity. This includes respecting different perspectives and striving for inclusion within the organisation and its activities.

d. Language and communication

It highlights the importance of effective communication and having a common language to express identity and values. This includes being aware of language use and promoting formation to effectively convey the organisation's identity.

e. Action and practice

Several groups stress the importance of action and practical steps to achieve a welcoming church. This includes letting go of habits that hinder diversity and actively pursuing equality and inclusion, especially for minority groups such as LGBTQ+ persons.

3. Formation in a missional church

The Catholic Gay Pastors' Association spoke on the theme of 'formation in a missionary church'. This theme was also addressed in the report of the Network of Catholic Women. The following is what both reports contributed around this theme.

a. Invest in formation of laity and equality within the Church

It is necessary to invest in the formation of lay people, with special attention to women, so that they are well equipped for tasks and responsibilities within the church. Make use of the formation offer of religious for this purpose. In the training of priests and deacons, pay explicit attention to dealing with women and ensuring equal treatment.

b. Respecting Human Rights as a Church

For a credible church, it is important that human rights are respected within the church. That credibility will also be served by open dialogue, including discussions on LGBTQ+ issues and the position of women.

c. Stay in dialogue with society and use up-to-date scientific Insights

The reports underline the importance of a credible and missionary church that is willing to listen to society and scientific insights.

d. Ensure proper formation of all believers

They advocate thorough formation of believers, not only in doctrine, but also in dialogue and deepening with God and each other.