

RETHINKING CHURCH

Fresh perspectives for
a tired denomination

BY EDWIN CHR. VAN DRIEL



Here we go again.” I wouldn’t be surprised if that is what many of us will think when the presbytery agendas arrive in our mailboxes this winter, asking us to vote on issues like the definition of marriage. Another set of controversial proposals. Another round of polemics in the press and the blogosphere. Another minefield for our congregations. And more sadness and anger all around. “Maybe we just shouldn’t do this,” we’ll think. “Maybe we, or they, should just go.”

If that’s what we think, who could blame us? The differences among us are real, the conflicts painful, and if we are honest, we have to admit we do not know if and how we will overcome them.

Our biggest issue, however, is not conflict within the church. It’s how we think about what it means to belong to a church.

For many Americans, the church is a voluntary organization. We belong to a congregation or a denomination because we want to. This approach fits perfectly within the American emphasis on freedom and choice.

But if I am a member of a church because I choose to be there, I can also depart any time it pleases me. Having joined at will, I can leave at will. That means that if there is a conflict in the church, the threats of church split and schism are always on the table.

In the country where I grew up, things were different. Growing up in the Netherlands, I was raised in the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC). The NRC counts among its members both liberals and conservatives—just like American mainline churches. Over the past few decades, these different church wings have had serious theological arguments on issues similar to the

Rich Hanlon, a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, serves Communion during one of the seminary’s four weekly services.



Rebecca DePoe shares the cup, representing the blood of Christ, with a fellow student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

ones debated here in the United States. But despite their disputes, the NRC’s liberals and conservatives have still accepted one another as members of the same church. The reason for this mutual acceptance is theological. For the NRC, the church is not a voluntary organization but rather an entity constituted by a divine act, an act of covenant.

Church membership rests on choice—but not our choice. Rather, *God* chooses us as members through our baptism: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). Therefore, theological disagreements among members do not allow one to say to another, “I will leave the church.” If God chose the other as a fellow member of the covenant, what right do we have to separate?

Paul said it this way, in his letter to the church in Corinth: “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? . . . The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:18–19, 21).

Interestingly, the NRC’s theology on this matter was itself shaped by a time of deep conflict and schism. At the end of the 19th century, many in the church disregarded the church’s classical Reformed confessions. The church’s leadership showed no interest in taking a stand, and things seemed to be taking a decidedly “liberal” hue.

The church’s conservative minority was divided in two camps. One camp thought its members should appeal to the church’s courts and general assembly. If this did not help, the members would leave the church. For several decades this camp did make its appeals, and when they did not succeed, the members indeed dissented and left.

Another group of conservative members believed, however, that as long as one was not prevented from preaching the gospel, one should never leave the church. (The Reformation comes to mind here; although, this also underscores how complicated matters of dissent are, as the Reformers wanted to “reform” the church, not leave it.)



Mary Clare, daughter of L. Roger Owens, participates in Communion during Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's 2014 convocation. Owens is a professor of leadership and ministry at the seminary.

To bolster their case, this second group pointed to the people of Israel.

The church, the writers of the New Testament say, is embedded in Israel. But Israel is not a voluntary organization. Even the sternest prophets who address Israel's disobedience do not suggest that the faithful remnant pack up and leave. The prophets do not start their own "dissenting" Israel, as if the purity of God's people could thereby be protected or won. They knew this people to be God's creation, not their own.

If we enter the church through the waters of baptism, then the church is not a voluntary organization. To be baptized, Paul says, is to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection: we die, and are made alive (Rom. 6:2–11; Col. 2:12). Resurrection is not something we choose to do. It is done to us. It is a gift. And so are the church and its unity.

If that is true, we have to rethink what it means to be church. We

have to stop searching for a common ground, a shared opinion, as that which holds us together. We already have a common ground: Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected One.

When we come together in our congregations, presbyteries, and General Assembly, we aim to respond faithfully to what was given to us in Christ. But even when we deeply disagree on what such faithfulness looks like—even when our conversations halt, our positions clash, and our votes divide us—we nonetheless still stand on common ground. We still belong together, because the unity of the church is not based on the commonality of our responses, but on the fact that it is one Lord who brought us together. And this in itself, I believe, changes the conversations, because it changes what is at stake in our agreements and disagreements.

Now, I know that some of us may fear that we are simply sidestepping the real differences and divisions

among us—thereby weakening our missional appeal and ensuring a slow death. An attractive church has a clearly defined message, so the thought goes; and that's why divided churches fail.

And what I suggest will indeed not solve our differences. It will not make church life any easier. To forge a common life among people among whom there is real conflict and who have caused each other pain is hard. However, in doing so, we would make visible to a watching world what the gospel is all about: that, in the end, our lives are not determined by *our* convictions but by "Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

What a witness it would be to our culture, itself so conflicted, if members of the church—while being completely honest about their divisions—would say, "And still, we cannot let go of one another, because we know that our unity is based not on ourselves but on the grace of the risen Lord."



Sometimes seminarians just need a break from reading and writing. Students at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where Edwin Chr. van Driel teaches theology, enjoy community and fellowship on a sunny day.

To take our baptism seriously means rethinking not just church but also Christ. To say that in our baptism we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection confesses first and foremost something about Jesus: that *he* is resurrected—that is, not just an inspiring figure from the past but one who is alive and active.

That was certainly the case for the Netherlands Reformed Church.

You may have thought you could foretell how things would develop once the dissenting group left. They would create a conservative bulwark, its identity firmly protected by its confessional base. Meanwhile, the NRC would grow more and more liberal, with a slim but powerless conservative minority. However, in reality things turned out quite differently.

One hundred years later the dissenting (and originally conservative) church found itself at the far *left* of the theological spectrum, with its international daughter churches,

including the Christian Reformed Church in North America, declaring themselves in impaired communion with their mother church.

Meanwhile, a spirit of renewal began to stir the larger NRC in the 1930s and '40s. Liberals, middle-of-the-roads, and conservatives grew discontent with the perceived theological wishy-washiness of the church. None of these groups gave up their particular approach to the gospel, but all came to realize that

a church, to be true to its calling, needs to confess boldly its obedience to the gospel of Christ. They found one another in the notion of baptismal unity as developed by the conservative theologians who had stayed, embedded in a new, Christ-centered church order. How powerful this new theological orientation had become was evidenced when decades later the church made decisions that for many were highly controversial—women's ordination



Professor L. Roger Owens presides over the Communion table at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

and the blessing of same-sex unions—and the unity of the church nonetheless held.

If Christ is truly the one whom we confess him to be—the risen One, alive and active—then there's no predicting how the history of our church may develop. But what we do know is that this church is not ours, but his. And maybe that's the real meaning of our conflicts and strife and our inability to solve them. We may think they are about the causes we hold dear. But maybe, in the end, they are Jesus' way of teaching the church that we are not our own, but his. That the church is not our creation, but his. And that the future of the church therefore does not depend on us, but on him.

Edwin Chr. van Driel is an associate professor of theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA).