Northern Synod

TASK TEAM REPORT IMAGE OF THE CHURCH

Report

12 March 2025

1 Assignment

To reflect, with the help of research among other things, on the image of the church and to suggest possible action plans.

2 Task team

Neels Jackson and seven respondents

3 Execution

The idea of reflecting on the image of the church emerged at the Northern Synod's session at *Weesgerus* in October 2022. Society's image of the church is often perceived as extremely negative, so we frequently come across words and phrases such as 'irrelevant', 'concerned with peripheral matters', 'missing the point', 'makes no difference', 'arguing over trifles'.

After much deliberation it was decided that Neels Jackson would write a perspective on the image of the church and that a number of people would be asked to respond. Neels is an award-winning journalist and, after many years as a church reporter for *Beeld* newspaper and then as editor of the *Kerkbode* (the DR Church's monthly), published a book with the title *Drie dekades van verandering* (*Three Decades of Change*).

The respondents in the process participated anonymously. For some perspective on them, we share the following:

- The backgrounds of the respondents included, among others, the business world, academia, humanities, training, diplomatic services, and the arts.
- None of the respondents are ministers.
- Three are women and four are men.
- Their ages range from thirty to seventy.
- Four are regular churchgoers, but all of them regard themselves as believers.

4 Neels's perspective

In a consumer culture where everything (including the church) becomes a product and in which marketing plays an essential role, there is understandable concern about the church's internal and external image. It is, however, important that the

DRC [Dutch Reformed Church], having reformed roots, should allow herself to be led primarily by the word of the Lord. In this regard a few texts can point the way.

The first of these is Jesus' words in Matthew6:1-4: 'Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' [NIV]

This is a clear admonition to the church not to sing her own praises. The church should therefore be wary of burnishing her own image.

There is, however, a second text in the previous chapter, also in Jesus' sermon on the mount and also relevant in this discussion: (Matthew 5:14-16) 'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.'

In the face of it, it seems as if these two sections contradict one another. According to the text quoted first (Matthew 6) the good deed must remain hidden, but according to the text quoted second (from Mattew 5) the faithful must let their light shine before others 'that they may see your good deeds'. The difference of course lies in the motive for the deed. The motive which Jesus opposes in Matthew 6 is that the deed is done 'to be honoured by others', whereas the motive Jesus prescribes in Matthew 5 is 'that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven'.

For the purposes of this assignment this means that the church must do good deeds primarily to make God's love visible in the world. In the second place it can mean that the church should relate her stories—not in a way that moves the church into the spotlight, but it a way that causes the Father in heaven to be glorified.

To encourage this, the synod could use a key sentence such as, 'See what the Lord is doing here!' With such a motive churches can be encouraged to share their stories on paper or video or in any useful format. Such stories can also be included in the newsletter of the synod or be sent to the *Kerkbode*.

It is perhaps even more important that such a way of doing and talking can be inculcated in church congregants so that it becomes a way of life to spot virtuous deeds in daily life and to acknowledge God's hand in them.

The pattern that people should understand and acknowledge is that God loves the world. His love fosters warm hearts and service-mindedness in his people. Daily life

is about thousands of tiny deeds of care and caring. This is how God's love flows through his people to the world.

The gospel is a message of paradoxes: Who is first shall be last; who wants to be important must become as unimportant as a child; 'whoever wants to save their life shall lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and the gospel, will keep it.'

Perhaps in this matter it works the same way. If the church forgets herself and focuses on being a channel of God's love, the church's image in the eyes of the world will improve.

5 Contributions by respondents

These contributions have not been edited and are given in no specific order.

5.1 Respondent 1

I think it is in spontaneous, unexpected ways that God leads a person who stands in a meaningful relationship with him. Christ determines how the world sees the Church. Our relationship with him, and its development, should flow over naturally into Galatians 5:22-25 and should therefore be the light that the world sees. Paul consistently emphasises that we are 'free' and should not conform to the culture of this world. The Church (THE BODY OFCHRIST) is of its nature different and should certainly not be compared to the consumerist culture. God never says, 'Be worried about my church'; he says, 'Be the light of the world because you stand in a personal relationship with ME, the Most High.'

Acts 1:8 reminds us that the Holy Spirit will come upon us and make us witnesses. If this means that you want to share videos and that you are convinced that it is right to do so, do so. But only if God lays it on your heart, and not because the DR Church has decided that this is the new 'flavour of the week'. So, allow for such sharing but do not be conformed to this world. Young people raise their hands during praise-and-worship—it is an acceptable practice, but it may look forced and fake if everyone is encouraged to do so. Will all congregations and individuals take the trouble to share stories anonymously, to actually glorify God and not themselves or their congregations?

I think the image of the church has for a long time become irrelevant. A better question would be, 'What is the DR Church's task?' And if we bear God's light to the world by means of videos and TikToks (posted by extrovert Christians)—seeing that no non-Christian reads the *Kerkbode* or the synodical letter—the DR Church is perhaps beginning to forget that God is in control and that he decides how he wants to send his light bearers. By means of his word and his truth all congregants should let their light shine in their daily surroundings (Galatians 5:22).

With the above I mean that the church should provide spiritual development and training. The Holy Spirit lets us bear the fruit of the Spirit (light bearers) and it is God who decides on the image and direction.

Finally: Is the DR Church empowering her congregants to let their lights shine? Spiritual maturity will be the image of God as well as the church! Do the congregants really know how to pray? Have all congregants read the Bible from front to back? Do congregants really know the Bible? In my opinion, the task of the church is precisely the above, to be more relevant instead of being anxious about the 'image' of the church.

5.2 Respondent 2

I simply asked ChatGPT what the perception AI has of the Church.

Summary: The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is viewed by many as having a controversial history due to its association with apartheid, but it is also seen as an institution in the process of healing and reconciling with its past. Its more conservative stance on social issues still garners criticism, but it also maintains a strong identity, particularly among Afrikaners and conservative communities. 'How this history and reputation affect the person you're speaking with will likely depend on their own views on the church and its legacy.'

My opinion is that for those inside the Church the image is sufficient, but I am convinced that the DR Church should evaluate her corporate and institutional role and position it better.

- Ecosystemic thinking and approaches, participation in social challenges across boundaries in SA, can be very valuable.
- Platforms and the creation of values for the community can be a fantastic contribution.

5.3. Respondent 3

I find it somewhat difficult to respond to this subject because I feel 'I do not know enough' about it. My reason for saying this is the subject under discussion. Personally, I try to view the church as a safe harbour and a place where God's name is praised. My experience is that the church adds value to my life by offering cell groups and courses. They also make a difference in the community with many projects whereby they want to place the city and its people in a better position. When people talk about the 'politics' of the church, I usually try to withdraw because I do not want to be part of it. Perhaps I am naïve when I avoid listening to what people have to say, but I simply feel that the church is 'managed' by people. Where there are people, there is always conflict … in work, or church, culture or sport, or any other place. I think that people often get entangled in the conflict that is caused by people and so miss what church is about.

When I was younger, I was more liberal and spoke easily about my faith and indirectly about the church. As I grew older, I did so less. The reason is merely that I do not want to get involved in conversations where people are being negative. On the contrary—at present I feel that my relationship with God is sacred and that I do

not necessarily want to share it with others—which basically means that I am covering my lamp with a bowl.

Something else which I would like to share—I am single and looking for someone to share my life with, so I use dating apps for this. There are a few things that are important to me that I ask men about in advance, and one of these matters is faith. I have noticed something interesting—many men say that they have faith and believe in God but that they no longer go to church. I usually do not ask them about it in detail, but their reasons are, among others—that the church has basically become a business in which people want money, that there is politics in the church, and that there are people who do not agree about how some churches live out their faith by means of, say, speaking in tongues. (I thought this would be an interesting to share.)

5.4. Respondent 4

When we think holistically about the image of the church, it is referred to as 'the body of Christ on earth'. This in itself—as a scientific definition—makes no sense to non-Christians and can even mean many different things to people who faithfully go to church; because we are, in the end, beings of our own creation who grow, develop, and eventually disappear, and then this cycle starts all over again in the next generation. For the average church congregants their congregation is their church—there where they easily settle and live, and the greater church is something distant. That is why the congregants often look inwards to manage fears about finances, membership numbers, aging buildings, and so on. We must keep in mind, however, that this is nothing new and that churches over many centuries have struggled with this dilemma.

We are speaking about elements and resources, and we must here only determine whether in future there are going to be enough of these elements to enable us to keep being the church.

The church will keep on existing—this is a given that has been proved through all the centuries.

Outside the congregation the church is often something distant.

Presbyteries and synods can confuse people, and then 'the church' is often referred to as irrelevant, concerned about peripheral matters, missing the point, making no difference, fighting over trivia, because here in the congregant's own cocoon there are other more immediate, everyday tasks that require attention. Inclusively the perception is then that here we serve the community and here we do things in such a way that the Father in heaven is glorified.

To return to the more holistic idea of what the image of the church is, I want to focus first on cultural views on what the image of the church means. Black people regard the church as a place of long, drawn-out gatherings with many symbolic actions, and singing and dancing are normal practice.

Coloured people are more formal and emphasise clothing and fixed dogma.

Younger people want to sing and be entertained while the average Afrikaans churchgoer wants to listen and does not like his concentration to be broken.

The Orthodox and Catholic churches are focused on rituals and symbols.

Must there therefore be concern about the image of the church over cultural borders? Not at all, and it is unnecessary to keep on tampering with it.

Younger people want to sing and be entertained. The image of the church, in my opinion, goes hand-in-hand with the development of the different generations over the last 100 years.

Depending on how you look at it, from which generation do many of the perceptions come that we hear daily, such as ‘the church has lost its relevance’, ‘it is no longer necessary’, and ‘it makes no difference’?

For congregants who are growing older the DR Church is the church created by the ‘creators’—the generation between 1918 and 1946.

Our generation, the Baby Bomers (1945-1964) established ourselves in the structure. We like order and stability, and one does not change for every bagatelle.

Now, suddenly, the church is running empty and there are no more congregants between 35 and 55, which implies that there are no longer congregants younger than 35.

Are they all victims of immigration and demographic shifts that are framed as problems to be solved? Not necessarily.

To change the image of the DR Church we must find out what makes Generations X and Y operate.

What makes them tick?

This generation does not have the mindsets of the two generations preceding it. They have a mantra of anti-establishment and of keeping authority figures at a distance. They are driven by prosperity, have tertiary qualifications, and have become entrepreneurs. They keep pace with the circumstances of the technological revolution. They do not have time or the inclination to fit into a church that moves at a slow pace behind today’s technological affluence.

Therefore, to change the image of the DR Church, we must decide how this generation can function inside the church because at the moment they are way outside of it. They are either without congregation or without faith or with charismatic congregations that meet their needs. The great question is how they can be included without getting rid of the established foundation.

5.5. Respondent 5

The front page of the Sunday newspaper does not hesitate to publish sensational stories. And, unfortunately, what the journalists classify as sensation is not the charitable initiatives of the DR Church but rather the most recent controversial decision about gays in the ministry.

The wider media do not always provide us with a complete picture, and it is high time that this changes. Neels Jackson's suggestion to intentionally share stories, specifically about how the DR Church makes God's love visible in the world, is not only meaningful but also of cardinal importance.

In short, may the church keep on freely sharing stories about what the Lord is doing here.

Our world needs to take note of this.

5.6. Respondent 6

Personally, from my own experience, I think the image presented by the church is determined by the quality of leadership in a specific congregation. In this respect, one can compare the church to a business. Any business's success is determined by the vision, leadership, and managerial qualities of the owner/manager. The challenge to the church to survive worldwide is going keep on growing, and the question is whether pastors should not be trained as 'managers'.

5.7. Respondent 7

Neels Jackson's book. *Drie dekades van verandering* ('Three Decades of Change') discusses, among other things, the image of the church. 'Image of the church' is in itself a stimulating idea for a debate. After all, people have different 'images' of the church. One group regards the church as a building, often with a tower. For others it is a place that they visited long ago.

To capture a general image of the church is therefore virtually impossible.

And it is indeed impossible to single out the DR Church from among all the wider church communities

Within my own simple understanding of faith, believers have their own image of the church, irrespective of the denomination they belong to. For this group the church is a societal community brought together by their faith and living by grace alone. Because Christ is their Saviour, they are saved. As part of the grace given to the faithful, they also share with others who have received less than they have. The church does not exist separately from the community, but supporting people in their journey of faith should be central. This faith journey includes service to and support of other communities. In this way the mistakes of the past can be avoided, and the church's role (rather than its image) can be established in the world.

6 Conclusion

Here is some food for thought. Perhaps it will be a good thing if the presbyteries take the trouble to discuss the image of the church in their own districts.