

Contribution of the Council of Churches to the processing of the Dutch history of slavery

Changes in society do not happen overnight. Groundbreaking insights need time before they become widely accepted in society and even then they often encounter resistance. Changes in the attitudes and awareness of the population are a long-term process and go never without controversy.

Over the past twenty-five years, thanks to groundbreaking historical research, but not least thanks to the social groups that bear the burden of the past, important steps have been taken in Dutch society towards awareness and recognition of the history of slavery in Dutch history. However, it must be said that the road to processing, recovery, and reconciliation is still long, and moreover, there is currently less willingness in society to really address these issues than there was a few years ago.

Although churches in the Netherlands do not play a leading role in this awareness-raising process, which is understandable given their marginal position in Dutch society, they do have their own responsibility and role to fulfill. The Council of Churches in the Netherlands, a community of 19 member churches and associated members, is attempting to give shape to this task.

For many years, racism and discrimination have been high on the ecumenical agenda. The struggle against *apartheid* in South Africa has mobilized Christians and churches in the Netherlands since the 1960s. In 2009, the World Council of Churches celebrated the 40th anniversary of the *Programme to Combat Racism* with several church services and a symposium in Doorn. During this conference, it was pointed out that in the last century, attention was primarily focused on South Africa, but that the problem of racism and discrimination is a global problem that is relevant in many contexts. The 2009 conference focused in particular on the situation of Dalits, Roma, and Palestinians, but also on the treatment of refugees and migrants in the Netherlands. Dr. Kanyana Mutombo referred to racism at this conference as an umbrella term for racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance, among other things.¹

¹ [Apartheid universal concept – Council of Churches in the Netherlands](#), dated June 15, 2009.

The history of slavery was not a theme at this conference or at the Council of Churches in the Netherlands. That changed a few years later when the Evangelical Brethren Church, one of the member churches, proposed to the Council of Churches that 2013 be a year of remembrance of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. In doing so, the Evangelical Brethren Church, which celebrates Ketikoti every year on July 1, emphatically placed the issue of the history of slavery on the agenda of churches in the Netherlands.

The Council of Churches unanimously adopted this proposal and wrote a letter to the member churches on December 21, 2011, from which I quote a few sentences:

*"Within the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, there is a unanimous feeling that the commemoration of 150 years since the abolition of slavery deserves the attention of the various member churches. (...) The Dutch government abolished slavery in 1863, making it one of the last countries to take this step. (...) We would therefore like to invite you to take the time until July 1, 2013, to learn more about this history. The fact that we were victims of the Nazis is etched in our public memory. However, few people seem to want to know that our colonial history, partly due to the actions of the then 'white' churches, also claimed many victims. (...) For black people, the memory is painful, because slavery was accompanied by uprooting, abuse, and lawlessness. For white people, the past is shrouded in guilt; they tend to see slavery as something from a distant past."*²

In 2012 and 2013, the Council worked within its limited resources to bring the issue of the churches' history of slavery to the fore and to involve church leaders in this important topic. The awareness-raising process was supported by a publication in July 2012 by the Evangelical Brethren Church with a discussion guide for the churches, a conference on the history of slavery and mission in Suriname with an important contribution by the late Joop Vernooij³, and a church service on July 1, 2013, in the Koningskerk of the Evangelical Brethren Church in Amsterdam.⁴ But the statement issued by the Council of Churches on June 14, 2013, on the eve of the church celebration in Amsterdam, had the greatest impact.⁵ It is a powerful text about the guilt and shared responsibility of church and theology for legitimizing and perpetuating the system of slavery. The text is addressed directly to the churches and the descendants of the people who were once traded as slaves and forced to work as slaves. The statement is limited however to

² Council of Churches Archive

³ Slavery and the Churches of Suriname, [slavernijsuriname.doc](#), 2013

⁴ Script dated September 13, 2011, Council of Churches Archive

⁵ The statement from June 2013 can be found in a message dated July 13, 2020, about the Ketikoti celebration on July 1, 2020. [Council of Churches on the history of slavery – Council of Churches in the Netherlands](#),

transatlantic slavery and does not mention Africa and the East. In the statement, the churches express their desire to work together with the descendants of enslaved people to create a society in which human dignity, freedom, responsibility, solidarity, and respect are fundamental values.

This declaration received a lot of response and provided the foundation for the churches' ongoing commitment to processing, restoration, and reconciliation. To the disappointment of those directly involved, that follow-up never materialized. Almost unnoticed, the subject faded into the background again until, in 2020, in the run-up to the commemoration of the abolition of slavery in 2023, it once again became a high priority on the agenda of the Council of Churches.

In 2021, the Council of Churches decided for the second time to set up a program to raise awareness of the history of slavery and the role of the churches in it. In many ways, this was a repeat of previous efforts, with the difference that in 2022 and 2023, it became clear that the history of slavery in the Netherlands had become a very important and topical issue. On December 19, 2022, Prime Minister Rutte, speaking on behalf of the Dutch government at the National Archives in The Hague, issued a historic apology for the Dutch history of slavery.⁶ On July 1, 2023, King Willem Alexander did the same in a personal way.⁷ Another major difference is that the descendants of those who were enslaved are now much more in control than before.

What was the contribution of the Council of Churches in the run-up to the commemoration in 2023? An important and positive step was that we, as the Council, sought cooperation with others. In particular, with the Association for the Healing of the Slavery Past, established in 2017 by the Lutheran Evangelical Church, and with the Protestant Theological University, where research into Church and slavery just began.

Thanks to this collaboration, we were able to develop meaningful activities. In the spring of 2023, we published the collection *Eindelijk vrij? Bijdrage aan bezinning op kerken en slavernij* (*Finally Free? Contribution to Reflection on Churches and Slavery*), which includes interviews with Mgr. Karel Choennie and Rev. Daniëlle Dokman, both from Suriname.

In collaboration with the PThU, we organized an international symposium on June 1, 2023, in the Dom Church in Utrecht entitled *Slavery, Impact, and Liberation: Voices from the Churches, Then*

⁶ [Rutte apologizes for Dutch history of slavery, 'not a full stop, but a comma'](#)

⁷ [King apologizes for slavery past and asks for forgiveness](#)

and Now, with speakers from Suriname and the Caribbean Netherlands, and also focusing on church and slavery in the East.⁸

A third highlight was the memorial service *Shared Past – Shared Future* on June 30 in De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, broadcasted partly by Omroep Zwart. Once again, on behalf of the churches guilt was confessed before God for this burdened past and prayers were said for forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation.⁹

The lesson of 2013 was that we must not slacken our efforts after the commemorative year and that the continuation of attention and programs must be guaranteed. Churches are virtually on their own in this regard because they are not eligible for government subsidies. The role of religion in the history of slavery and the process of coming to terms with and reconciling the past is not sufficiently recognized.

After 2023, we therefore continued the partnership and worked on a long-term program in which we focus on promoting awareness of the history of slavery in municipalities, the discussion about Winti, and the role of the church and theology.

I would like to go through these three points.

Every year, on the eve of the celebration of the abolition of slavery on July 1, we organize an ecumenical memorial service in collaboration with the local church or ecumenical group. The advantage of this is that the history of cities and regions can be included. We work together with the EO, which broadcasts a compilation of the service and highlights the local history of slavery. This year, the memorial service took place in the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Zwolle. It is striking that participation in these memorial services remains limited, even though the broadcast on TV is well watched.

The Council of Churches in the Netherlands is more than a community of "white" churches. The Council is much more diverse than is generally assumed, not only because of the participation of the EBG, but also because of the membership of various Orthodox Churches. The Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands is also more and more a diverse community, especially in the Randstad. However, it is a fact that white Christians are by far in the majority in the Council. So there is still a world to be won.

⁸ [PThU-Program-symposium-Church-and-Slavery-web.pdf](#);

⁹ [Memorial service 'Shared past – shared future' – Council of Churches in the Netherlands LiturgyMemorialService_0626_PRINTEDMATERIAL_TOTAL.indd](#)

A particular challenge lies in the area of dialogue with representatives of the Winti religion in the Netherlands. They are in the process of seeking recognition of Winti as a religion. Discussions on this are being held at the Ministry of Justice. At present, Winti priests are able to provide spiritual and pastoral assistance in prisons at the request of prisoners. As is well known, the relationship between churches and winti is a sensitive one. In Suriname, the ban on Winti was only lifted in 1971, although Winti rituals were practiced by believers from various churches through time. Within the EBG, there is reluctance to mix Christian faith and Winti. In an interview Mgr. Choennie called for a respectful dialogue with Winti believers.¹⁰ In 2022, the Winti community in the Netherlands asked the Council of Churches for support in the process of gaining recognition as a religion in Dutch society. We have had some positive discussions, which could be the start of a longer process.

If we want to contribute to the processing of the history of slavery from within the churches, we must also take a serious look at the role of theology in past and present. In June 2024, we organized a conference in Utrecht, in collaboration with our partners, on the ongoing impact of the history of slavery.¹¹ It became clear that racial, cultural, and religious inequality also plays a role in the churches and needs to be better addressed. Examples showed that well-intentioned attitudes of white Christians often conceal, consciously or unconsciously, a sense of superiority.

Churches should evolve from communities that stand up for people of color to communities of color. This is a major challenge. There is too little exchange between churches of newcomers and the established churches. Christians with a migrant background cannot easily integrate into the culture and religious experience of traditional Dutch churches. From their platform, *Samen Kerk in Nederland (Together Church in the Netherlands)*, churches from migrant backgrounds are working to improve their position in Dutch society. The Roman Catholic Church focuses on the integration of communities with a migrant background into the diocesan structures.

Western theology is burdened by its entanglement with the colonial system and is still afflicted with feelings of supremacy. Although a shift has taken place in recent years, there is still a great deal of ignorance in churches about the history of colonialism and slavery, and there is often a lack of contact with Christian communities of color. Exclusion and racism are saddening.

¹⁰ 'There must be room for inculturation. Just as we have respectful dialogue with Hindus and Muslims, we can have respectful dialogue with Winti believers. It is a very different religion with different principles than the Christian faith. It should not be dismissed as idolatry.' In: *Finally free? Contribution to reflection on churches and slavery*, Ecumenical Reflection No. 71, 2023, p. 40.

¹¹ [The impact of the history of slavery and the churches – Council of Churches in the Netherlands](#)

However nuance is also needed in this debate about the role of churches. Although encapsulated in the colonial system, there were also people who spoke out against the system of slavery, just as churches and Christians today speak out against racism, discrimination, and modern forms of slavery.

The conference in 2024 produced a large number of recommendations, which we have now started to implement. Some of the most striking recommendations were: set up an anti-racism fund, digitize (church) archives, produce a series of podcasts about church and slavery, investigate the state of theological research and education in this field, and provide discussion material for church members.

An initial survey of some twenty Protestant and Catholic theological training programs in the Netherlands revealed that the curricula certainly pay attention to the Dutch colonial past and the history of slavery. For example, a chair in Black Theology has been established at VU University Amsterdam, and Willy Jennings, who recently gave the Martin Luther King lecture in Amsterdam, will give a series of lectures on his book *After Whiteness* at the Baptist seminary next year. Some programs also have a diversity policy that focuses on hiring people of color. So a start has certainly been made, but the extent to which attention is paid to the history of slavery and its impact on church and society today needs to be further investigated.

Looking ahead

This overview has hopefully made it clear that the theme of church and slavery has been the focus of the Council of Churches' attention over the past fifteen years, albeit intermittently.

For me personally, confronting and studying this painful past has been a true journey of discovery.

On the other hand, we must recognize that we are only at the beginning and that not so many people in our churches realize how important this subject is for the future of our churches.

Since the 1950s, Dutch society has become very diverse. In fact, this should also apply to churches in the Netherlands, this is not really the case yet.

This presents a major challenge. My experience in recent years is that openness to the world, history, and pain of others opens up a new future in which we ourselves also will change. That is where my hope lies.

Geert van Dartel.