

Willow Creek or Hollow Creed?

Commitment to willow-creek communities in the Netherlands



1. Introduction

The Netherlands are said to be one of the most secularized countries in the world. More than half of the population is unchurched, and there seems to be no end to the further decline of church membership (Becker, forthcoming). Moreover, the participation of the church members is very low: about 10% of Catholics regularly attends church, for the Protestants this number is a bit higher. The number of confessions declines in all churches, as does the participation in other sacramental rites. The adherence to traditional core values is very low, even among church members (cf. Sengers 2003: 12-17). But on the other hand, the Netherlands can be seen as a very religious country. Only 1/3 of the population considers itself as an atheist and about 2/3 believes in a personal God or a higher power. Again about 2/3 describes itself as rather or very religious. Other items like 'I believe in God / life after death / heaven / hell / wonders' show a remarkable increase in the 1990's (Dekker et al. 1997: 18, 19, 27, 28; ISSP 1995; ISSP 2001; Becker et al. 1997: 65, 69). And other events show the Dutch society that religion is not dead: the strict reformed churches continue to grow, a Baptist church in the north buys its 3rd church building in ten years and the evangelical broadcast organization brings 30.000 young people together at its annual meeting.

In this climate of irreligion on the one hand and perceived religious need on the other, many renewal movements see Holland as their working field. They try to renew the churches (its message, its practice, its presentation) in order to attract new members or to mobilize the existing members to a higher level. Among them are progressive movements like the feminist, ecological or third world movement, organizations for married priests or the ground level movement. But most of these have died. Among them are also more conservative movements, like the Pentecostal movement, the charismatic movement and the evangelical movement (Laeyendecker 1992; Stoffels 1992), present in a Protestant and a Catholic version. In my present research, I focus on renewal movements working in the three mainline churches that offer a distinct method of renewal for the local parish church. These are the Alpha course (Sengers, forthcoming), the concept of an 'open church' conceived as 'Church as an inn' (Hendriks 1999) and the Willow Creek movement. My simple question is if they are able to attract new members or to mobilize existing ones, as they promise to do. In this paper I will concentrate on the local church communities that are member in the Dutch branch of the Willow Creek Association.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I pay attention to the history and method of Willow Creek respectively. Then I show how the concept of Willow Creek was received in the Netherlands, both by the member churches of Willow Creek Association, and by the critics of Willow Creek. After that, I present the data on the growth of Willow Creek communities in the Netherlands. In the conclusion, I discuss what the results mean for the future of (evangelic) Christianity in the Netherlands and for the research in the sociology of religion. The goal of the research is four-fold. First, I want to describe and evaluate these movements, as this has not been done on a scientific level. Second, I want to contribute to the practical theology of community building, as I hope to find a 'key' to understand church growth mechanisms. Third, I want to test some hypotheses of rational choice theory about the success of sectarian movements. And finally, I hope to be able to say something about the future of religion in the Netherlands.

2. Willow Creek

'Willow Creek Community Church' is the name of a non-denominational mega-church in the suburbs of Chicago (cf. www.willowcreek.org). The name is taken from the cinema in which the community started its services in 1975. The big man behind Willow Creek is Bill Hybels, now its senior pastor. He was the son of a successful businessman and it was his destiny to take over his father's firm. But at the age of 17 during a conversion experience, he comes to see the redeeming love of God through Christ and he breaks with the commercial career. Next to his study of theology and work in a Christian catalogue house he organizes the youth group in South Park Church. Here he comes to know the musician Dave Holmbo, who in 1972 becomes the leader of the church band. Hybels offers bible study to the band members. As more and more non-members attend these meetings, South Park Church can no longer offer the facilities needed. The group, now working under the name Son City, decided to establish an independent community and held its first service in the Willow Creek cinema at October 12, 1975 (Robinson 1992: 54-61; Scheunemann 1995: 19-27; Paas 2000: 3).

At his studies, Hybels became under the influence of the New-Testament scholar dr. Gilbert Bilezekian. It was his passion to renew the churches after the example of the early church communities on a biblical base. Hybels adopted this passion and he integrated it with his experience at Willow Creek. In the contacts with the local community it became clear to him that many people are interested in religion, but that they did not like the churches: their message was not convincing enough, they did not appeal to the daily experiences, the liturgy was boring. Hybels decided to model his church differently and to use modern media, to take themes from daily life experiences, not to confront the visitor with the Message and not to ask for money (Scheunemann 1995: 28-31). The concept appealed and the community grew.

At the end of the 1970's however, the growth led to a crisis. What exactly happened is not clear (cf. Hybels/Hybels 1995: 23-144), but the period was crucial for the further development of the church (Donahue/Robinson 2001: 11-14; Paas 2000: 3). One of the problems was that the Hybels family and many volunteers with them were literally exhausted, so they decided to pay more attention to leisure and relationships. The invention of a 'church of small groups' was one of the solutions to deal with the problem. Also it became clear that the church suffered under problematic leadership structures. A board of elders and a senior-pastor (Hybels) replaced the consensus. Finally a theological problem was signaled: the community had paid too much attention to God's love. Confronted with the problems in the community, Hybels discovered also other sides of God and of sin. After the crisis was mastered, the community continued to grow. A new building was opened in 1981 and enlarged 1990. Today, up to 15.000 people attend the services in Willow Creek weekly. This growth drew attention of other churches, that are now assembled in the Willow Creek Association (www.willowcreek.com). At present, about 10.000 communities of different denominations are member of this association; about 40% of these are outside the US (cf. Sargeant 2000: 22-27; 134-162).

3. Church for the unchurched

What is the specific method of Willow Creek? Worldwide, the Church is being praised for its concept of 'Church for the unchurched'. The radical orientation on the unchurched would explain the success of the church. They themselves see the small church communities as the basis for their success. But Willow Creek offers a much broader concept of community building, many parts of which are in use at other evangelical groups or methods. I think we can discern between the vision and mission of Willow Creek and the method(s) to reach this goal.

Willow Creek is guided by its statement of faith (cf. www.willowcreek.com; De Blois-Zandijk 1995: 51-53), which content is in line with traditional protestant (Calvinist) theology. The Bible is seen as the infallible word of God with highest authority over faith and the practice of faith. As through the fall of man the life-saving relationship between man and God is broken, man needs the saving grace of God that he can get through conversion and belief in Jesus Christ (Paas 2000:

5-6). Willow Creek has an inclusive vision of the Church, as the Body of Christ that comprises all who believe (cf. Sargeant 2000: 20-21). Willow Creek tries to be a biblical community, based on Acts 2: 42-47. Therefore it has formulated ten values for a biblical community. One central point is that as God is concerned about those who do not believe, the church should be deeply concerned about them as well: the Church has the mission to bring the Gospel to the unchurched. Therefore the Church should make the biblical message culturally relevant, the followers of Christ should be outstanding examples of the Christian life, the community must be warm and caring and thus be organized in small groups (Hybels/Hybels 1995: 158-165 184-194; Scheunemann 1995: 41-59). These biblical values end in the mission of the church. Three aspects of this mission are traditional in character: to praise God, to build up the faithful and to follow Jesus by prophetically protest against social injustice. But in the fourth part of the mission of the church, Willow Creek is most radical: to proclaim the love of God in Christ to the world, to make all mankind as His disciples and to baptize them - according to the great Commission of Matthew 28: 19. This commission is the heart of Willow Creek and they do everything to bring the unchurched to fully devoted followers of Christ in His church (De Blois-Zandijk 1995: 53-54; Paas 2000: 6-7).

Willow Creek has invented several creative solutions to fulfill the Great Commission. One of them is that they offer one service for members on a weekday, and one for seekers on the weekend. Further, the seeker-services are as much as possible, as much as the Biblical message allows, adapted to the world of modern man. His prejudices against religion and church must be reduced so the biblical message can enter his life (Pritchard 1996: 80). This means there are no lengthy quotations from the Bible and there is a short, easy to understand sermon (Sargeant 2000: 77-105). There is a lot of use from drama, popular music and modern media. Finally the anonymity of the visitors is guaranteed: there are no name tags, you are not asked where you are from, you are not asked to stand up, you are not asked to give money. This does not mean however that there is no opportunity for information or that visitors are not challenged to make a decision in their life (Robinson 1992: 76-90; Paas 2000: 10-11; Pritchard 1996: 84-88, 100-115; cf. Sargeant 2000: 54-76).

Willow Creek does not concentrate on the unchurched in general, but on a specific target group (Paas 2000: 10; Scheunemann 1995: 28; Pritchard 1996: 60-66; cf. Sargeant 2000: 2-8): the working family man in the age between 25-50 with a higher education. They try to know everything about him: where he lives, where his family is, what he thinks of the church, what his problems in life are, what his value-system looks like (Pritchard 1996: 67-79). This is all integrated in the church services, in the pastoral service, in the sermon. In all, Willow Creek strives to perfection. As their target-group is quality-oriented in all aspects of life, Willow Creek does its utmost best to give quality in music, in preaching, in the building, in the parking lot, in the pastoral services. The attention of the visitor must not be disturbed but concentrated on the message. Moreover there is a regular evaluation if the concept still appeals or can be improved. The strive to perfection is also theologically interpreted as giving to God the best a man has to offer.

Many of what Willow Creek has to offer is open to the general public, but who wants to become a member has to adhere to strict demands. Membership is open to everybody above 12 years old, who has become to know Jesus as his savior and Lord, is baptized and who wants to participate in the Willow Creek Community Church. You have to participate one year in the church before you can become a member and to follow a course on the statement of faith and the structure of Willow Creek (Robinson 1992: 121-137; Bilezekian/Hybels 1993). Then there is an interview with an elderly, you have to sign a declaration of membership and you take part in a public confession (Hybels/Hybels 1995: 200-201; De Blois-Zandijk 1995: 54-55; Paas 2000: 4). Willow Creek expects total dedication to Christ. That means that you put your trust on Jesus Christ, that you want to grow spiritually, that you participate in the life of the church and give your tenth (Robinson 1992: 134-137; Hybels/Hybels 1995: 199-200; Paas 2000: 9).

Within the concept of Willow Creek, it is very important that every believer learns to know the gifts he has received from God and to use them in the community. Therefore they use the Network-method, based on the ideas of Christian Schwarz, to help people discover their talents and interests and to give them the proper task in the community. After the seminar there is an interview with an advisor (cf. Dijkstra-Algra 1999). The talents are invested in one of the small groups, also an invention of Willow Creek. These small groups are essential church: in them, people are brought together with God and others, there are religious services, ministries, lives get changed and thus here the church is build up. The leaders of these small groups are the most important persons, not the paid staff, and they take care of the members. When the group becomes too big, they split. With 2.700 groups, everybody can be able to find a group to his or her liking (Sargeant 2000: 106-133): There are groups concentrated on discipleship, there are groups concentrated on ministering to problems in life and there are groups that concentrate on service in the church community or the local community (De Blois-Zandijk 1995: 74-75; Donahue/Robinson 2001).

The whole concept of Willow Creek finally ends in seven steps to reach out to the unchurched and to turn him in an active, committed Christian that in his turn again reaches out to the unchurched (Scheunemann 1995: 57-76; Hybels/Hybels 1995: 169-181; Paas 2000: 4, 7; De Blois-Zandijk 1995: 56-57, 69). And here we see that the success of Willow Creek is not in the seeker-services or the small groups. The result of the model of Willow Creek is that there grows a community of people that is highly motivated and committed to the Church and the faith, that is willing and prepared to invest a lot of time and money in the community, that are able to connect to others and convince them of the value of membership and that can be appealed to their commitment. Thus the community gets the resources that make it possible to attract new members. The secret is that Willow Creek is able to connect people to the organization and to motivate them for the organization.

4. Willow Creek in the Netherlands

At March 15, 1995 the Dutch branch of the Willow Creek Association was founded (www.willowcreek.nl). According to their own statement, they had 100 member churches of a variety of denominations in 2004 (cf. Paas 2000: 13). In a newspaper article, the director of Willow Creek Netherlands said that about 20% of the communities of the mainline protestant church uses the Willow Creek model. This number however cannot be verified, and it is unclear what elements of the model they use. It is possible however to become member of Willow Creek. I asked Willow Creek Netherlands and it showed out that 10 mainline protestant communities (of the former Netherlands Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the communities that in preparation of the unity of these two already worked together as United Protestant Churches) were member of Willow Creek Netherlands. This is a neglectible minority, as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (as the church is called now) has about 1.100 local church communities. These 10 are spread over the country as follows:

Table 1: Dutch Willow Creek communities per province

	NRC	RCN	UPC	%	
Groningen		2		20	North
Friesland					
Drenthe					
Overijssel	1	1		20	East
Gelderland					
Flevoland					
Utrecht		1		10	West
North-Holland	2			20	
South-Holland	1	1		20	
Zeeland			1	10	South
North-Brabant					

Limburg					
% per church	40	50	10	N=10	

This table shows that Willow Creek is mostly used in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, but is directly followed by the Netherlands Reformed Church. Only one church characterizes itself as United Protestant Church. Half of the Willow Creek communities is in one of the three western (urban and industrial) provinces, the other half on the more rural countryside. Groningen and especially Overijssel are centers of traditional Protestantism, but over the whole, the geographical spread of the Willow Creek communities follow the Dutch Bible belt from the south-west (Zeeland) to the Northeast. Further it can be said that of the NRC-communities one is in a big city and two in provincial towns. The RCN-communities are all in small cities, except for one that is in a provincial town. The UPC-community is in a small city.

The communities of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands cannot take over the model of Willow Creek one-to-one. The denominational structure of this church puts limits to the applicability of the concept. They cannot throw out members, change the statement of faith or abolish the Sunday service. What they can do is work in small groups, apply the Network-method and maintain a conservative and biblical view on the faith, the church and its mission. It becomes really interesting when they orient to specific target groups, when they try to motivate their members to bring in their unchurched friends, or when they offer attractive seeker-services. Other free churches like the Baptist church in Drachten (www.bethel.nl) or the evangelical Pillar-community in Lelystad (www.pijler.nl) are of course freer to apply elements from the Willow Creek model. But what do the mainline communities do with Willow Creek?

To answer this question, I searched for these communities on the internet. I found four of them. First it is striking that all communities have a traditional character. They all portray themselves as a community called by God, that wants to grow in faith and bring the redeeming message to the world. Two communities explicitly say they work with small groups that are also open to non-members. In their services they don't seem to experiment: they all assemble on Sunday-morning and sing from the common book. Two however indicate to use an evangelical songbook as well. One community indicates to have a praise evening. Further it is striking that all communities are active on the catechesis with an Alpha-course, faith-groups, bible studies, one time in combination with Network. Also youth-groups are explicitly present. Next to the websites I found information about a reverend that attend a leadership course and one community that has enlisted an evangelist who tries to increase the missionary level of the church members and to undertake missionary activities, including seeker-like services for young potentials. My impression is that the communities take over several elements of Willow Creek, but not in an overall concept (cf. Dijkstra-Algra 2004: 7-8).

Although there is a lot of admiration for the success of Willow Creek, there is also firm, especially theological critique. Especially Paas has critique on the principles of Willow Creek, although he is generally in favor if the methods. In line with traditional reformed Christianity, his critique is that Willow Creek pays not enough attention to Gods grace and too much stresses the active actor that can acquire this grace. In a broader sense he criticizes the 'evangelization of needs', that by paying too much and exclusive attention to the needs of the people can corrupt the biblical message and leaves too little freedom to the individual. This critique is in line with that of Pritchard, who says that Willow Creek makes too much use of psychological and marketing-techniques and does not theologically think about modern culture (Paas 2000: 13-22; Paas 2001: 61-78). The pastors of Willow Creek Association, although not seen in this way, give another form of critique. They admit that they are not able to attract new members but only former church members and in this sense are more a re-formation than a revival (Sargeant 2000: 29, 34).

5. Research

For my research, I took the ten member communities of Willow Creek Netherlands. I supposed that when a community is a member, they will adopt relatively more elements of the Willow creek method and engages more intensely with it than communities that are merely registered as an interested party. I wanted to know if they since the inception of Willow Creek Netherlands, so from 1996 on, showed an increasing or decreasing commitment to their community (I was not able to detect when they became member). In order to measure the commitment to a local church community, I gathered data on five items: attendance, membership, confessed membership, new members and financial giving. The choice for these items is on the one hand practical (as these data are registered by the churches and easily available), on the other had theoretical (as I consider them to be objective indicators of the commitment to a church). But these items are also in line with the goal of Willow Creek: attracting new members and heightening the attachment of the existing ones. I compared the performance of the Willow Creek-communities to the regional church structures in which they function. This is because I expect Willow Creek-communities to compete for members and other resources with other communities directly surrounding them. I also took a regional perspective because the national trend is clear (namely: decline in every respect), but there might be regional variation in this trend. Data were provided by the yearbooks and archive of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and by the SMRA, the statistical bureau of the Netherlands Reformed Church. It was not possible to collect data on financial giving, attendance and new members (for the NRC and UPC).

6. Results

Contrary to the success in America, the Dutch communities are not very successful. On the contrary: they seem to participate in the negative trend that rules the protestant church as a whole. To measure membership trend, I assessed the membership of the Willow Creek community as a proportion of the regional membership number. I then measured the procentual growth of this number for each year and the average growth since 1996. No clear trend can be seen for the membership figures. About half of the communities showed a small increase, the other half a small decrease. There are no real peaks, all center about a growth of 0%. The number of growing RCN-communities is a bit higher than the number of decreasing communities, but on the other hand the number of NRC-communities show a higher growth and a higher decrease. The UPC community shows a small decrease.

Table 2.: membership (number of communities by average growth in perc.)

	<-10	-10<>-5	-5<>-1	-1<>0	0	0<>1	1<>5	5<>10	>10	N
NRC			1			2	1			4
RCN				2		3				5
UPC				1						1

The number of confessed members does not show an increase either. I again took the proportion of confessed members, measured the procentual growth for each year and the average annual growth. Again, growth and decrease are balanced. The communities show a small growth or a small decrease; the numbers are about equal. The variation is a bit bigger but because of the small numbers, a real trend is not obvious. Willow Creek communities thus do not clearly grow in the number of their confessed members compared to their regional number.

Table 3.: confessed members (number of communities by average growth in perc.)

	<-10	-10<>-5	-5<>-1	-1<>0	0	0<>1	1<>5	5<>10	>10	N
NRC			1	2		1				4
RCN				2	1	1	1			5
UPC			1							1

Finally, I looked for the number of new members in Willow Creek communities. Only numbers of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands were available. I measured for each year the differ-

ence between the number of new members in the Willow Creek community and the regional average, and the average difference over all years. Again, a clear trend cannot be seen. Half of the communities show an increase, half show a decrease. Only one community has a clear increase.

Table 4.: new members (number of communities by average difference in numbers)

	<-10	-10<>5	-5<>1	-1<>0	0<>1	1<>5	5<>10	>10	N
RCN			1	1	1		1		

7. Conclusion

The success of Willow Creek communities in the Netherlands is limited. They hardly increase in membership or confessed membership and the number of new members is marginal. This is a remarkable result in the light of the high expectations. It is easy to say that the evangelical model does not appeal to the Dutch public, or that secularization in Europe is so strong that Willow Creek cannot be successful. But we had indications that the model of Willow Creek is not completely adopted by these communities. This of course limits the missionary power of the Willow Creek model. Other communities that are freer in adopting the Willow Creek model and that do grow seem to support this thesis. Further research must make clear what can be the reason for this limited success. Compared to the steady decline of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the performance of the Willow Creek communities is relatively good. An evangelical revival however, also in combination with the extreme low number of Willow Creek communities, does not seem to occur in the Dutch Protestant church.

8. Literature

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9. contact

Dr. Erik Sengers
 Post-doc researcher
 Kampen Theological University
esengers@mail.thuk.nl

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Drenthe					
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Gelderland					
Flevoland					
Utrecht		1		10	West
North-Holland	2			20	
South-Holland	1	1		20	
Zeeland			1	10	South
North-Brabant					
Limburg					
% per church	40	50	10	N=10	

Table 2.: membership (number of communities by average growth in perc.)

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UPC				1						1

Table 3.: confessed members (number of communities by average growth in perc.)

	<-10	-10<>-5	-5<>-1	-1<>0	0	0<>1	1<>5	5<>10	>10	N
NRC			1	2		1				
RCN				2	1	1	1			5
UPC			1							1

Table 4.: new members (number of communities by average difference in numbers)

	<-10	-10<>-5	-5<>-1	-1<>0	0<>1	1<>5	5<>10	>10	N
RCN			1	1	1		1		