

Tekst voorzitter Raad van Kerken in Nederland bij in ontvangst nemen van RICE 2020 onderzoeksrapport op 8 mei 2021

Good afternoon,

Thank you for inviting me today to attend on behalf of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands the presentation of the Rainbow Index 2020.

I am aware that today is an important day for you. This report on inclusiveness of Christian Churches in Europe is the result of several years of research in which many persons from different European countries participated by collecting and evaluating data. It is a special report because it looked at the degree of inclusiveness of Churches in Europe, primarily from the perspective of LGBT Christians themselves. In my brief contribution, I hope to explain to you how the Council of Churches in the Netherlands may relate to this research report.

First of all, some information about the Council of Churches in the Netherlands. The Council was established in 1968 and has 18 member churches and associate members. The diversity of the Churches in Europe is also reflected in our Council. Our diversity is greater than the diversity of Churches in the research report, because in addition to Orthodox (Byzantine, Slavonic and Oriental), Catholic (Roman Catholic and Old Catholic) and Protestant Churches, the Council of Churches in the Netherlands also includes Adventists, Free Evangelicals, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army and Quakers.

A golden rule in ecumenical relations is that there is much more which unites us than what divides us: the one faith in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptism, the Holy Scriptures and the conviction that every human being is created in God's image, a child of God with human dignity that is to be respected and protected. This is somehow our matrix of inclusiveness, the fundament of the Christian sister and brotherhood, that is open to every person and from which no one, who wants to belong to it, may be excluded.

Without this fundamental awareness that we, as Christians of different Churches, are bound together in Christ, it would be more difficult to discuss differences in vision and opinion, trying to bridge them where possible and, where this is not yet possible, to keep on working for a better mutual understanding and not to lose out of sight the purpose of the ecumenical work.

Ecumenical work emerges from the desire to restore communion between divided Churches, but because of that it requires a spirituality that makes room for the otherness of the other. This can only happen in a spirit of mutual trust and dialogue.

In recent decades, many dialogues between churches have been held about matters of faith and church order. It has been pointed out for some time already that ecumenical dialogue is equally needed on ethical questions and especially on views on anthropology, gender identity and sexuality. As you know too well views on this matter can be very divergent both within and between churches.

What is the position of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands in this matter?

In May 2011, as our General Secretary Christien Crowel already mentioned in her word of welcome on Thursday, the Council of Churches signed a declaration on behalf of all member churches against violence against homosexuals. I would like to read the first paragraph from this declaration:

"We do not think alike about homosexuality in all aspects, but we are united in the belief that human beings are created in the image of God and are precious in His sight. Therefore, people should treat

each other with dignity - respectfully, peacefully and lovingly - and violence against homosexuals, in whatever form, is out of the question."

A few weeks ago, we discussed this declaration from 2011 again in our plenary meeting to hear from each other what has been done about it in the past ten years and whether and how it has worked out. Although there are clear differences, the outcome of the discussion was a solid reaffirmation of this declaration. The member churches of the Council of Churches stand – without exception – for a respectful treatment of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Of course, with this statement not everything has been said or done. Particularly in Western societies, there has been a major shift since the 1950s in the view of gender identity that has a global impact and is also legally and socially anchored and accepted in many countries. The traditional Christian concept of a human being, marriage, family, sexuality is thoroughly challenged. Some Churches go along with this development, other Churches are wrestling with it and some Churches remain convinced of their previously established teaching.

In itself it is not strange that new visions of gender, identity and sexuality clash with views passed down from generation to generation. In our secular context, freedom of religion for the Churches is an important guarantee of their free and independent existence.

This brings us to the challenging aspect of the Rainbow Index of European Churches 2020. It shows what – from the perspective of LGBT Christians – should be done to be an inclusive Church in terms of church organization, practice, language and public witness.

Those who follow the developments know that these issues cause great tensions worldwide especially within Churches.

I was asked to tell whether I think that the Rainbow index will help Churches in the Netherlands to reflect on the degree of inclusiveness. My answer would be that it depends a lot on the approach, the way the Rainbow index is used and put forward in contacts with Churches and in the media.

If the outcome of the Rainbow Index is merely used to praise or denounce particular Churches and countries it will not stimulate self-reflection nor dialogue, it can even be stigmatizing. Moreover the scientific underpinning of the scores of the churches on this index is rather weak. It is likely that a number of Churches may not agree with the index itself as a measure for inclusiveness. This finds its roots in fundamental anthropological and ethical convictions of those Churches, and – in my considered opinion – that should be respected too.

On the other side there is a great need for space for dialogue especially on the fundamentals. The issue affects all churches existentially, which deepens the dialogue, makes it valuable but also vulnerable. The fact that this research has been done is of great value and cannot be neglected. I hope that the inter-church dialogue on gender and sexuality in both the Netherlands and Europe will receive a new impulse by this research. It is important that the LGBT perspective itself is taken into account in the course of this dialogue. Therefore the research report needs to be studied seriously in view of building bridges of understanding in mutual respect, with compassion and sensitivity for all concerned.

In the light of this intention I receive this research report on behalf of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands and, I promise you, we will study it carefully.