Universiteit Utrecht

MARKETING THE PKN

An Analysis of the PKN's Missionary Work in the Light of 'Faith Branding'

JULY 2020

BACHELOR THESIS, RELIGIOUS STUDIES
(BACHELOR EINDWERKSTUK RELIGIEWETENSCHAPPEN)

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Word count: 12241

Abstract

Religion and marketing are more alike than one might expect: both aim to make others see the truth that they see. Since the foundation of the Dutch Protestant Church (PKN), the church congregation has focused on missionary work (evangelising), but decreased in members despite it. This thesis investigates the missionary work of the PKN and discusses to what extent the PKN can be regarded as a 'faith brand'. By looking at the PKN website, reports the PKN has published and taking interviews, the research shows how the PKN conducts missionary work. These data are analysed using Mara Einstein's concept of 'faith branding'. The relation between the concepts of 'marketing', 'faith branding', 'evangelising' and 'missionary work' are explored and then clarified by discussing three examples of faith brands in the US. The emphasis lays on creating an understanding of how of the PKN as an overarching organisation creates a brand image and how three local churches feel about that. The thesis argues that there seems to be a difference between the identity of the overarching organisation and the way the local churches identify themselves as represented by the churches interviewed.

Religie en marketing lijken meer op elkaar dan je wellicht zou verwachten. Beiden richten zich er op om anderen van hun denkbeeld te overtuigen. Sinds de oprichting van de Protestantse Kerk Nederland (PKN) heeft de kerk zich gericht op missionair werk. Tegelijkertijd is het in ledenaantal gedaald. Deze scriptie onderzoekt het missionair werk van de PKN en bespreekt in hoeverre de PKN kan worden gezien als 'geloofsmerk'. Door te kijken naar de website van de PKN, rapporten die de PKN heeft gepubliceerd en door interviews af te nemen, laat het onderzoek zien op welke manier de PKN missionair werk uitvoert. Deze data worden geanalyseerd door middel van het concept 'faith branding' van Mara Einstein. De relatie tussen de concepten 'marketen', 'faith branding', 'evangeliseren' en 'missionair werk' worden onderzocht en vervolgens verhelderd door drie voorbeelden van geloofsmerken uit de VS te bespreken. De nadruk ligt op het schetsen van een helder beeld van hoe de PKN als overkoepelende organisatie een 'brand identity' creëert, en de ideeën die drie lokale kerken hierover hebben. De scriptie beargumenteert dat er een verschil lijkt te zitten tussen de identiteit die de overkoepelende organisatie presenteert en hoe de lokale kerken zichzelf identificeren, zoals gerepresenteerd door de geïnterviewde kerken.

Contents

1. Introduction

After 42 years (1961-2003) of negotiation, '*Samen op Weg*' (Together on the Road, SoW), the Dutch Reformed Church (NHK), Reformed Church in the Netherlands (GKN) and Evangelical-Lutheran Church, came to an agreement and fused on May 1st 2004 into the PKN: the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Dros, Hielkema & de Ruiter 2004). SoW was process of negotiating a central creed, non-religious practicalities, external profile and the way local churches would work together.

One of the motivations for this was to create a bigger platform for missionary activities (Dros, Hielkema & de Ruiter 2004). However, since the official union of the PKN there has been a decrease in members (Kregting et al. 2018). According to spokeswoman Marloes Nouwens-Keller this is mainly because of high death rates (Nouwens-Keller, Interview by phone, April 9, 2020). She says that there are not many people that actively deregister, but there are also not more people that register as new members than people that pass away, which would suggest that the missionary work is not successful. Recent research in sociological explanations for a decrease in religiosity in the Netherlands by Joris Kregting (et al. 2018) demonstrated that the expansion and increased quality of the educational system is linked to the decrease in religiosity. An effect of that, higher social security, has also contributed to the decrease. The results of this are visible in the PKN, despite its focus on missionary work.

In this bachelor thesis I focus on the attempts made by the PKN to keep existing members and/or attract new members, making use of Mara Einstein's concept of 'faith brands'. Einstein, a scholar in Media Studies, investigates how religion finds and has found its place in the American commercialised society, in her book, *Brands of Faith* (2008). Her main thesis is that religion, like consumer products, should be be branded in order to remain relevant, placing a responsibility with the religious institutions.

To what extent is Einstein's notion of 'faith brands' – that she uses to analyse mega churches, kabbalah and televangelists in the US – applicable to the Dutch Protestant Church? In this thesis I will consider how the PKN both can, and cannot be seen as a faith brand.

The PKN is a unified church, where the old denominations are still present. There are general rules to which every PKN church has to adhere, but within those rules there is space for individual interpretations, such as to what extent it wants to be evangelical. When it comes to missionary work, the local churches have autonomy and can start their own initiatives. The PKN's headquarters gives suggestions, but they must be supported by the local churches to be picked up. "Though they will not actively be not-evangelical, not all churches will give you a welcome with open-arms" (Nouwens-Keller, interview by phone, April 9, 2020). The PKN's daily board (*moderamen*) is in that perspective more an advice centre, as they cannot order the churches to do something.

Social and scientific relevance

Social relevance lies in creating awareness and understanding for religious institutions around the idea that religion can be 'marketed' and for the impact it can have on growth. My research presents ways in which American faith brands commercialise themselves, to give an alternative perspective to the Dutch 'missionary work'. Therefore, this research can give an opening for religious institutes to start thinking about ways to grow.

Religion and marketing form an interesting and unlikely combination. Marketing, defined by the American Marketing Association (AMA) is "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (AMA 2017). Einstein, following James Twitchel (2004), argues that religion and marketing are virtually the same. Both sell stories and both "rely on storytelling, meaning making and a willingness of people to believe in what is intellectually unbelievable" (Einstein 2008, 78). Religion for Einstein is a package. In the case of the PKN, within Einstein's model, that means that the PKN is just a package of (Protestant) Christianity. Therefore, if branding is to products as the PKN is to Protestant Christianity, then maybe the PKN could be considered a faith brand as Einstein discusses.

Research about religion and marketing has been undertaken in the United States (Twitchel 2004 & 2007; Einstein 2008; Cooke 2010), however there is little similar information from European sources. This does not mean that religion in Europe is not 'marketing' itself. A possible reason for the lack of research however could be that European churches are not using marketing strategies in the same way as American churches. In this thesis I will address this gap in the research and explore marketing of religion of the PKN. However, in applying an American concept, that is based on the American context, it is important to acknowledge there is a difference.

Method

By analysing the concept 'faith branding' first by defining it and later by putting it in context, I will use a hermeneutical approach to examine the PKN as a potential faith brand. For the definition I will use literature informed by that of Mara Einstein, and quantitative data from Dutch data centre, the CBS. For the latter I make use of primary data, including the PKN website and my own interviews with representatives of member churches of the PKN. Because of the scope of the research and time limitations that come with it, I have been able to conduct three formal interviews and one informal one.

I have chosen three churches, one of each of the three initial churches (GKN, NHK and Evangelical-Lutheran church). The purpose was not to represent each of the congregations, but to give an insight in the diversity of PKN churches. Due to the corona pandemic, I was not able to visit churches or conduct interviews in person. Interviews were conducted over the phone and all based on the same list of questions (see appendix 1). The language of communication was Dutch to allow interviewees freedom of expression, but I have translated quotes to English. The interviews started with questions

about the church: "is there growth?", "do they actively present themselves in their local neighbourhood?", "do they actively try to reach people from outside of the church?" and, "to what extent do they feel connected to the PKN?". Finally I asked what their thoughts are on the idea of the PKN as a faith brand.

My background has given me certain bias about the PKN. Going to church when I was younger, has given me the image of the PKN being grey and having a classical liturgy with songs that are unappealing to me. My image of the PKN having relatively many older members, has been confirmed by the spokeswoman of the PKN, and through this research I have found that I am not the only one who thinks of the classical liturgy and songs as 'dull'. I have tried to be impartial in conducting the research, but my opinion of the PKN may have caused undue influence on my research.

Thesis Outline

In chapter two I analyse the concepts of faith branding and marketing, and substantiate the relevance for the use of these concepts in religious contexts. In chapter three these concepts will be explored by discussing two examples of faith brands that Einstein (2008) discusses Joel Osteen and Rick Warren, and one that is alike, which I analyse myself using Einstein's concept, Kenneth Copeland. All three are evangelical churches from the US. By looking at examples Einstein gives, I want to gain a better understanding of 'faith branding' and make a more complete consideration as to what extent the PKN can be called a faith brand. In chapter four I discuss the current attempts of 'selling', or 'marketing' that the PKN currently performs, and in chapter five I give an insight in the views on 'missionary work' of three PKN pastors. In chapter six I will bring all of this together, to come to a conclusion in chapter seven.

2. Religion on the marketplace?

Because of changes in society, religion for most people is not a social norm anymore (Kregting et al. 2018). As a result of this development, Peter Berger (1967) and Mara Einstein (2008) among others, have argued that religion now needs to be marketed in order to remain relevant. According to Einstein, religious organisations and individuals do this in America by creating a specific image for their religious group (church), book or music. This is a 'brand', or as she calls it, a 'faith brand'. These faith brands have specific names, logos and a stories associated with them. The elements of: creating a story, informing people of the history and the consumer of their connection with the narrative as a whole, are what, according to Einstein, make a brand. In this chapter, I explain Mara Einstein's concept of 'faith branding' (2008), and how it relates to broader theories of secularisation.

(Post-)Secularisation

Secularisation may have amplified the need for marketing religion. 'Religion as a possibility' seems to be the norm in Dutch society today: you are free to be religious, but the public sphere is not dominantly religious. There are a variety of religious 'sacred' places, religious political parties and schools, but there is no societal pressure to adhere to a religious group. For some people, religion may even be invisible in society. However normal this may seem, it is only relatively recently that we shifted away from a society immersed in religion. This shift in social norms is partially explained by the 'secularisation thesis' although it is a widely debated concept (Casanova 1964; Berger 1967; Stark 1999). Secularisation is roughly explained as a process linked to modernisation in which more and more sectors of society and culture are no longer under the influence or ownership of the church (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1983; Habermas 2008). The term 'secularisation' however also had the undertone of indicating the disappearance of religion in society. Thomas Luckmann, as did Berger, criticised this connotation in 1970. They argued that religion was not disappearing at all, but that it was losing its prominence in the public sphere and became limited to the private sphere. More recently, their ideas have been criticised by scholars including Charles Taylor (2007), Jurgen Habermas (2008) and Berger (2012) himself, observing that religious practice is still highly visible in the public sphere. They argue that secularisation should be viewed in terms of institutional differentiation and religious pluralisation.

Berger (1967, 2012) has written extensively on the effects of religious pluralisation of religious institutions. Religious pluralism, he says, where the normality of a monopolised religion is no longer the reason for people to join or stay at that church anymore, means that religious groups now have to defend their plausibility. This, he predicts, means that religions will have to adjust themselves to the 'customer's' likings in order to appeal to them and keep them with them. As a consequence of this, there are different kinds of religions which are now accessible to everyone. This pluralistic situation turns religion into 'religious products' to appeal to people, which is how religious contents become subjects of fashion and 'supernatural' elements may be pushed back to the background. Because all religious

institutions have to do this and there is no ultimate truth anymore, people will start looking for their own truths, which, as Berger sees it, leads to individualisation (1967).

Is this, an individualistic and pluralistic society in which religion exists, but is no longer the central grounding point in existence, what we now see in the Dutch context?

Faith brands

The prediction of Berger, is similar to what Mara Einstein (2008) sees in the United States of America. The religious marketing she describes, of commercialised marketing campaigns for religious books and ice cream trucks to get people to church is 'a few' steps further. Einstein's work is mainly based on Evangelicals with some elements of Kabbalah, I will illustrate her theory in the next chapter using Evangelical examples. The main argument in the book *Brands of Faith* is that "religion has to be marketed in today's culture in order to remain relevant" (60). Einstein sees an enormous market in which all products have to be branded, or they will not be seen. A 'product' can be anything from a book, to the services of a religious group or pastor, to just 'ideas'. She argues that religion and brands are taking over each other's features. Religions become products, and (product) brands become religious. Branding and 'brands' are defined by Einstein as:

> "commodity products that have been given a name, an identifying icon or logo, and usually a tagline as a means to differentiate them from other products in their category. Branding also occurs through the creation of stories or myths surrounding a product or service" (2008, 12).

Later in the book she adds David Ogilvy's definition of a brand:

> "the intangible sum of a product's attributes: its name, packaging and price, its history, its reputation and the way it is advertised" (Ogilvy in Einstein 2008, 70).

Einstein concludes her definition by saying that "faith brands [are] religious products and services that are part of a comprehensive, cohesive marketing plan to create a product that resonates with today's consumer-conscious religious shopper" (Einstein 2008, 14). I therefore see relevance in including the element of communication from the definition of marketing (AMA, 2017). The elements that I will use to decide whether the religious products and services that I look at in this thesis are a faith brand or not are:

- a (brand) name;
- packaging (this can be an icon, logo or corporate identity);
- a tagline;
- some kind of myth or history, which reflect the brand's image;

- communication of the product message to the (potential) client.

From this follows that religious branding is the way religions make themselves seen and heard by the consumer, as Berger predicted they would have to do. "[It] is about making meaning – taking the individual aspects of a product and turning them into more than the sum of their parts" (Einstein 2008, 70). Stories, myths or accounts of history contribute to that by bringing a brand to life and resonating in people's minds. In my perspective, these 'stories' can be the stories in the bible, a personal story of a pastor or the 'story' of a brand like Apple, a brand that with its 'i' products, connects individuals with individuals. Stories are a part of branding, and as such they are also part of a marketing strategy. They attribute to the image of your brand (branding), but also to the connection between a consumer and a product (marketing) (AMA 2007; Einstein 2008). Faith brands all have their specific focus, a recognizable word or face around which they brand. Because it is not always a (directly) religious message, and heavy messages like 'sin' and hell' are left out of the focus, Einstein calls this 'watered down' religion and explains it as a way of "easing" people "in" (66). By 'easing in' she means not figuratively slapping newcomers in the face with a religious message, but showing them the positive sides, like emotional or financial support. Marketing and evangelising alike are then aimed at interesting people for their product.

Marketers have learned the value of creating brand cult members – users that are so enthusiastic about a product that they become product evangelicals. One of the developments that Einstein describes is that of churches hiring church consultants. Without calling them that, they are basically marketers that take the message from the church, and promote it as the product. For the church it is then the task to "sell Jesus once you get them in the door" (64). So the selling point is a good message and once people fall for that, the church will have to tell them that Jesus has died on a cross for the sins of men, which 'we' have to make up for, a loaded message. There is a lot of critique on marketed religious products that place an emphasis on prosperity, saying they are only "lightweight Christian, if Christian at all" (65). Although Einstein recognises these critiques and agrees with them to some extent, she still sees the marketing as a "necessary evil" (Einstein 2008, 207).

When talking about religious institution, there is however a problem with using terms like 'branding' and 'marketing', because the religious institutions do not like this commercial jargon. 'Mission', 'missionary work' and 'evangelising' are used within Christianity in a broad sense. In that context, mission and missionary work are used as bringing out the word of God, letting others know you exist and what you do, with the goal of conversion. This is similar to marketing in the sense that it is about creating a connection of some sort between the religion or religious institute and a non-religious person by making them aware of- and attracted to your existence. According to Einstein, marketing is the same as evangelising : "people are lured to religion, or any other product or service, with the promise of something in return" (Einstein 2008, 208). Missionary work and evangelising are then similar. Branding, within the parameters discussed before, does not seem to be part of the Christian 'language'.

Einstein's research is based on the American context and it is important for my research to recognise the difference between the conformist nature of Dutch society and the larger than life nature of American society. But even though we may not have the same extreme commercial society in the Netherlands, we still live in a society characterised by religious pluralisation and institutional differentiation (StatLine 2019). As such, we may expect to see a certain level of free market competition between different religious traditions, and perhaps even a form of 'faith branding'. This is why I want to explore if 'faith branding' could be a useful tool for studying the 'business' of religion in Dutch society, more specifically the missionary work of the PKN.

Story telling

A returning aspect in *Brands of Faith* is the way products are being framed. Einstein started and finished her work with how both religion and (other) businesses that brand their products, are meaning makers by the stories they tell (2008). Having 'myths' is even part of Einstein's definition of branding. Because of the many interpretations that are given to the concepts 'myths' and 'stories, I want to explore what this element of branding means.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam Webster, a story can be fictional: an oral or written narrative, a plot of a narrative, a (widely) circulated rumour or even lies, but it can also be non-fictional, like a recording of history, or an account of events, used to relate things to each other. When it comes to stories surrounding (faith) brands, it can mean any of these definitions. A company can make up a story in order for people to relate with them. Apple Inc. is a good example of this. Although it is a technology company, as stated by its CEO at the time, Steve Jobs, the main focus is on marketing (Schneiders 2011). In a similar way to how the Protestant doctrine was envisioned by Martin Luther (Hill 2006), just the bible, without all the unnecessary 'extras', Jobs believed in a personal, simple computer that was accessible for everyone (Ferrara & LaMeau, 2012).

However stories can also contribute to your brand image in a negative way, when a rumour goes around and the brand starts to be associated with that rumour. In that case, the rumour becomes part of the story as well. This could be because of a bad review or a series of bad reviews or customers, but it can also be caused by a rival brand. Technology company A could spread the rumour that their rival is using technically malfunctioning products, so that consumers will not want to buy the bad products and buy from A. With branding, you therefore want to be able to steer the stories that are spread about your brand, whether it is a commercial brand or a faith brand, so that the audience perceives you in the best way possible for your brand.

For churches, whether perceived as a faith brand or not, an example is the abuse of children in the Catholic Church. When it comes out that the priest of a specific church is guilty of this, people may not want to be associated with that church and existing members may even want to leave. Similar to a company dissociating itself from a poor product drawing bad reviews, the church may want to dissociate

itself from the priest in order to keep its members. Similar to a bad product, despite dissociation, this may also cause lasting damage to the reputation of the Catholic church as a whole.

Other things that can influence people's image of a brand can be the brand name and logo. As a brand, you want a logo and a name that suit the content of your brand. If you want to come across as a happy or funny brand, you would choose different shapes and colours than for a sombre or serious brand. In a similar way, when you welcome clients in your store, office or church you want to leave an impression that matches the image you 'brand'.

In the next few chapters I will elaborate more on Einstein's concept of faith brands by discussing two of her case studies and then using that as a background to look at the Dutch Protestant Church and the extent to which the concept of faith brands can be a useful tool for researching the PKN.

3. Evangelical 'faith brands' in the US

Evangelicals and evangelising

The goal of this chapter is to explore how the faith brands that Einstein based her concept on, operate and have been able to grow tremendously. The question that I therefore want to answer here is how these faith brands identify themselves and what makes them successful. I further aim to consider the nuances between evangelising and branding in order to use that in my analysis of the PKN and its 'branding'.

The number of people that identify themselves as being Christian in the Netherlands, as well as the number of people that are church members, is decreasing (Kregting et al. 2018). However, Christianity is not shrinking everywhere (Jenkins 2016). A striking example of this is Evangelical Protestantism in the United States, which is growing (Pew 2015). Evangelical Christians are now the largest religious group of Protestant Christians in the US (Einstein 2008). This is mainly because they are actively marketing themselves. And not like I discussed in the previous chapter, just evangelising in the sense of 'making people aware that they exist'. Although they are doing that, there are examples of Evangelical groups or pastors that are branding themselves by creating a clear, and perhaps 'customer' oriented identity that can therefore be labelled as 'faith brands'.

What exactly do I mean by evangelical faith brands? Evangelicals are a diverse 'group' of churches that "are not thinking, speaking, and acting with unanimity" (Smith 2002, 22). However central ideas are that followers are 'born', or 'born again', in Christ, with a duty to evangelise by spreading the Good Word (Fitzgerald 2017, 2). Evangelical faith brands are then evangelicals that have a clear brand name, key phrase, a logo or icon and a 'story' that contributes to their image and a way or multiple ways to communicate this to people from outside their church.

According to Einstein, the first institutions to make use of marketing on a broad scale for religious institutions were the seeker churches or megachurches (Einstein 2008). In these churches, and to a large extent American evangelicals in general (Smith 2002), the story and message is mostly about the fact that the people that have come to the church, have already been saved. The idea of being 'God fearing' is not directly promoted (Einstein 2008).

I will discuss the cases of Joel Osteen, Rick Warren and Kenneth Copeland as examples out of the hundreds of evangelical ministers in the US that all lead or even founded their own churches and have thousands of followers.

Joel Osteen

Joel Osteen, to whom an entire sub-chapter in her book was dedicated, is for Einstein a prototype faith brand. He meets all the requirements of a faith brand that I discussed earlier and is incredibly successful as a church/ brand. Joel Osteen is the senior pastor in Lakewood Church (Texas). He took up preaching

just before this father died. Since then he marketed both the church and himself so successfully that it grew from about 6000 weekly attendees in 1999 to about 40.000 in 2008 (Einstein 2008; Joel Osteen n.d. 'About Joel'). The brand name is Joel Osteen, the icon a "smiling preacher" and key phrases include "discover the champion in you" and "be a victor not a victim". Osteen makes use of television, books, websites and tours nationwide to get his message out. Things that attribute to his image are his bright smile, the involvement of his family and the fact that everyone calls him 'Joel', making it seem easy to approach him. All

Figure 1: (Joel Osteen n.d. Our Ministry)

these elements together create a brand image of a family friendly, approachable man who tells positive stories (Einstein 2008).

There is a lot more to say about Joel Osteen, but the most striking thing was finding out the power of contemporary online marketing myself when, after I had been looking at Joel Osteen's website via my laptop, I took a short break and checked my personal Facebook page via my phone. On the timeline, not far down, I scrolled past an advertisement suggesting me to follow Joel Osteen on Facebook. Previously to this I had never seen a targeted advert of this genre or done anything online to link me to this page, or similar ones. I assumed it had something to do with technology links like cookies, but in the eyes of a believer this could be regarded as a sign of God (Berger 2012). The creation of the image of 'Pastor Joel' is an example by branding, spreading the brand out over the internet, and my Facebook page, ensuring everyone knows the brand, is marketing.

Rick Warren

The Purpose Driven Life (Warren 2002) is another kind of brand that found its way to a large audience. It is a book by Saddleback church founder Rick Warren, written as a bible study book, used in his own church, and also for sale for all other churches that wanted to know about it (Purpose driven, n.d.; Einstein 2008).

The book has a brand name, '*The Purpose Driven Life*' or 'Purpose Driven', a key phrase, 'What on earth am I here for', and a tree as a logo. The context of 9/11 and 'millennial fever' had already sparked the spiritual interest of people and at the same time it was the period in which 'baby boomers' turned 50 and started asking themselves more life questions, making it the perfect time for Warren to market it (Einstein 2008).

When it was first published, the book was branded in such a way that it could just be a 'regular' self-help book. *Purpose driven*, was supposed to appeal to anyone looking for a new (purpose driven) lifestyle. Following another Christian bestseller, it was (and is in Walmart and online at Amazon and the Dutch Bol.com) sold in 'big box' stores, making it accessible for the larger public (Einstein 2008).

The book has a website on which it is sold, accompanied with explanation videos from 'Pastor Rick' (Einstein 2008). Next to that the Saddleback church has its 'purpose driven life' course, which guides people through the forty days the book describes. The branding evolves around changing lifestyle, allowing the marketing to (partially) be done in non-religious settings.

Even though the church and book fit in the definition of a brand, when asked, Warren said that what others call commercialism and marketing, he calls evangelism, "sharing the Good Word" (Einstein 2008, 118), which as discussed in chapter two are the virtually the same.

Kenneth Copeland

The last example came to my attention when a video of Kenneth Copeland went 'viral' after Copeland executed judgement over Covid-19 and declared the United States of America "healed and well again" (YouTube 2020a). The Kenneth Copeland Ministry (KCM) was founded in Texas, but now has offices in among others Europe and Africa as well (Kenneth Copeland Ministries n.d. About Us).
This ministry sells the message of "VICTORY". Copeland, as do Osteen and Warren, hosts events and broadcasts videos and the ministry has its own news channel, "VICTORY News". Together with his wife Gloria, Kenneth posts a daily video recorded prayer and there is a 'believers academy' to educate followers (Kenneth Copeland Ministries n.d.). The brand has two icons. a globe with "Jesus is Lord" written across, and an old man's crocked smile.

When it comes to the image of KCM, this one is harder to pinpoint. Kenneth and Gloria are both from an older generation and the settings in the videos they post and the website in general reflects that. However on the 'about us' page on the website, three of the four images are more young
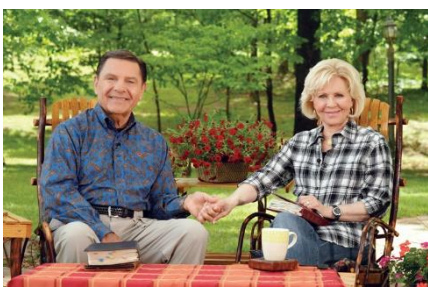
Figure 3 (Kenneth Copeland Ministries. n.d. About Us)

lifestyle type of imaging, which is a mismatch with the rest of the page (See Figures 2 and 3). The lifestyle images support the "are you new here" message, followed by "do you recognise yourself in these life situations? We know what you are going through" (Kenneth Copeland Ministries. n.d. About Us). Before telling you anything to do with faith, they appeal to your personal experiences. The youthful lifestyle photos are not congruous with the image of the

Figure 2 (Kenneth Copelands Ministries. n.d. About Us)

minister. Therefore the faith brand does not seem as cohesive as those presented by Joel Osteen and Rick Warren.

Discussion

By discussing three faith brands, I have tried to clarify Einstein's concept of faith branding. All three are forms of religious products that have shaped a brand identity and are marketing, or 'evangelising' with that identity (image). The common features are that the messages are either aimed at the brand or at the 'customer' (follower or religious seeker), they all appear on television and publish books, or in the case of Warren, the book is (part of) the brand, and they all train their followers to think in a certain way by offering them courses, teaching the brand's faith. Because the initial messages are not condemning, the churches do not teach that part of the Bible, because the message has to match the content (Einstein 2008). The images of their brand that they are creating themselves, are what they are 'branding' with, it is the marketing or evangelising message they send out.

4. The PKN and its missionary work

The PKN is the result of a merger between three protestant denominations, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Church of the Netherlands and the Lutheran-Evangelical Church. Even though the churches are on paper one church, in reality there are still differences between the views and attitude from the individual churches towards the overarching organisation. In order to understand today's PKN, it is important to have a basic understanding of how the PKN came to be. In this chapter I will therefore start by presenting a short history of the PKN and then explain why the PKN can be seen as a brand and discuss forms of 'branding' within the PKN.

A short history of the PKN

The protestant church in the Netherlands has been splintered since the Reformation. There are and were many different congregations because of theological disagreements. In 1961, eighteen theologists and pastors from both the Dutch Reformed Church (NHK) and the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (GKN) initiated contact with the goal of negotiating the possibilities of a potential merger. Both denominations stand in the Calvinistic tradition, but because of slight theological differences in the nineteenth century, they split (Dros, Hielkema & de Ruiter 2004). The initiative was strongly promoted on a congress in 1962, forming the start of the cooperation, *Samen op Weg* (SoW). The Evangelical-Lutheran church did not join before 1986 for financial reasons, but they had been inspired by the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. Once their financial situation was healthy again in 1990, they joined the process of the union (Dros, Hielkema & de Ruiter 2004, 77). Despite ongoing disagreements on different topics, SoW resulted in an official union of the NHK, GKN and the Lutheran-evangelicals into the PKN on May 1, 2004.

One of the most important goals of the union was a larger missionary base (Dros, Hielkema & de Ruiter 2004). Because churches started losing members after the Dutch 'decompartmentalisation' (ont*zuiling*), a united church had benefits in that perspective. To put it in context, the compartmentalisation (verzuiling) is the name for the period of time that started after world war 1 and lasted until about 1960. During this period of time there were arguably four social 'groups', two confessional (Protestant and Catholic), socialist and liberal/others. Since the official union, the PKN has placed an emphasis on mission and evangelising.

The name '*Protestantse Kerk*' would be the brand name as a part of the logo, but PKN is also commonly used. The logo consists of a dove, a cross and a halo, and carries out the message of a church that lives based on the word of God and is "aimed at peace, justice and the wholeness of creation". The circle, or halo stands for unity and unity of

Figure 4 (ReproVinci B.V. 2012)

the churches, but also for the perfection and eternity of God. The cross stands for the suffering, dying

and upstanding of Jesus Christ. The Eight-armed cross is a combination of the 'regular' cross and the Greek 'chi' from Christus: 'X'. It also stands for the eight day of creation, a new beginning. Finally, the dove stands for peace and of course the Holy Spirit (ReproVinci B.V. 2012). The motto of the PKN, 'Place to find faith, hope, and love' (*Vindplaats voor geloof, hoop en liefde*), is inspired by the bible and with this the PKN wants to show where it stands for and how it can be a value on people's lives (ReproVinci BV 2012). The logo and motto have to be used following the corporate guidelines (Protestantse Kerk, n.d. Richtlijnen) as a method to create a unity in the (online) image. About the 'brand identity', the website states that in the world wide Protestant Church, which the PKN is a part of, people come together around the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message of 'faith, hope and love is carried through in social awareness and by responding to the desire for experimental forms if being church, as well as the classic forms.

So far this chapter has accounted for four of the five elements of faith branding. The following part will discuss the last one, that of communication. Because identity feeling cannot be 'ordered' by the overarching organisation, it is interesting to look at the image that the members give of the PKN. "We [the headquarters] need to make people hungry, but the churches need to share the bread" (Nouwens-Keller, Interview by Phone, April 9, 2020).

Missionary work

To consider the way local churches and other initiatives present the PKN and communicate their message to people from outside the church, we need to consider whether they are actively doing missionary work and telling people about their faith. The way in which the PKN is making its belief known is via mission. The term 'missionary' has briefly been discussed in chapter two. The PKN also describes it on her website, saying:

> "Churches or people are missionary when they are brought to movement by Jesus Christ to be involved with people and situations in their surroundings in a loving way. It is a loving involvement that becomes visible in the way they behave toward people, what they do and what they say" (Translated from: Protestantse Kerk, n.d., Wat is missionair?).[1]

Because of the bottom-up construction of the church, the overarching organisation cannot tell churches to be missionary, and merely advise on how best to do it and how to approach people from outside the church. The PKN suggests three approaches: be welcoming, seek out and send out. To be welcoming here means inviting people to come to an event that the church had planned already, and making sure that new people feel welcome, seen and heard. To seek out is to organise events or activities that are

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[1] "*Kerken of mensen zijn missionair als ze door Jezus Christus in beweging worden gebracht om liefdevol betrokken te zijn op mensen en situaties in hun omgeving. Het is een liefdevolle betrokkenheid die zichtbaar wordt in hoe ze met mensen omgaan, wat ze doen en wat ze zeggen*."

aimed at making contact with people who never came to the church before and making them aware of what you do. This is with the goal that people could come to other activities if they want to know more about the Christian faith afterwards. Then the third, to 'send out', I will discuss in more detail. This used to be associated with going out to other countries and cultures to set up initiatives there, but today, because of the decrease in members of the Dutch Protestant Church, there is a bigger focus on 'sending out' in the Netherlands (Protestantse kerk n.d., Missionair werk).

Because of a desire for the mission, and the observation that the existing churches are not supplying for needs of everyone in the society, the members of the PKN have started new ways of 'being church' at around 250 places since 2005. These are 'pioneering places', '*kliederkerken*', monastic initiatives, missionary communal houses and more, new forms of being church for people that do not feel at home at 'classic' churches (De Reuver & Vellekoop 2019, 16).[2] The communal houses might organise Taizé celebrations at home or connect with each other and the bible in other ways and be active in their area with a missionary goal (De Reuver & Vellekoop 2019). The monastic initiatives organise walks, prayers and meals in silence for seekers with an open and welcome environment. In the monastic initiatives there is often no coexistence yet. The pioneering places and *kliederkerken* need a bit more explanation. Both are based on and inspired by initiatives from the United Kingdom, 'messy church' and 'fresh expressions'.[3]

The messy church and the Dutch *kliederkerk* are ways of being church where there is place for both children and parents to experience faith and creativity together. It is said not to be a children's church, but there is a lot of space for the energy and creative interests of children while keeping the focus on the bible (Messy Church. n.d.). Via the PKN, the first few *kliederkerken* in the Netherlands started in 2016, today there are over a hundred of them (Protestantse Kerk n.d. kerkzoeker).

Part of the fresh expressions initiative is the 'serving-first-journey'. What this means is that a local church gives a group of people from that church the space to create a new community that exists next to- and to some extent outside of that local church (Protestantse Kerk n.d, Missionair werk). The PKN translated the serving-first-journey to pioneering and started setting up pioneering places from 2004. As a principle it is about seeing value in finding new ways of being a church by looking at and listening to the people that you have assembled. The projects are usually started by a core of people from the church and the aim is to attract about the same number of people from outside the church (van der Velde et al. 2020). The idea is not to start as a 'classic' church, but to find the connection between the people you have started with. This can be creative, via quizzes or by sharing meals together. The aim of these new ways of being church is to hold the bible as a central point around which you build a 'church' that works for your specific group of people, without trying to become like a 'classic' PKN church (de Reuver & Vellekoop 2019; see Appendix 2). Interestingly, this approach, bases itself on personal ties, which

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[2] '*Kliederkerk*' is Dutch for 'messy church'.
[3] See: https://www.messychurch.org.uk/ and https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/.

Einstein argues, is a way of "soft-selling"; because that way someone does not only become connected to "the study of the belief system, but also to the friendships he or she is developing" (Einstein 2008, 84).

The identity of the PKN

To come back to the original question, the exact way in which religion is brought to people from outside the church and the image that is presented of the PKN is not made clear in this report. It does point out the theological differences between different pioneering places. In places where the initiators believe "that people will be lost without Christ, they will be more motivated to convince non-believers or people of other religions to choose for Jesus Christ than those who have a 'broader' view on religion" (van der Velde et al. 2020, 17). The report says that it would be good to discuss these differences. Overall the report concludes that in all pioneering places the Christian message and character are clear, although not everyone was aware of this before stepping in (Van der Velde et al. 2020). With the pioneering places I do wonder if that is a brand on itself, as the new ways of being-church do not have to reflect the classic ways of being-church and therefore may not communicate the same message.

When I asked Nouwens-Keller about the image of the PKN she gave two answers. On the one hand she sees that there is a problem around the image, for example that people think you have to be religious before stepping into a church. The other answer she gave me is that she and her team are conscious that the projects they take on reflect the image they want to give off: helping the weak groups in society (Nouwens-Keller 2020, own interview). This shows consciousness of the perception of what they are doing, but it is not the proactive style of branding used by the American faith brands.

5. Three local PKN churches

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the PKN is an overarching organisation from a church, the Dutch Protestant church, with a top-down construction. This means that the 'headquarters' cannot put rules in place or command the churches that are part of the PKN to do certain things. The local churches therefore have a lot of freedom and because they are the ones that have to do the missionary work, they have to be included in this research. Due to the size of this thesis I have made a selection of three churches: The *Gereformeerde kerk Urk* (GKU), the *Protestantse gemeente Wageningen* (PgW) and an Evangelical-Lutheran church, from which the location will stay anonymous.

Three local churches

I have interviewed three pastors, Gerard van Zanden from the *Gereformeerde kerk Urk* (GKU), Nico Sjoer from the *Protestantse gemeente Wageningen* (PgW), which is a combination of different *hervormde* churches and a *gereformeerde* church and Evelien Jansen (pseudonym), from an Evangelical-Lutheran church, who prefers to stay anonymous.

Urk, the place of Pr. van Zanden his church, is an exemplar of the Christian stronghold in the Netherlands. In 2015 about 94% percent of the population there was Christian and 52% *gereformeerd* (Schmeets 2016). Pr. van Zanden stated that the three church buildings from their church, are nearly always full. The *Protestantse gemeente Wageningen* is, like Urk, part of the Dutch bible belt, but is in Pr. Sjoer's (joking) words the Sodom and Gomorrah of the bible belt. Pr. Sjoer described the church as very diverse, relatively liberal, but with a lot of differences among members; "from almost Evangelical, so Pentecostal-like, to decidedly liberal, to people who don't really believe in a personal God […] and then a lot of people in between that range". The third church, the Evangelical-Lutheran church is located in the center of a large city. In the Netherlands there are evangelical churches that do not identify themselves with the image they have from American Evangelicals that Einstein describes, that is 'happy clappy' and *opwekkings* music. These two evangelical churches are completely different church congregations that only have the word 'evangelical' in common. This church emphasises the Lutheran tradition and is very proud of its church building, organ and a more 'classic' liturgy, as Pr. Jansen describes it.

"We don't have a product, we have a calling"

I first want to highlight what really stuck with me after the interviews. It is also what seems to be the most important reason why a direct comparison with evangelicals would be difficult, if not impossible. In chapter three it seemed to be a trend that all three discussed US faith brands put a large emphasis on a personal experience, with messages like 'VICTORY' and 'you will overcome' or 'succeed'. On top of that, in two of the three cases the 'brand' name was the name of the pastor, glorifying them as a

person. In contrast to this, two of the three PKN pastors, without being asked, placed an emphasis on the centrality of God, not of men. When I asked Ps. van Zanden and Sjoer what their churches did to grow or tell other people about faith, they both stressed that church growth is not the goal. Their personal interest is not important in the Christian faith and that faith should be focused on God. "When talking about missionary work, I do not believe in strategies or planning. We don't have a product, we have a calling" (van Zanden). This shows a different religious experience and believe than the evangelical contexts in chapter three, and one that goes against Berger's prediction that the 'supernatural' would not be emphasised as much (Berger 1967). The difference between product and 'calling' is an interesting one. This is an experience of religion where God and Jesus are not pushed to the background in order to 'sell' the faith (Einstein 2008), but come before everything.

"Winning souls"

This does not mean that these churches do not show themselves in their local area and maybe try to spread their faith. Especially Pr. Jansen from the Evangelical-Lutheran church said that they always try to be as welcoming as possible. She is in this perspective more open towards evangelising than the other two. Her church opens the church building on Wednesday afternoons for tea, coffee and a short, 'easy' service. Around Christmas and Easter they organise plays for all children that are rehearsed on the day itself, with the goal for them to be easily accessible for a wide audience. She also mentions the messy church, which they do four times a year and is very successful and that people from her church volunteer for the food bank. Despite being keen on growing, giving off a good image to the local context and being located in a city centre, she said that there is barely any growth and that there is a stable 'core group'.

Pr. Sjoer tells me that, despite not having a focus on 'winning souls' as he said it, they grow just from being who they are. This may be true, but it could also be the way in which the church wants to see itself. The Protestant church wrote an article about the topic in which different pastors give their vision on 'winning souls' (Protestantse Kerk n.d., Zieltjes winnen). The article gives an interesting twist to it, saying that despite the negative connotation, winning souls is not a bad thing, and like missionary work, a way to help people find Jesus, if and when they are ready for it.

Because the PgW is located in the university city Wageningen, a lot of its members are connected to the university, making it a 'studious' congregation. They help out the weak in the local area, both financially (where necessary) and by donating food, but they also organise readings, workshops, book discussions, movie nights and more, which, Pr. Sjoer estimates, are visited by about five hundred people a year. He was proud to be able to say two things. First, that they welcome people from all backgrounds, genders and sexual orientation, and that this does not affect their role in their church. He and his colleague also participate in local pride walks and are mentioned on the LGBTQ+ church website 'wij de kerk' (we the church). And second that they belong to that "ancient (*oer oude*) Christian tradition. It does not make us saints, but it does give you some ground to stand on". By doing

what they believe is right, the congregation have at least a stable amount of members and are even growing a little bit. Although they are not actively selling themselves, by just being present in the local community, they are 'soft-selling' their faith.

This is similar for the reformed church in Urk. Pr. van Zanden has seen a substantial growth in his church during his three years there, about two- to three hundred new members. He estimates about 150 from births and the rest to be coming from other churches. "That usually goes from heavy to light […], so they come from conservative churches and then it all needs to be a bit more loose… and then fortunately you can go to the reformed (*gereformeerde*) church". In the same period of time they have lost about 100 members.

Because Pr. van Zanden does not see the church, and its faith, as something you should bring to the people, and there are not many people that are not Christian in Urk, there is very little missionary work outside of the church. This does not mean that his congregation is not active in the local area. The church runs a charity shop in an old warehouse, which is used for meeting people and to raise money for the chosen charity. In summer a number of churches also organise something in the docks, but he did not know much more about that, which is also a reflection of how much he cares about it, he said. Pr. van Zanden indicates that he is not always sure about how to approach missionary work, as he does not want to 'steal' people from other churches. but he also feels like people from outside the church may not always be open to conversations about faith. "The most difficult, I find, is to talk about faith with well, friends from high school". To me, he said, it would be easy to talk about faith, because it was me who came to him. This is interesting because it shows concern about other people's feelings towards faith and an awareness that not everyone may want to hear his message, but it also shows a theological view, like we saw in the previous chapter with pioneering places.

"Member of the PKN in heart and soul"

When I asked the pastors to what extent they felt connected to the overarching organisation, the PKN, they all said that they experience benefits in different ways, but no one said they felt like their church members would identify themselves as members of the PKN in the first place. The benefit that all the interviewees mentioned is the freedom to do what they want.

Pr. Sjoer said that they are gratefully making use of the guidelines they get concerning corona, but if the national organisation would say something they disagree with, they have no problem with keeping their foot down. In a similar way, Pr. Jansen sees the desire in her church to keep the Lutheran tradition high. Her members, she thinks, would initially identify as Lutheran, and then "PKN's". She herself however, is "a member of the PKN in heart and soul. In the GKU, Pr. van Zanden told me, members had the choice around 2004, if they wanted to be registered for the PKN or just for the local church. About 1200 members decided to split off entirely, and other members remained a member of the GKU, but are not registered for the PKN. Despite the church still being a part of the PKN, this

already indicates a degree in mistrust towards the PKN, which he confirmed later by saying that a lot of people from his church "follow the developments in the PKN with suspicious eyes". Until now they have always been allowed not to employ women and marry gay couples, but Pr. van Zanden is not sure what would happen if the PKN would start prescribing those things and foresees another split in that case.

Pr. van Zanden sees benefits in that they can now 'borrow' pastors from for example the *hervormde* churches, where that was not possible before. Of the four pastor places they have, only two are filled, so that they can now ask pastors form a different congregation is beneficial.

One identity?

What do all these different opinions mean for the identity of the PKN and the PKN as a united church? By identity I mean the 'brand' image that the PKN wants to stand for and communicate to people from outside the church. The overarching organisation of the PKN is trying to stimulate churches to be active and present in their local context and to be missionary, so tell people about the gospel. The one church that is actively thinking about mission and showing itself in the context is the Evangelical-Lutheran church. Considering the reason for them to join *samen op weg*, and thus why they are now part of the PKN, it was to be expected that this church focusses on missionary work. However it is interesting to see that the other two churches did not plan to win people over, but are doing similar activities to the Evangelical-Lutheran church. I do not mean to say here that Pr. Jansen said that her church does make plans to win people over, but in the conversation her focus seemed to be more on the image that they show people of her church. The desire for churches to grow and the resistance against evangelising and convincing people to become a member is an interesting point of tension that I want to analyse in the next chapter.

Interestingly, Ps. Sjoer and van Zanden without being asked, spoke about their image of a typical PKN church. According to Pr. Sjoer it is typically protestant to detest a top down construction and to want a lot of freedom. Pr. van Zanden sees 'typical PKN' as mainstream, one service on Sunday (where his church has two), they have female pastors and "there is more allowed". This last sentence I thought was interesting since he also mentioned that they sometimes sing the so called '*opwekkings*' (revival) music, a style of modern Christian music that is often associated with evangelical churches.[4] But according to Pr. Jansen, her church rejects it. Without going too deep into the topic of music, these two churches are not the only ones that take a side when it comes to the *opwekkings* music. From online articles on the PKN website and a reformed news website, it appears that people, even from similar religious backgrounds within the PKN do not agree with each other on this topic (Protestantse Kerk Nederland n.d.; van der Knijff 2019).

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[4] *Opwekkingsmuziek* is a Dutch Christian music genre. The literal translation is 'revival', but 'revival music' on itself refers to folk/pop/rock music, which is different from 'opwekking'.

I have drawn limited data from quite extensive interviews. With only three case studies there are already so many different points at which they differ and are similar. However what could be problematic is the connection these churches feel with the PKN and other PKN churches. From the responses I obtained, the churches seem to get along with other local PKN churches, even if it is only on the level of pastors, like it is the case with Pr. Sjoer. This is already one step in the direction of the unity that the PKN is aiming for. When it comes to the connection with the PKN as an overarching organisation, there seems to be a dubious feeling. All three pastors say that they appreciate the freedom they have, but Ps. Sjoer and van Zanden indicate that they find it a bit too free for their own liking.

6. The PKN, a brand without identity?

In chapter four we have seen that the PKN as an overarching organisation gives off quite a clear image. It has a brand name, *Protestantse Kerk*, a recognisable icon the logo we saw in chapter four, a tagline *Vindplaats voor geloof, hoop en liefde*, and there is a history behind it: the path leading to the union from 1961 till 2003, the common goal of mission and the church that is part of a world-wide belief system that wants to be a place where people find faith, hope and love. In chapter four I discussed the ways in which the PKN gives shape to the mission in different ways. Translated back to marketing terms, the PKN is marketing itself. The 'brand' that it is marketing, following the website, is one as I described here. Purely looking at the website, the PKN definitely has a brand identity to market.

However the Protestant church in the Netherlands is a united church as said before, and the individual churches are the ones that 'have to' do the actual marketing (missionary work). Therefore the way they perceive the PKN, the connection they experience with the PKN and the way they talk about it, matter as much, or maybe even more than what the overarching organisation says.

Contrasts in Church

What then is 'the PKN'? Is it the local churches? A sum of the local churches, or the overarching organisation/the headquarters? And what about the new pioneering places that often have different structures than a 'normal' church? You can be 'a PKN church' but is that the same as being the PKN? The PKN is a church denomination and local churches have had the choice to become a member of the PKN or not, so one would think that you can speak of unity. But there are a lot of differences between the local churches, among others, not all churches are actively spreading the word of God (Nouwens Keller 2019, own interview), like the vision of the PKN is. For them there may just be a more personal experience of faith, without feeling the urge to spread the Good Word.

On the level of the PKN as national organisation the concept of faith branding is useful in so far that the intention behind the unified church is 'more connection', more base from which to do missionary work. There is the support for the local churches in finding faith, hope and love and as part of that there is the 'marketing' element in both local missionary initiatives and the 'messy churches' and pioneering initiatives, that are executed by the local churches but for a part initiated and stimulated by the overarching organisation. From a principle of listening to the people that come together, this is their way of connecting to people from outside of the 'brand'.

The local churches within the PKN 'brand'

When I asked the interviewees, "could you see the PKN as a brand?", I got three surprised responses. They were either in the shape of silence or laughter. Pr. Jansen was very clear in that she does not see

the PKN as a brand. She sees it as a possible formation of the church and as a good organization, but absolutely not as a brand. This explanation makes it interesting, because the way she describes it, is very similar to the way Einstein describes religion: "religion is just a package" (78). Both come down to the principle that similar 'products' have different expressions. Ps. Sjoer and van Zanden both think that the organisation is definitely aiming to be a 'brand', but they think that there is too much freedom and diversity to be able to call it that. Pr. Sjoer is of the opinion that it could all be a bit clearer, like in the Catholic church. At the same time he is proud of the connection with the old church, with which he seemed to imply the same world-wide protestant church that the PKN is a part of. This suggests a connection in the sense of a longer shared tradition. That 'tradition', whatever it is, is ground for a brand identity, but that would have to mean that all PKN churches are talking about the same tradition. The Lutherans stand in the tradition of Luther, so the church history from the reformation onwards. Ps. Sjoer told me how his church is also very conscious of the Judaist tradition that Jesus was part of, which would mean a tradition that goes a few centuries further back.

On another note, Pr. Sjoer is proud that the PKN is the first church, worldwide, that has incorporated the new pronouns for people who have been through a transgender transition. "But is that then our identity? No, that is not it, because we also have the identity of colleagues who walk around in three-piece suits and where women are not even allowed to serve in the ministry" (Sjoer). This quote beautifully places the three churches in different corners. It places for example Pr. van Zanden's church, where women are not allowed in the ministry and where the pastors wear three-piece suits, opposite to the female Pr. Jansen. In turn, her church that stands in a younger tradition, prefers a more classical liturgy and, whereas the other two churches happily welcome 'happy clappy' music in their services.

So on the one hand there are a lot of internal differences within the PKN, but on the other hand we have seen Ps. Sjoer and van Zanden speak up against the idea of selling god. "We don't' have a product, we have calling" (van Zanden), "We grow just from being who we are" (Sjoer) and the article on the PKN website discussing negative connotation of "winning souls" under PKN pastors (Protestantse Kerk, n.d. Zieltjes winnen). This shows that there is a wider resentment against the marketing element of faith. The article however also explains that these pastors may not like the phrasing 'winning souls', but they do want to attract people to church. Changing the name to 'missionary work' is part of the solution for the article. Because I never asked my respondents about 'winning souls', but focussed on missionary work, I am not convinced that is the solution. The message of the article, that attracting new people is not a bad thing, however is interesting, because Ps. Sjoer and van Zanden implied the opposite.

It also became clear through the interviews that these churches highly value their freedom and individual identity. They do not want a central organisation that also represents other Christian denominations, to tell them what to do. Some may not even want to be part of the PKN or have members that do not want to be registered in the PKN's database. This on its own is an interesting finding, but within the framework of 'faith branding', it makes it difficult, because it shows a disconnect from the

'brand'. Because all of the pastors mentioned this, could the resistance against branding and the value for freedom be the biggest thing they have in common?

Is the individual freedom of the local churches faith branding on itself? Although they are part of the PKN, when the PKN makes a decision that they do not agree with, they have all made it clear that they will go their own way. However, I do not think that this is faith branding. For one because none of the people I have spoken to sees the PKN as a brand. But also because a faith brand seems to evolve around the brand, whereas the responses of the pastors show a focus on God and faith, rather than themselves or their particular church. They are not specifically branding their church, but rather the faith they have.

On a more positive note, all three pastors seem to appreciate the organization and expressions, like the corporate style of the website which other PKN churches can use and the help during the Corona outbreak. Pr. van Zanden recognizes what they might have meant with the logo, the dove for peace and being open, round friendly letters and "some kind of compass, that you can go all directions with it" (van Zanden), although he does not necessarily agree with the messages and thinks that it is a weakness instead of a strength.

Public image

What does this mean for the PKN as a possible faith brand? The idea of a brand is to communicate a certain identity. A packaging that matches what it stands for, often 'held together' by a narrative. These elements all communicate the identity of the product. The thing I have not highlighted yet is the image that people have of the PKN. Both members of PKN churches and people from outside of it. Data about this, you cannot just pull from a book or website. It is personal, and as discussed in chapter two, it can change rapidly, depending on what gets picked up by the news for example. According to the PKN spokeswoman, the image that people have is that in order to step into a church, you have to be religious. From what Pr. Van Zanden said, about being hesitant about bringing up faith with old friends, it sounded like there was some kind of shame. Not that he felt like he had to be ashamed of himself, but because they all went to do different things after school and they may not understand (van Zanden 2020, own interview).From what I have seen myself, I would say that the protestant church is a bit dusty and boring, because of the old songs, long sermons and old fashioned looking buildings. Important to note here is that these are all subjective views.

The PKN is aware of the image that they present and is conscious about the projects they support, in order to make them look good (Nouwens-Keller, Interview by phone, April 9, 2020), similar to what Pr. Jansen described. This consciousness of action, although maybe not stressed enough, is important in the classification of faith brands (Einstein 2008).

7. Conclusion

To what extend can the Dutch Protestant Church be seen as a brand? In this thesis I have assessed the concept of 'faith branding' from the American marketing specialist Mara Einstein and tested it on the Dutch Protestant Church (PKN). Following Einstein's definition of faith branding, the research has focussed on the PKN's name, logo, key phrase, brand identity and communication.

The PKN, as established in 2004 out of three protestant movements, has an agreement on key theological matters, but the local churches have a lot of freedom for their individual views in terms of strictness and expression. The PKN stimulates churches to be missionary in their area, but it is up to the local church to do something with that or not. The PKN is conscious of what they do and what image they give off and that is expressed in the elements of Einstein's definition of 'faith brands'. I would therefore conclude that the PKN is a faith brand as far as the PKN as an overarching organisation is concerned. I want to stress that I see a difference between the American faith brands that Einstein describes as being aimed at the brand or the customer and the PKN who's 'packaging' is fully aimed at the faith.

There also seems to be a difference between the PKN, that presents itself as a faith brand, and the individual churches who, following my data, highly value their own freedom and identity. A more general conclusion on the connection between local churches and the PKN as a whole is a difficult one, since I have only spoken to three of the local churches. I can therefore not exclude that some PKN churches feel a greater connection with the overarching organisation and desire to follow its vision. But for the three pastors representing the churches that I have spoken to, that is not the case. There seems to be a disbalance between the packaging (the PKN) and the product (local churches).

The PKN churches that I have spoken to are not pushing their religious message to the background, like Osteen, Warren and Copeland, but are putting it above the mission, strategy and planning. The emphasis is on quality of church over the quantity, which is combined with a feeling of guilt for stealing people from other churches. I would not say that it is necessarily in contrast to what the PKN is carrying out, but the interviewees indicated that they felt that their own identity was more important to them than that of the PKN. The data and opinions of these four interviewees is not enough to generalise for all PKN Churches, but they still give an interesting insight.

Due to Covid-19 I have only been able to gather a limited amount of data. Further detailed research could explore the relationship between the PKN and the local churches that are part of the PKN in order to come to a more comprehensive understanding of the Dutch Protestant Church as a whole. In addition to that, following from the negative responses from the interviewees and the PKN article, an interesting area of enquiry would be why 'branding' has such a negative connotation within the PKN. And is it just a few PKN pastors or the PKN in general that think this way, or do other (church) denominations share these feelings?

This thesis has explored the idea of faith brands in Dutch religious institutions. With his I hope to inspire them to step away from the idea that marketing is necessarily bad and take steps to think about ways it works for them. Academically I have aimed to show how marketing and branding are present in the religious studies and that they are more relevant than we might have thought.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

Questions for individual churches (in Dutch)

1. Hoeveel leden heeft uw gemeente?
2. Op welke manier zijn de gemeente en leden betrokken?
3. Wat voor acties onderneemt u om uw leden betrokken te houden?
4. Bent u de afgelopen jaren gegroeid als gemeente?
5. Bent u bezig met het verspreiden van het geloof in uw omgeving?
6. Zo ja, wat onderneemt u om het geloof bekend te maken in uw omgeving (of verder weg?)
7. Hoe verschilt dat tussen voor en na Corona?
8. Stimuleert u uw gemeente leden om hun ervaringen met het geloof buiten de kerk te delen?
9. Adverteert u als kerk in uw omgeving? (active marketing) door bijv krant advertenties of sociale media?
10. Hoe is uw kerk anders dan andere kerken in uw omgeving?
11. Voor de 'oprichting' van de PKN, 'wat voor' een kerk was dit? (gereformeerd, hervormd of Luthers-evangelisch)
12. In hoeverre voelt u zich verbonden met de overkoepelende organisatie, de PKN?
13. Zou je de PKN kunnen zien als een soort 'merk'?
14. En wat voor merk zou dat dan zijn?

Appendix 2.

When can a pioneering church be recognised as a church: Ten essences of being church (in Dutch)

a. Een groep mensen die door de Geest wil leven uit Gods genade in Jezus Christus,

b. die regelmatig in het openbaar samenkomt rondom Woord en sacramenten,

c. die samen een doorgaande geloofsgemeenschap wil vormen,

d. en die zich missionair en diaconaal inzet voor de wereld, te beginnen in de eigen context,

e. bestaande uit tenminste tien volwassenen die hun gaven inzetten voor de kerkplek,

f. die zelf de verantwoordelijkheid op zich neemt voor het beleid en de financiën,

g. onder leiding van een kernraad, met tenminste drie belijdende leden van de Protestantse Kerk die ook een kerkelijk ambt bekleden,

h. met in de kernraad tenminste één ambtsdrager die bevoegd is om het Woord en de sacramenten te bedienen,

i. in verbondenheid met de kerk als groter geheel, in het bijzonder de Protestantse Kerk,

j. en die meewerkt aan toezicht en aan de behandeling van klachten en conflicten.

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