

Growing Grey and Growing Green: Re-narrating Ageing in Baptist Churches in the Netherlands

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Abstract:

In 2016, the Baptist Union initiated a project on the ageing of (and ageing *in*) Baptist churches in the Netherlands. Its aim was to reflect — through a series of dialogical interventions in four ‘ageing’ congregations — on the consequences of growing grey, especially in light of dominant cultural narratives that tend to relate ageing to loss and decay. This article discusses in retrospect the findings and gains of the project. It shows that although cultural narratives have deeply shaped ecclesial life, there are other perspectives to be found in the everyday wisdom and ordinary theology of church members. It is argued that the project empowered the churches to find alternative readings on ageing, thus finding new perspectives in which to live. Thus, the intervention helped to re-narrate the narrative of ageing and the ageing church.

Keywords:

Theology of ageing; ageing churches; ageing; deficit model; practical wisdom

Where the elderly are not honored, there is no future for the young.

— *Pope Francis*²

¹ Wout Huizing was responsible as initiator and project leader of the project ‘Groentjes’; the retrospective, academic reflection on the project was a joint effort by Wout Huizing and Hans Riphagen. The ‘we’ in this article refers to both authors. In some cases, a reference is made to the individual ‘I (Wout)’ for reflections on Wout’s particular role in the project.

² This strong statement was delivered by Pope Francis during his weekly General Audience on Wednesday, 4 March 2015. Speaking to the crowds gathered in St Peter’s Square, the Pope focused on the role of grandparents and denounced a widespread lack of respect and consideration for the elderly and their dignity (Cindy Wooden, ‘Pope Francis: Ignoring, Abandoning the Elderly Is Sinful’, *Catholic News Service*, 4 March 2015).

Introduction

Hello, I am Ellen. I am 84 years old and I have been a member of this Baptist Church since I was 15. Our congregation is ageing and has become small, currently consisting of only 40 members. What a difference from the old days when we were a large and thriving congregation and many people would come worshipping on Sundays! But many have passed away or have gone elsewhere, and no young people have come to us anymore. Nowadays, we merely succeed in settling the weekly worship services and a church small group once a month. In addition, we arrange pastoral care for each other: we call each other and send each other postcards. However, we cannot afford our own pastor. To be honest, I see the church's end nearing. For me the question is whether I will live to see it, as the end of my life is nearing. [...] My time is nearing its end, but nevertheless there is much to look back on with gratitude.

Ellen voiced this statement at the first gathering of the project 'Groentjes' in 2016. The project aimed to reflect on the narratives of ageing churches within the Baptist Union of the Netherlands. It was occasioned by the research of two students, who observed that the average age in Baptist Churches is slightly higher than the national average.³ At the time of their research in 2013, the number of those aged 65 in Baptist Churches was 20 percent,⁴ which was predicted to increase to 27 percent in 2025. In small congregations the average percentage was estimated to perhaps be even as high as 37 percent.⁵ The students' research concluded with some of the 'negative consequences' ageing churches face: a possible shortage of volunteers and leaders, an increase in pastoral care for the elderly, and a growing gap between generations. Moreover, it was suggested that these greying congregations would be less missional. However, what stood out as the most striking observation was the complete lack of reflection and policy on the topic of ageing and the ageing church. Rather, the process of ageing was met with a sense of acceptance and resignation, a *fait accompli*.

³ See Gerard Grit and Thomas Steenbergen, 'Het zilveren fundament: Een visie voor een ouder wordende kerk' (unpublished bachelor's dissertation, University of Applied Sciences (CHE) Ede, 2013).

⁴ Grit and Steenbergen, 'Het zilveren fundament', p. 12. In small churches this percentage is 32.9%. In larger churches (above 400 members) this percentage is much lower: 10.5%.

⁵ Grit and Steenbergen, 'Het zilveren fundament', p. 13: Small churches are churches with less than 200 members.

Project ‘Groentjes’, set out to change this passive mindset, and to help Baptist churches reflect on questions of ageing. ‘Groentjes’ translates literally as ‘freshmen’, but in this article we propose the translation of ‘growing green’, reflecting an intended wordplay on Psalm 92:15: ‘They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green.’ The project was run in collaboration with four participating churches, all small congregations with less than sixty members and an average age above sixty-five years.⁶ Through a range of dialogical interventions, questions were raised such as: what does it mean to become an ageing church? how are ageing churches perceived? how do people themselves talk about ageing and what does this mean for their vision for the (ageing) church? and in general, what is the place of the elderly in churches? From the start, it was noted that narratives of ageing in Baptist churches strongly reflected dominant cultural narratives. Ageing — and the process of becoming an ageing church — was primarily seen in terms of a problem, as after all, the ‘youth have the future’. Ageing was equated with an inevitable move towards dying. Ageing churches therefore tend to be seen as unsuccessful and failing, especially in a church fellowship deeply influenced by Church Growth Theory.⁷ From the start of the project, the project team was convinced that the Christian tradition held alternative narrative perspectives on ‘ageing’ that are relevant to the church today.⁸

This article aims to provide a retrospective evaluation of project ‘Groentjes’ in order to understand how dialogical interventions may help ageing Baptist churches to counter dominant cultural narratives on

⁶ As such, ‘Groentjes’ reflects the collaborative approach envisioned in the article of Hans Riphagen elsewhere in this *JEB S* issue, although ‘Groentjes’ was less research oriented and had a more intuitive character.

⁷ See Olof de Vries, *Gelovig gedoopt: 400 jaar baptisme, 150 jaar in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2009) pp. 248–250.

⁸ See Liuwe H. Westra, ‘Meditatie’, *Kerk en theologie*, 64, no. 4 (2013), 295–297; Cees Houtman, ‘Ouderdom in bijbels-theologisch perspectief: Een “Schriftgetrouwe” benadering’, *Kerk en theologie*, 64, no. 4 (2013), 310–322; Frits de Lange, ‘De verantwoordelijke ouderdom’, *Kerk en theologie*, 64, no. 4, (2013), 323–332; John S. Sussenbach, ‘De betekenis van ouderen voor de gemeenten van Christus, een verkenning’ in *De geschiedenis van het Schriftwoord gaat door: Gedachten ter markering van de theologie van dr. O.H. de Vries*, ed. by Henk Bakker, Albrecht Boerrigter, Jeanette van Es, and Winfried Ramaker (Utrecht: Kok, 2014), p. 138.

ageing, and read themselves in a more faithful light. First, two dominant cultural narratives on ageing in the Netherlands are introduced and briefly discussed. This is followed by an overview of the approach taken in ‘Groentjes’ and by indicatively highlighting some of the voices that were heard. Subsequently, a number of observations and reflections are made on what *occurred* in the project, that is, how narratives of ageing changed. Finally, an overall conclusion is given. Before proceeding, a comment needs to be made on the nature of the project described in this article: from the start it was envisioned as a professional ‘church development’ project, not as an academic research project. Thus, since the suggestion to write an academic article on the project for this journal issue comes some considerable time after the project was undertaken, this article can be characterised as a retrospective evaluation, in which we reflect on the wisdom learned through the process.

Dominant Cultural Narratives of Ageing in the Netherlands

The subject matter of this article is set against the background of the rapidly ageing Dutch population. In the early 1900s, 5 percent of the population was 65 years or over. Today it is 15 percent and around 2040 a peak will be reached of 26 percent. In absolute numbers, a rise is predicted from 2.6 million in 2011 to approximately 4.6 million in 2039.⁹ In addition, a substantial increase in the number of people living beyond the age of 80 is to be expected in the coming decades. This phenomenon is known as ‘double ageing’: the number of elderly people increases, while in addition, people grow older. As a result, provisions are made in areas of medical care, recreation, housing, and pensions. Likewise, new identity narratives emerge for particular age groups, as the typical ‘senior’ does not exist. So, for instance, a division has become commonplace to mark different groups of seniors: ‘young seniors’ (aged 60–75), ‘old seniors’ (aged 75–85) and the ‘oldest seniors’ (over 85 years old).¹⁰ Indicative of this increasing concern to find distinguishing, new

⁹ See Eveline Castelijn, Annick van Kollenburg, and Wine te Meerman, *De vergrijzing voorbij* (Nijmegen: Berenschot, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁰ See Sussenbach, ‘De betekenis van ouderen’, p. 138.

identity narratives of the elderly, is the rise of the political party 50PLUS in 2010, aiming to give the elderly a voice in Dutch politics.

In the field of gerontology (the study of ageing) two dominant cultural master narratives of ageing are often mentioned, both well established in literature: the *deficit* narrative and the *successful ageing* narrative.¹¹ The *deficit* narrative is well captured in the cultural expression that everyone wants to *grow* old, while no one wants to *be* old. This expression was already popular in the seventeenth century as a line of poetry illustrates: ‘Old age, thou art despised, while each man so desires thee.’¹² From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, life was symbolically represented in a concatenation of stages from rise to fall (see Figure 1):¹³ a human being climbs the stairs, growing in fortitude and strength and reaching the climax at about fifty years of age. This is then followed by an equal number of descending steps where feebleness and decay set in. At age 100, the inevitable ending is represented by the grave (see the figure of death and the grave below the staircase). Cultural representations of old age in art often depicted it as a worn, patched bag, a bare stiff tree, or a ruined building. Drawings and prints during this time period often pointed to the mortality of the (older) human being.¹⁴ In the deficit narrative the meaning of ageing is unambiguous: it entails decay and loss, the loss of social life and of social identity. Hence the warning *memento mori*: remember that you have to die.

¹¹ See Frits de Lange, *Eindelijk volwassen: De wijsheid van de tweede levenshelft* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2021), pp. 10–16; J. W. Rowe, R. L. Kahn, ‘Successful Aging’, *The Gerontologist*, 37, no. 4 (1997), 433–440; H. Faber, *De zeilen strijken: Over het ouder worden* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1980).

¹² F. A. Stoett, *Nederlandsche spreekwoorden, spreekwijzen, uitdrukkingen en gezegden*, 4th ed. (Zutphen: W. J. Thieme, 1923–1925). Translation ours, in Dutch: ‘Ouderdom, hoe sijt gij zo veracht, terwijl een elck u zo begeert.’

¹³ Artist Unknown, ‘De trap des ouderdoms’, published by Glenisson en Zonen somewhere between 1856 and 1900, <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Trap_des_ouderdoms_19th_century.jpg> [accessed 1 July 2021].

¹⁴ See Anouk Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit, De verbeelding van de ouderdom in de Nederlandse prentkunst (1550-1650)* (Zutphen: Walburg, 2007), on the ‘trap des ouderdoms’ see p. 126.



Figure 1: The stages of ageing.

More recently, a different cultural master narrative has emerged, that of *successful ageing*. Because of the longer life expectancy and greater vitality of sixty-five-year-olds today, it seems that the inevitability of decay can be postponed. The suggestion is evoked that it is possible to stay young forever, even in old age: physical markers that suggest the opposite such as wrinkles, grey hair and sagging body parts, may be corrected. Successful ageing entails the prospect of decades of good years ahead — a Third Age¹⁵ — of active, enterprising ‘young seniors’, enjoying their retirement in freedom, autonomy and financial abundance. Thus, a whole new lifestyle market has emerged that sings new hymns of the good life, expressed in carefree socialising, leisure

¹⁵ The use of Third and Fourth Age is reflected in Anglo-Saxon literature on ageing. The Third Age represents people of 55–64 (‘Pre-retirement’) and 65–74 (‘early retirement’), while the Fourth Age represents the group of 75–84 (‘need some support’) and over 85 (‘increasingly dependent’). The latter group is also referred to as the ‘most vulnerable’. See, ‘De derde levensfase: het geschenk van de eeuw, Advies 08-01-2020’ Raad Volksgezondheid & Samenleving <<https://www.raadvv.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/01/08/samenvatting-advies-derde-levensfase>> [accessed 6 July 2021].

activities and active holidays.¹⁶ Gerontologist Jan Baars argues that this cult of being young evokes a ‘gerontophobia’: a fear of growing older.¹⁷ Inevitable questions of life and death are postponed as long as possible.¹⁸ Theologian and ethicist Frits de Lange reflects on this so called Third Age, observing that

policymakers and visionaries try to shift the burden of ageing as much as possible onto the Fourth Age of life. It is only then that we branch off and die, preferably a little quickly. The ambivalences of old age as both burden and blessing, both profit and loss, both celebration and disaster become neatly divided between the two separate phases of life, and thus made seemingly manageable.¹⁹

What both cultural master narratives have in common is that they are essentially negative about the process of growing older, while they are somewhat caricaturist in tending either towards a very optimistic or a very pessimistic picture, neglecting the fact that reality itself often involves a more nuanced story that involves both loss and gain.

In contemporary ecclesial and theological sources, there is a wealth of literature on the pastoral care for and spirituality of the elderly, often focusing on their particular needs.²⁰ Yet, the meaning of old age

¹⁶ See Frits de Lange, *De armoede van het Zwitserslevensgevoel, Pleidooi voor beter ouder worden* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).

¹⁷ See Jan Baars, *Het nieuwe ouder worden, Paradoxen en perspectieven van leven in de tijd* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2007), p. 88.

¹⁸ This is called ‘compression of morbidity’, a term that means reducing the length of time a person spends sick or disabled. The idea is to maximise healthy lifespan and minimise the time spent less than well (morbidity literally means ‘being unhealthy’). The term was first coined by Stanford University professor James Fries. See James F. Fries, ‘Aging, Natural Death, and the Compression of Morbidity’, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 303, no. 3 (1980), 130–135.

¹⁹ Translation ours. In Dutch: ‘beleidsmakers en visieontwikkelaars proberen de last van het ouder worden zoveel mogelijk op het conto van de vierde levensfase te schuiven. Dan pas takelen we af en gaan we dood, en het liefst snel een beetje. De ambivalentie van de ouderdom als last en zegen, winst en verlies, feest en ramp wordt netjes verdeeld over de twee gescheiden levensfasen en zo schijnbaar beheersbaar gemaakt.’ (Frits de Lange, ‘Weg met de mythe van de tweede jeugd’, *Trouw*, 6 Januari 2007 <<https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/weg-met-de-mythe-van-de-tweede-jeugd~b460593d/>> [accessed 11 October 2021].)

²⁰ See on ageing and spirituality: J. M. A. Munnichs, *Ouderdom en eindigheid: Een bijdrage aan de psychogerontologie* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1964); Joep Munnichs, ‘Ouderen, levensvragen, levenstaken en zingeving’, in *In het spoor van het verhaal: Ouderen en pastoraat*, ed. by M. van Knippenberg (Kampen: Kok, 1993), pp. 33–44; Herman Andriessen, *Een eigen weg te gaan: Ouderen en spiritualiteit* (Baarn: Ten Have, 2004). See also: J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of*

itself is not so often thematised. In (evangelical) church development literature, the tendency is to underwrite the dominant cultural narratives, as church development itself has been strongly fostered by a narrative of (quantitative) growth, as well as deeply shaped by an orientation towards youth culture.²¹ Thus, church development wisdom tends to see an ‘ageing church’ as a problem that needs solving, for example by investing in youth work or focusing on intergenerational work.²² It may lead the elderly to feel somewhat obsolete, as it is not they, but the youth who have the future. Other studies acknowledge the particular challenges and opportunities ageing churches face, which do require due consideration and reflection. Thus, for example, Houston and Parker conclude,

Rather than placing a premium on their older members and what their years of life experience add to the overall faith and growth of their congregation, many of today’s churches consider the elderly somewhat of a burden. Such unfortunate thinking results in lost opportunities for volunteerism for older persons, despite the facts that most are healthy, have retirement incomes, are readily available with their time and have the necessary faith and experience to lead. Some of the most rewarding lessons and programs in churches are those taught and overseen by senior members.²³

Human Development and the Quest for Meaning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) and E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton 1963), and Lumen Lifespan Development, ‘Psychosocial Development in Late Adulthood’

<<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wmopen-lifespandevelopment/chapter/psychosocial-development-in-late-adulthood-2/>> [accessed 25 august 2021]. Another way of thinking about ageing is introduced by Lars Tornstam, *Gerotranscendence – a Developmental Theory of Positive Aging* (New York: Springer, 2005). Interesting in this regard is also the theological reflection of Ralf Dzwiewas, ‘Werkstattgespräch – die Lebensphasen und Milieuviefalt im Alter’, Lecture, organised by the Bund Evangelische-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden, 2 October 2020 <<https://www.befg.de/angebote-fuer/zielgruppen-der-gemeindegemeindearbeit/altere-erwachsene/803/online-werkstattgesprach/#c31428>> [accessed 26 August 2021].

²¹ See on Church development Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 111–180. On the orientation of modern evangelicalism towards youth culture, see in particular Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and The Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 103–124.

²² So, for example, David O. Moberg, ‘Preparing for the Graying of the Church: Challenges from Our Changing Society’, *Review and Expositor*, 88, no. 3 (1991), 179–193; James M. Houston and Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Ageing Church, Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

²³ Houston and Parker, *Ageing Church*, p. 49.

Interestingly, while Houston and Parker are among the few who reflect on the intricate value of old age, they nevertheless seem to subscribe to the *successful ageing* narrative in this particular section. In general, this underscores the point that little is done to challenge cultural readings of ‘ageing’ and the ‘ageing church’. The ageing church continues to be read as problematic, as a church that is slowly passing away; an opposite example of how it should be. Voices that seek to offer alternative, and more positive readings on ‘ageing churches’, that for example stress the spirituality of ageing or the particular (often long) history of these churches as a story of faithfulness, perseverance and wisdom, are rare.²⁴

Project ‘Groentjes’

Project ‘Groentjes’ began in 2016 in four small ageing Baptist churches, two churches from the north of the country and two from the south-west.²⁵ The churches were selected and invited to join by myself (Wout) in consultation with other staff members of the Dutch Baptist Union. It took no effort to obtain their cooperation as all churches were immediately eager and willing to participate. From a methodological angle the project was inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry approach: an organisational development method that ‘seeks to illuminate the positive aspects of an organisation, so as to work from there on processes of change’.²⁶ It was introduced in the Dutch ecclesial context through the work of church development pioneer Jan Hendriks, and has gained

²⁴ See Houston and Parker, *Ageing Church*, p. 55: ‘Contemporary culture emphasizes the physicality of human development rather than the spirituality of aging. The Bible’s emphasis, however, is upon the moral and spiritual growth of those seeking to become mature in wisdom. The Midrash Rabbah states: “How welcome is old age! The aged are beloved of God.” Such a culture does not see the aged as having outlived their usefulness. Rather it celebrates their age, so whatever was the measurement of life, records of years lived are carefully kept of biblical characters at their death: Isaac, 180; Abraham, 175; Jacob, 147; Ishmael, 137; Sarah, 127; Joseph and Joshua, 110. Abraham Herschel has remarked: “Old age was not a defeat but a victory, not a punishment but a privilege.”’

²⁵ A Dutch report on ‘Groentjes’ was published on the website of the Baptist Seminary <<https://baptistenseminarium.nl/okbi/empirisch/62-resultaten/832-project-groentjes>> [accessed 1 July 2021].

²⁶ See Eduard Groen, *Geloofwaardige gemeente, Uitgangspunten van een baptisten gemeentebouw*, Baptistica Reeks (Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2011), pp. 84–87.

wider acceptance since.²⁷ Appreciative Inquiry focuses on what ‘gives life’, on what people find essential, valuable and important.²⁸ Following this approach, project ‘Groentjes’ aimed at finding the stories of the intrinsic value of ageing congregations. In this section, a brief overview of the steps taken in the project is provided, followed by a few fragments that are indicative for the sort of stories that were told.

Participation in the project required the organisation of three sessions in each church. A first meeting was held in order to shape the focus of the research. Church members were invited to reflect on their own ideas of ageing. This involved open and insightful conversations, and in some cases a renewed acquaintance with each other, around a theme that was not often discussed openly. Personal experiences were shared, and biblical texts on ageing were examined and discussed. Also, an initial exploration was done on how the topic of the ageing church was perceived by its members. The second session revolved around the meaning and relevance of the church community for the life of its members. The conversation focused in particular on the past two years, so as to generate stories about the present situation as much as possible. Through making an inventory of and summarising the stories, an attempt was made to uncover the narratives that underlay the church life.²⁹ Besides stories of ordinary church life, some impressive accounts were also told about welcoming and hosting refugees, standing side by side during times of illness, encountering new people in the neighbourhood, as well as celebrating life-defining moments during worship. During this session church members were invited to share their

²⁷ See in particular, Jan Hendriks, *Goede wijn: Waarderende gemeenteopbouw* (Utrecht: Kok, 2013). The method has been influential among Dutch church development professionals; see e.g., *Met andere ogen* <<https://www.met-andere-ogen.nl/>> and *Waarderende gemeenteopbouw* <<https://www.waarderendegemeenteopbouw.nl/>> [both accessed 25 August 2021]. Also in the English-speaking context, Appreciative Inquiry was found to be a helpful method for church development. See, e.g., Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004). Appreciative Inquiry can be illustrated by the ‘5D’ model with 5 phases: define, discover, dream, design and deliver. Within the project ‘Groentjes’ the first three phases were used as interventions.

²⁸ See Groen, *Geloofwaardige gemeente*, p. 84.

²⁹ See on the importance of stories in Baptist church life, Groen, *Geloofwaardige gemeente*, p. 70. Groen advocates the use of church development approaches that focus on stories. See also James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Trinity Press, 1974).

dreams, hopes and desires. This almost always entailed the desire for the church to continue to exist, while it was also accompanied by a sense of realism that this continued existence could not be taken for granted (see for instance the quote from Ellen at the start of this article). Towards the end of the project, a final meeting was held in each of the churches, preceded by the voluntary assignment for church members to either write an imaginary picture of their church in ten years' time, or a letter to future generations of Baptists in the Netherlands, recounting the significance of faith and the church and sharing lessons and advice. In practice, only a few church members accepted the invitation to write the assignment. However, when these were discussed during the final meeting, they yielded much material for discussion.

After the first two rounds of sessions in the local churches (thus after eight meetings in total), representatives of the participating churches — which until then had not met each other — gathered for a workshop in Baptist House, Amsterdam. Each church gave a brief presentation about its own situation. Possibilities, limitations and future prospects were shared and discussed. The meeting was experienced as an eye-opening encounter, as the experiences that were narrated created a sense of recognition and solidarity. As a result, a process of exchanging new ideas started, for instance about the shape of the worship service, outreach to neighbours, and the organisation of pastoral care. Finally, after all sessions had been completed, about a year after the project had started, a symposium was organised in which the participating churches as well as delegates from the wider church fellowship came together to exchange ideas and discuss possibilities.³⁰

Before moving to a number of observations and reflections, it is helpful to quote a few fragments from the letters that were written before the third session of the project. These are indicative of the sort of topics and conversations that emerged.

Ellen, already introduced at the beginning of this article, wrote her letter to a new generation, which included the following fragment:

³⁰ Out of the conversations that took place in the final stages of the project, the Baptist Union's youth worker Ronald van den Oever developed material on the topic of inter-generationality. See Ronald van den Oever, "Toolbox voor een intergeneratieve gemeente" <<https://baptisten.nl/images/mgo/jongeren/Toolbox-IG.pdf>> [accessed 6 July 2021].

We do not know each other and while you are at the beginning or in the middle of life, I am at the end. I am still a member of one of our Baptist churches, but more importantly, I am still in connection with Him, whom I call God, whom I have never seen, but who nevertheless plays a role in my life. Do not think that life has been smooth. Many things have happened: good things, difficult things, mistakes, questions, and yet I am reminded of my confession at the age of 15, which consisted of only 5 words: 'I cannot live without God.' Did you really think I understood and lived what I said? No, but I had to say it like that, from the inside. Perhaps you also recognise something of this need? I experience the Spirit of the invisible God as His presence on earth, who can inspire people to trust that, despite everything that is wrong, things will turn out all right, no matter what, and who encourages me to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. [...] My challenge for you is that you dare to appropriate this in your own way, just as I did so long ago, and that you can say: 'I cannot live without God.' And that you will show, among others, in the community of your choice, how to live under the care of God and find a place where you will be encouraged and comforted.

Another participant wrote as follows:

Now that I am at the end of my life, I feel the need to tell something about the church which is dear to me. [...] In the first place, it is a place where I am confronted with other people who from a faith perspective have to be accepted by me as they are. I say 'have to' because it does not happen automatically. To me, belief means daring to think for yourself, to make your own choices in life, based on what you experience as God's intention. Including the fact that you can make mistakes and that you dare to face them and make other choices. [...] That in meetings within the church all opposites can fall away and that you discover that the other has the same value as you, and that you need each other to make a beautiful world together. I have discovered this in the stories of the Bible, especially of Jesus in the New Testament. And the word that fits in with that is: 'Love'. Not *covering*, but *discovering* love. Where do you learn that? Where can you learn it? Not only at home, in the family, and not even on the street, but in church. That is what church is for! With trial and error. [...] Through conversation, where listening is more important than talking. And through meetings in which you feel at home.

Finally, someone notes about their church that

it feels like family, people you did not choose yourself, or would have, but who have become dear to you. Faith is so precious and important. Especially at a time like this when there are so many uncertainties, God is the only certain thing in this world. [...] You may not know it but the elderly are praying for you.

Interpretations and Reflections

In a retrospective evaluation — bearing in mind that no recordings nor detailed fieldnotes were made during the project — we present some reflections concerning the ‘re-narrations’ of ageing that took place. Thus, we reflect on how project ‘Groentjes’ changed the perspectives of ageing and opened up new frames of reference that challenged the dominant cultural narratives mentioned above.

We start by making two general observations on the way the project itself generated reflections. First, we found that the subjects of ‘ageing’ and the ‘ageing church’ were very much under the radar and sometimes even taboo. It is one of those subjects that people are deeply affected by as it shapes their everyday experiences, yet which they do not often talk about. Strikingly, what characterised project ‘Groentjes’ from the start was the high level of involvement and eagerness from participating churches and church members. The initial response was much higher than was first expected. Simply put, it deeply mattered to these churches! As news about the project spread through the Dutch Baptist Union’s newsletter, other churches reached out to enquire whether they could join as well. Thematising ‘ageing’ created space for an honest, involved, and relevant conversation that deeply concerned all around the table. Thus, it fostered a conscious reflection on the question, in what ‘narratives’ about ageing do we actually live and believe? As such the whole project can be seen as an empowering process, in order to help older people to find their voice.³¹

A second, related reflection is that I (Wout) was somewhat overwhelmed by the appreciation shown towards me and the church fellowship, for the time and energy invested in this topic: churches felt seen and heard. Moreover, the approach of ‘Groentjes’, following the Appreciative Inquiry approach, started with the idea that much of worth could be discovered in these churches. This was expressed, for example, in those moments when we explained the title of the project (‘Groentjes’, that is, those ‘growing green’) in reference to Psalm 92. It

³¹ See Wout Huizing and Thijs Tromp, *Mijn leven in kaart: Met ouderen in gesprek over hun levensverhaal*, 3rd ed. (Voorthuizen: Perspectief, 2020).

proved to be a point of discovery that inspired participants to look at themselves and the congregation with new ‘fresh’ eyes, and moreover felt as if it were a break in the perception (and perhaps first of all a self-perception) of ‘ageing churches’ as failing and dying. Rather, a new story emerged: when you are old, it is *not* over, but there is still much of value. Moreover, the project enabled the voicing of this new story within the broader church fellowship, indicating the theological truth that these churches are fully part of the body of Christ.

More particularly, the dialogical interventions of ‘Groentjes’ — namely, the process of sharing personal stories, sharing stories about the church community, discussing bible passages and theological topics — generated new narratives and perspectives, thus empowering these churches. We will refer to three reflections on such ‘re-narrations’ that occurred through the conversations in the churches. A first reflection is that although the *deficit model*, that is, the way ageing has come to be equivalent with decay, loss and abandonment, had deeply shaped the ecclesial imagination on ageing, the conversations that followed during the project generated much correction and resistance towards a one-sided negative frame. Put differently, the conversations brought to light a lot of wisdom and ordinary theology among church members, mobilised during the sessions, that challenged a one-sided focus on *deficit*. This is reflected, for instance, in Ellen’s letter, in which she writes to an imaginary young person about the life experiences she has gained, in which God’s faithfulness stands out as a continuing promise, even in her old age. Instead of merely focusing on the shortcomings of old age, many conversations revolved around the possibility of inner growth continuing even in old age (see 2 Cor 4:16). This often related to the theme of grace and thankfulness: even though the end is near, it is possible not to grieve about what has been and has passed, but to be thankful for the value of the life lived. Another theme that perhaps may characterise ageing is that of (self)relativisation and mildness with respect to doctrines and convictions, as well as space for a greater diversity and pluriformity within the church. A strong awareness was expressed that old age brings its own, unique perspectives to life, sometimes referred to as wisdom.³² Rather than merely a process of loss,

³² See Frits de Lange, *Eindelijk volwassen*, pp. 151–162.

these themes point us to the gains of old age. Interestingly, personal experiences of ‘ageing’ were often projected onto stories of the ‘ageing church’. Thus, the ageing church was seen as a church with a rich past, in which much wisdom had been acquired (with the task of the elderly in particular to narrate this history). Moreover, the past was not merely seen as loss, but as something to be remembered and be thankful for, as someone remarked:

When the end comes and we cannot continue as a church, we count our blessings and thank God for all the good things that have been given to us, personally and in the church. Then we do not have to be bitter, but we can be grateful. What beautiful years we have had!

Certainly, these conversations did not negate the challenges of ageing, and the reality of decay, of loneliness and loss. However, they helped to bring in other, more hopeful and graceful narratives to the table.

Another key reflection concerns the discovery through the conversations that even in an ‘ageing church’ there is much that should be celebrated and reassessed as having importance in the faith and life of the church community. Especially during the second meeting, when through Appreciative Inquiry stories were shared about the present meaning of the church community, an awareness grew that even while ‘grey’, there were things of value to be cherished in the church community. Examples were shared of how people enjoy ‘small’ rays of light: beautiful moments together or celebrations that left an impression. The attentiveness to small things itself could be characterised as a fruit of growing older.³³ Likewise, in the participating churches there is the firm conviction that God is at work: the significance of the church for this small group of people is great. People enjoy being together intensely and care for each other in many ways. They found they could look at the church not as a set of activities (then indeed the reduction of capacity through ageing is a problem), but as a community with a high quality of relationships. In this way the community itself is a witness to God’s love. In this process of discovery, ‘Groentjes’ had a performative effect, especially through the process of sharing experiences with other

³³ See, e.g., Wout Huizing, *In de Spiegel: Beelden bij het ouder worden* (Den Haag: Tabitha, 2003), pp. 45–48; see also Wout Huizing, ‘Ouder worden in de Nederlandse samenleving en kerk anno 2013: Feiten en visies’, *Kerk en theologie*, 64, no. 4 (2013), 298–309.

churches, as ideas were exchanged, cooperation was established and in some instances something ‘new’ emerged. The following example tellingly shows this.

One of the participating churches had just parted from its retiring pastoral worker, and had decided not to replace him. However, during the group discussions in Amsterdam, the church somewhat coincidentally stumbled across a young student of the Baptist Seminary who had started to develop a particular interest in pastoral care for the elderly. After some conversations, and the experience of a ‘match’, the church decided to offer this young man a job contract to provide the church with pastoral support and care. As the congregation was rapidly shrinking and had little income, the costs of the contract could only be covered through spending the little financial reserves the church had left, estimated to run out in two years. There was no expectation whatsoever that hiring a young student would attract a new generation to the church. Rather, a desire was expressed to invest in *this* student, giving *him* firsthand experience and a chance to develop.³⁴ In an email, the chairperson, a seventy-three-year-old woman, wrote, ‘after two years the money will be gone, but then a young man has grown in his work and life!’ As the church reflected afterwards, project ‘Groentjes’ had given them the awareness that, although small, they were still of value. It gave them confidence in the significant role the community could still play for those involved.³⁵ Rather than merely passively waiting for the inevitable end, their newfound perspective allowed them to proactively pursue a different course. The church continues to exist until today.

A third reflection concerns the deliberation that took place on the particular positions and significance of the elderly in respect to the whole church. There was a realisation that church policy tended to move along the ‘deficit’ model, that is, to see older people mainly as people that require special care, particular activities and an annual Christmas present. Likewise, it became clear that in the worship services, sermons

³⁴ This is an example of ‘generativity’, a term Erik Erikson introduced for the 7th stage of life (see Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968)).

³⁵ Interestingly, they said that before ‘Groentjes’, they would always apologise to guest speakers for the very few people attending church. Gradually, however, they became prouder of who they were: small but beautiful.

and activities, they were not really visible, represented, or given a voice. This raised the question as to the meaning of the older generation. Seeing them as fully contributing to the body of Christ, as indispensable to it and as meaningful, were discussed as important corrections. It was noted that they can be meaningful with their prayers, listening ears, time, wisdom and advice (see, for example, the final quote above). The conversations raised the important theological question of what place the elderly occupy within the body of Christ.³⁶

Taken together, what these reflections suggest is that the process of creating space for attentive conversation is a deeply valuable way for communal discernment. ‘Groentjes’ aimed to do exactly that, finding a voice on the often-neglected subject of ‘ageing’, and ‘re-shaping’ or ‘re-narrating’ the narratives in which the church — including the ‘ageing church’ — lives. In that sense, it could be described as a project that aimed for a healing experience, as it sought to address a ‘hurt’ (that is, something neglected, excluded and negatively framed) which was felt but not brought into the open.³⁷ A striking observation here was that as facilitator of the sessions, I (Wout) did not introduce much theology or theoretical insights: the wisdom was already there; it only had to be drawn out.

Conclusion: Considerations and Questions

In this article we explored how methodological processes of dialogical intervention, as exemplified in project ‘Groentjes’, may help ageing Baptist churches challenge dominant cultural narratives on ageing, and read themselves in a more faithful light. Although the exact design and approach of ‘Groentjes’ was shaped somewhat intuitively, we argue that at its core, it revolves around paying attention to people’s lives — and thus, caring and honouring them — by creating open space for sharing, and by addressing an important concern that often remains under the radar. It started from the conviction that although dominant cultural narratives of ageing (the *deficit* model or the *successful ageing* model) have

³⁶ See Sussenbach, ‘De betekenis van ouderen’, pp. 135–145.

³⁷ See Henk P. de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 174.

deeply shaped ecclesial life, other perspectives are possible. Within the cultural narrative frames, ‘ageing churches’ tend to be seen as problematic and dying, as churches without a future, a perception that may be there from the ‘outside’ but that is also experienced from within in the self-perception of these churches. However, thematising this in open conversations, it was found that many different perspectives were already present in Baptist church life, emerging from biblical narrative as well as from decades of ecclesial experience and wisdom. These new perspectives empowered churches to see their predicament differently, to see (some) possibilities and to celebrate both the past and present. A lesson may be learned here for the larger body of Christ, that is, not to negate the value of these ‘ageing’ churches. Perhaps, they show that church is less about pursuing a vision in order to create a particular kind of attractive church or achieve numeric growth, but rather about persevering in faithfulness and celebrating the (small) things God is doing in their midst.

Project ‘Groentjes’ also made clear how important it is to have honest reflections on the challenges of ageing in today’s culture. It raises questions such as: what does it mean for elderly people to live in a rapidly changing world, in which they are constantly reminded of the *successful ageing* and *deficit* narrative? what kind of pastoral guidance can churches offer to help ageing members find a worthy place in church and society?

Finally, what this article makes clear is that in a sense we all live in the cultural dominant narratives around us that shape our perspectives on the meaning of ‘ageing’, the importance of remaining ever young, and the fear of death. Here, the church may be a discerning community that learns to look prophetically at dominant cultural narratives, and seeks to live differently. ‘Groentjes’ sought to pursue that vision, humbly, intuitively but from a strong conviction: that everyone is made into the image of God; that the Body of Christ is a unique community and that there is a place for everyone, including people who are grey. As Nouwen and Gaffney note,

there are many reasons for thinking that growing older is a sad fate which no one can escape and has to be avoided at all costs. [...] It may well be that we do our utmost to silence those who remind us of our own future fate and

who, by their mere presence, criticise us poignantly. Therefore, our first and most important task is to ensure that the elderly once more become our teachers and that broken relations between generations may be healed.³⁸

This article, following up on this quotation from Nouwen and Gaffney, shows that there is still a lot to learn.

³⁸ Nouwen and Gaffney, *Levensloop en vervulling*, p. 12. Our translation. In Dutch: 'Er zijn allerlei redenen aan te voeren waarom we denken dat ouder worden het droevige lot is waaraan geen mens ontkomen kan en dat ten koste van alles vermeden moet worden. [...] Het zou wel eens zo kunnen zijn dat we ons uiterste best doen diegenen het zwijgen op te leggen die ons aan ons eigen toekomstig lot herinneren en ons louter door hun aanwezigheid het scherpst bekritisieren. Daarom is het onze eerste en belangrijkste opdracht ervoor te zorgen dat de ouderen weer onze *leermeesters* worden en dat de verbroken relatie tussen de generaties wordt hersteld.'

