

# Ministers on Salvation: Soteriological Views of Pioneers and Pastors in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

Missiology has always been inspired by soteriology, that is, Christian views of salvation. However, little is known about the actual soteriological beliefs of missionary practitioners. This article is an explorative qualitative study of soteriological beliefs among Dutch Protestant ministers who work in pioneer settings (N=20) and established churches (N=40). Our research shows that, contrary to what might be expected, these two groups (termed 'pioneers' and 'pastors') are very much alike with regard to their soteriological beliefs. The majority are convinced of the uniqueness of Jesus, and the connection of salvation with God and/or Jesus – even if this salvation is often

expressed in immanent terms. Only two differences have been found between pastors and pioneers. Pioneers experience more challenges in communicating the uniqueness of Christianity and they are more likely to have traditional views of 'eternal lostness'.

## Keywords

salvation – ministers – pastors – pioneers – soteriology – missiology – mission

## 1 Introduction

Recently, Protestant church bodies in various European countries have responded to the challenges of secularization and pluralization by creating new missionary initiatives, often termed as 'church plants', 'fresh expressions' or 'pioneer communities'. Altogether this has resulted in thousands of new – usually small – Christian communities, often with an explicit purpose of (re)connecting to secularized and dechurched groups. Increasingly, this leads to new research interests such as an entrepreneurial perspective on religious leadership and religious organizations (Volland 2015; Moynagh 2017; Foppen et al. 2017). Also, questions about selection, recruitment and training of leadership have ensued, leading to the exploration of different profiles in church leadership. For example, so-called 'church planters' (pioneers) and ministers of established churches (pastors) have been compared based on professional self-perception (Vos 2012; Paas, Vos 2016), age, and psychological profiling, producing insightful and significant differences between the two groups of ministers. By and large it seems that so-called 'church plants' are more often led by younger and more 'entrepreneurial' types of leaders while older churches are more often led by somewhat older and 'managerial' leaders (Foppen et al. 2017, 2018).

As for theological beliefs in relation to this renewed missionary vigour, little work has been done so far. Very little is known about the theologies that inspire church leaders, both in 'church plants' and in older churches, especially with regard to the missionary challenges facing them. This lack of knowledge applies to both theological beliefs shared by all church leaders, and possible differences between 'entrepreneurial' and 'managerial' leaders. In his study among ministers of three smaller Reformed denominations in the Netherlands, Vos (2012) observed no real difference in theological beliefs between pioneers and

pastors. However, this study was done in a theologically rather homogeneous and conservative environment, and only among male ministers. Differences may be stronger in theologically heterogeneous denominations and more gender-diverse groups. Moreover, theological beliefs may be affected by contexts in which practitioners work (see below, 2). In this qualitative study we have explored the theological beliefs of ministers, both pioneers and pastors, within the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (PKN), the largest Protestant denomination in the Netherlands. In this theologically diverse church, with (very) orthodox and (very) liberal wings, we have studied 40 pastors (ministering to older and established congregations) and 20 pioneers (ministering to one of the about hundred of PKN pioneer initiatives). In doing so, we have concentrated on soteriological beliefs, since such beliefs are deemed to be crucial for missiological practice (see below, 2). ‘Soteriological beliefs’ are taken as such beliefs that pertain to salvation and how this salvation is to be communicated to human beings. Three questions have been leading in this study:

1. Which soteriological views are found among ministers in the PKN? How do they view salvation?
2. To what extent do these ministers sense that their soteriological views have changed due to their contextual experiences?
3. Which differences in soteriological views can be observed between two groups of PKN ministers, namely pioneers and pastors?

## 2 Theoretical Background

Historically, there is a close relationship between views of salvation (soteriology) and missionary activity, not just in the sense that the general strength of our soteriological beliefs impacts our missionary zeal, but also in the sense that what we view as salvation will determine the kind of missionary activity we embark on (Van den Berg 1955; Bosch 2001:393; Bevans, Schroeder 2008:34; Paas 2020, 2021; Paas, Schaeffer 2021). For example, strong views of the uniqueness of Christianity (see below, 4.3–4.4), the crucial salvific role of Christ (4.5) and the possibility of being ‘lost’ (4.6) are likely to lead to more conversion-oriented and evangelistic practices of mission. Another reason for studying ministers views of salvation is the recent embarkment of the PKN on a more missionary course, which has led to a wealth of strategies and models emphasizing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of mission. However, within the denomination relatively little attention has been paid to the ‘why’ of mission, that is,

soteriology. In order to keep up its missionary activity and developing new leadership it is important for the PKN to find out to what extent its missionary policy is supported by the beliefs of its theological cadre (see below, 4.1–4.2). Moreover, shifts and differences in these beliefs may raise interesting questions for future training, coaching and supervision of its ministers. For example, if ministers of the Protestant Church, after years of working in local churches or church plants, find it increasingly difficult to accept the core convictions of their denomination that have inspired the missionary course of their denomination in the first place, coaching trajectories may be initialized or adjusted in order for ministers to regain engagement. So far, there has been no study of such beliefs within the context of the PKN, and only very limited research in other contexts. This study sets out to remedy this by exploring the soteriological beliefs of 60 PKN ministers – both pastors and pioneers.

As for possible differences between the two groups of ministers, it may be expected that pioneers work more often in contexts where they meet many people who do not share their faith, and where Christians ministers in general have little status (cf. Paas, Schoemaker 2018). Some versions of secularization theory suggest that traditional theological views tend to erode in contexts of religious pluralism and deep secularity (cf. e.g. Berger 1979). This would lead us to expect that, paradoxically, an increasing effort to establish missionary contacts with non-Christians might undermine strong Christian beliefs among practitioners due to their increased exposure to different worldviews. Pastors in established churches, by contrast, are usually embedded in Christian congregations, and are able to rely on clearer role expectations. Such contextual differences might correlate with theological differences even among ministers who share similar denominational backgrounds. Thus, one would expect that – all things being equal – pioneers experience more pressure to adapt or moderate traditional views of the exclusivity of Christ, the uniqueness of Christianity or the possibility of being eternally lost. Recent studies provide some evidence for this (Wall 2014; Watkins 2020:137–138; Riphagen 2021; Paas, Schaeffer 2021; *Kerk en Theologie* 2021; De Jong 2022). However, such studies are based on very limited data and should be considered tentative. Again, for reasons of training, coaching and supervision, it would be important to know to what extent theological beliefs of practitioners are shifting during their ministry, and how ministers in different contexts may need different (theological) training and support structures. This research sets out to further explore this, by concentrating on a larger and more diverse group of ministers, and asking them about their soteriological beliefs. To our knowledge, such research has not been done previously.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Sample Selection

Given the under-researched nature of this topic and its susceptibility for misinterpretations and ambiguity (cf. 4.5 below), we have adopted a qualitative approach. This will contribute to getting insight into the various soteriological views and shades of meaning present among practitioners. In time it may allow subsequent quantitative research into these soteriological positions to be as unambiguous as possible.

Data were gathered in 2020 and 2021, among pastors ( $N=40$ ) and pioneers ( $N=20$ ). Respondents in the pastors' group were selected randomly from an official list of 1500 pastors working for the PKN. Respondents in the group of pioneers were randomly selected from a list of 106 pioneer initiatives within the PKN. All participants were approached by email to participate in the study. In the email the goal of the study was explained to respondents and confidentiality ensured. If a respondent could not participate in the study, we selected the next person on the list to be approached by email.

While virtually all the approached pioneers participated, some pastors declined the request for participation due to reasons of illness or busy schedules, and others simply did not respond. This non-response among pastors may have led to a slight under-representation of more conservative ministers. No such bias was present among the pioneers.

#### 3.2 Description of Respondents

The mean age of all respondents was 49 years ( $SD = 11.4$ ). Pastors were significantly older than pioneers ( $F(1, 58) = 9.983, p = .003$ ) (see table 1). In total 21 women and 39 men participated in the study; no significant differences were found between the groups as for gender composition ( $\chi^2 = .330, df = 1, p = .56$ ). All participants were affiliated members of the PKN and thus their formal denominational attachment could be described as predominantly Reformed/Presbyterian. Prevalent informal attachments were described by participants in the pastors' group as Protestant (45%), Ecumenical (40%) and Liberal (32%) and in the pioneers' group as Ecumenical (35%), Evangelical (35%) and Protestant (30%).<sup>1</sup> On average, pastors had been working for their current employer (the PKN) 18 years, serving established PKN churches. Pioneers had been working in their relatively new church settings for 5 years

1 The PKN uses a subdivision into 9 *bloedgroepen* (blood types) within the church. Respondents were invited to choose one or more 'blood types' with which they feel related.

TABLE 1 Characteristics

	Pastors	Pioneers
N	40	20
Average age	52	43
Gender (%)		
Male	62.5	70
Female	37.5	30
Years working for PKN	18	5

on average. However, some pioneers had worked for an established PKN church before they became involved with the new church plant. Thus, their actual careers in the PKN may have been longer than appears from Table 1.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Missiological views were first measured via self-scoring on a list of five so-called 'marks of global mission'. Additionally, individual in-depth interviews were held with all participants through video calling, lasting between one and two hours. Anonymity was ensured and permission was asked to audiotape the interview (no participant refused this request). The same interview format was used for both groups and consisted of a standard series of questions regarding five different themes. First, demographical and biographical data were gathered such as age, years of current employment, theological background and level of education. Second, beliefs regarding missionary practices and intentions were discussed, including vocational changes in views on mission, inspirational practices and influential authors. Third, theological assumptions regarding foundational beliefs of the Church were addressed, including the possible uniqueness of the Christian faith, the person of Jesus Christ and soteriological beliefs (views of salvation). Fourth, the individual role of the pastor within the missionary practices they were engaged in was discussed. Finally, the activities and materials on mission, offered by the Missionary Unit of the PKN (*Landelijk Dienstencentrum*), were evaluated.

### 3.4 Analysis

The interviews were transcribed in moderate detail and summaries of each interview were submitted for review and approval to the participants. All participants agreed that the summary of their interview captured their statements during the interview well. Sometimes details were corrected or omissions

added, but overall there was little critique and often participants voiced their appreciation for the accuracy of the transcripts. A coding scheme was developed to categorize foundational beliefs and soteriological statements that were made in the third part of the interview. The coding scheme consisted of labels that addressed the established pastors' and pioneers' views on the role of Jesus Christ in their missionary communication (inclusiveness/exclusiveness), and how they viewed salvation (including its counterpart 'being lost'). We coded all transcripts and looked for similarities and differences in the viewpoints of pastors versus planters. These similarities and differences in viewpoints on salvation were the main focus of our analyses.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 *Five Marks of Mission*

In order to find out to what extent the missionary policy of the PKN is reflected in the views of its ministers, we started the conversation about mission by presenting the so-called 'five marks of mission' to the respondents (Ross, Wall 2008). They are: (1) to proclaim the good news of the kingdom (evangelism); (2) to teach, baptise, and nurture new believers; (3) to respond to human need by loving service; (4) to seek to transform unjust structures of society; and (5) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. While these marks are not meant to be exhaustive, they do present a rather comprehensive picture of missionary practice, and as such they are widely used in training courses and publications. The marks were translated in Dutch (with only slight differences in terminology), and the participants were asked to select the two marks they were most passionate about (Table 2).

No significant differences between both groups of ministers appeared from the data. Pioneers show a slight (but not significant) preference for evangelism ('proclaim the good news') and pastors a similar preference for diaconal ministry ('respond to human need'). Also, preferences for each 'mark' are fairly evenly distributed over the five marks. Altogether, the two groups do not seem to be very different in their view of what is important in mission.<sup>2</sup>

2 It should be noted, though, that the two groups may have interpreted some 'marks' slightly differently. For example, 'proclaiming' might be taken by pastors as a reference to preaching in a Sunday worship service, while pioneers might have understood it more as a reference to evangelism among people who are not familiar with Christianity.

TABLE 2 Marks of mission that participants are passionate about\*

	Pastors (N=40)		Pioneers (N=20)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom (evangelism)	19	25%	13	32%
To teach, baptise and nurture new believers	13	17%	6	15%
To respond to human need by loving service	21	28%	8	20%
To seek to transform unjust structures of society	12	15%	7	17%
To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation	11	14%	6	15%
Total number of choices made	76		40	

\* Two preferred marks could be selected

#### 4.2 *Missiological Awareness*

We continued the interview by asking for shifts in thinking about mission throughout the course of respondents' ministry. Of course, pastors were on the average somewhat older and so had had more time to develop their views of mission. However, we soon discovered that both groups perceive similar developments in their own theological views. More than half of the pioneers indicated in one way or another that they had become more open towards society: less judgmental, less obtrusive, less a 'proclaimer', and more open to whatever good is present in 'the other'.

The overlap between missional/diaconal work and social/cultural work has become more fluid. The inside-outside feeling has become more blurred, the boundaries between who are religious and who are not have become less distinct.

Pioneer, interview 18

We see the same movement among the pastors, even though they were less outspoken: six pastors expressed in one way or another that the contacts with



'others' had given them more space to allow for the other person's otherness. They became more open-minded.

The visor has opened further, has become broader. I have less need to judge. Someone is a believer or someone is not a believer, I have let that go a bit.

Pastor, interview 40

While the PKN and its predecessors have been shrinking continuously over the last decades, the survey also revealed a new self-awareness: eleven pastors spoke of a new boldness to communicate the Gospel. They felt free to openly share the Gospel.

There is marginalization, but also a vitality that we did not see before. We are now also much more a player in civil society. We have lost our fear of cold water, also because there is more interest in the church from the municipality and politics.

Pastor, interview 28

It seems that over the years both pastors and pioneers have developed an increased open-mindedness towards their surroundings and experience a new boldness to communicate the gospel. At the same time, these changes in missiological awareness also seem to stimulate self-reflection: what do I really believe? And in what way is that beneficial for (secular) people? This subject was addressed in our next question.

#### 4.3 *What is Unique about Christianity?*

The first of the three theological questions we asked in our interviews was about the possible uniqueness of the Christian tradition. 'What is it that our neighbours can only find in the Christian community and nowhere else?' (cf. Paas 2017). This is an important soteriological question, since Christianity's perceived uniqueness (at least in some areas) is a necessary condition for missionary action. Conversely, if Christianity wouldn't have anything unique to offer, much of mission's rationale would disappear. We initiated a conversation about elements in the Christian tradition that other traditions do not offer (according to the participants), and whether respondents emphasize this unique element in their missional communication.

Almost all respondents express that the Christian tradition does have unique elements. As far as unsolicited responses go, it was interesting (but not

surprising) to see that 20 of the 40 pastors and 8 of the 20 pioneers mentioned Jesus by name (see table 3).

Traditional notions and references like ‘cross and resurrection’, ‘incarnation’, ‘reconciliation and redemption’, Jesus as ‘lens’ to God and ‘Saviour’ are clearly not abandoned. Two observations can be made, however: (1) virtually all ministers emphasize God’s / Jesus’ (unconditional) love, grace, and forgiveness, while no one refers to ‘judgement’. This does not necessarily mean that they don’t believe in God’s judgement (see below), but at the very least we can say that they do not consider this as a unique contribution of Christianity; (2) several ministers emphasize God’s / Jesus’ solidarity with ‘losers’ and people in their ‘brokenness’ as a unique feature of Christianity. In fact, Jesus himself was a ‘loser’, according to some ministers. Without necessarily denying Jesus’ divinity or his role as saviour, the pastors and pioneers seem to emphasize his significance as a counter-figure in a hectic, competitive society.

Finally, other unique elements that were mentioned by pastors and pioneers dealt with a wide array of subjects such as *‘forgiveness’*, *‘the conviction that life is meaningful’* and *‘love determining our actions’*. Two respondents hesitated to answer the question because the question sounded somewhat presumptuous and rather exclusive to them: *‘I don’t want to say there is one absolute truth in*

TABLE 3     What is unique about Christianity? Answers with explicit references to Christ/Jesus or God

Pastors	Pioneers
Christ, (...) as exemplary figure, the mystery of the cross and resurrection, who stands alongside people in brokenness, His unconditional love, His unconditional love for us, His resurrection, His incarnation because of sin	Jesus Christ, (...) as Saviour of the world and your life, everything else can also be found outside the church
Jesus, (...) crucified (2×), as a lens through which you can see God, questioning our views, a loser His inspiration, Christ, His love (The unconditional) grace (of Christ) (3×)	Jesus, (...) as a loser who identifies with people who have lost everything, Lord Jesus, the name of Jesus Jesus’ grace (2×)
The Person of J.C. and (..) His mercy and justification, reconciliation and grace	Reconciliation and redemption through the cross of Jesus Christ
God’s (...) love and forgiveness, love and his grace, unconditional love, divine love	God as a person living inside us, God’s love for people, that you are known by God, God very close to people

*the Christian tradition. That is too exclusive for me*'. Only one respondent denied that there is anything unique in Christianity.

#### 4.4 *Communication of Uniqueness*

So far, the views of pastors and pioneers in our sample have been relatively similar. A difference emerged, however, with the follow-up question about how both groups communicated the uniqueness of Christianity. While the pastors elaborated extensively on what they considered to be the 'unique selling point' of the Christian tradition, only a minority (12 out of 40) had something to say about communicating this uniqueness to people in their context. When they did reflect on this, they mostly confined themselves to rather brief and general remarks such as: *'it takes wisdom to discover what you can share about God's grace'* and *'I want to share God's love but am searching for creativity in how to share it'*.

The majority of the pioneers (12 out of 20) reflected in much more detail on the issue of communication. Most pioneers, after naming the unique element of the Christian tradition, immediately started explaining the difficulty of bringing up this element in their missional communication. They often described how they wanted to talk about Jesus or grace with people in their non-religious environment, but were cautious to do so. Some of them explicitly addressed that the vocabulary they had been taught to use is far too religious to use in the secular surroundings they work in. An example:

Grace: you receive it and don't have to earn it. However, it is a far too religious word. (...) The word grace is a word I will not easily use in my communication.

Pioneer, interview 4

Evidently, there is some experienced embarrassment among the pioneers with regard to religious language. They either translate it into more 'secular' language, or they refrain from proclaiming it altogether. In that case, they attempt to embody their message in building good and lasting relationships with people around them. Clearly, the more secular context the pioneers work in is reflected in their experiences with communication (see discussion in section 5).

#### 4.5 *Significance of Jesus*

Following up on the question(s) about missionary communication, and the uniqueness of Christianity, participants were asked about the specific role of Jesus in their missionary communication. *'How inclusive or exclusive is Jesus in*

*your view?*’. With this question we intended to focus on soteriology, especially on whether and to what extent an exclusive commitment to Jesus is a condition of salvation. In hindsight, the question was not sufficiently clear. Most pastors and pioneers spontaneously focused on the inclusivity / exclusivity of Jesus’ earthly ministry and not on his role in salvation at large (see table 4).

TABLE 4     How inclusive/exclusive is Jesus?

Label	Exemplary quotes	Pastors	Pioneers
Emphasis on Jesus’ inclusivity in his earthly ministry	‘Jesus is inclusive: with Him there is peace. He rules out no one, everyone is welcome’ ‘Jesus is there for everyone. But, to get to the Father, He is no must. He is not the only way’ ‘Jesus is an example to live by, Christians don’t have the ultimate truth’	21	10
Emphasis on both inclusivity/ exclusivity in Jesus’ earthly ministry	‘He is both, inclusive and exclusive’ ‘Paul says: try to keep the peace with everyone! It is not for me to judge people’ ‘It used to be very exclusive, but now during a funeral I leave the answer about someone’s salvation to God’	8	6
Emphasis on Jesus’ exclusive significance for salvation	‘With regard to eternal damnation; everyone who is saved, is saved because of Jesus’ ‘The Bible and Jesus, they are about your salvation! Sometimes I miss that aspect, also with regard to the eschatology’ ‘Nowadays everyone talks about inclusivity, but I am a very orthodox theologian: conversion is needed’ ‘Jesus is the unique and only way to the Father’	5	1
Other answers	‘Jesus Himself supports the church; He is the secret that motivates our missiological actions’	6	3

The answers diverged considerably, reflecting the entire theological spectrum of the PKN. However virtually all the ministers – pastors and pioneers – emphasized Jesus’ inclusiveness in his earthly ministry. He is generous and breaks through boundaries drawn by (religious) people.

As for soteriology, we see the same pattern. Most ministers in our sample affirm Jesus’ unique role in salvation, but at the same time they are rather inclusivistic about the efficacy of this salvation:

In the pulpit I speak about our Lord and Savior. But you can’t communicate that in missionary conversations. (...) How inclusive or exclusive is He? He is the way, the truth and the life. But I often say: a road also has a verge and nobody knows how wide it is.

Pastor, interview 32

For me, He is unique. (...) The statement that He is the only way to the Father is disconcerting to me. He has something unique, yes – but I do think that there can be multiple paths to the Father, I don’t want to rule that out.

Pastor, interview 25

A minority, however, lean more toward exclusivism, that is, the necessity of personal faith as a condition for receiving salvation. This is expressed by five pastors and one pioneer.

In my communication I present Jesus first as a very good teacher or guru. But at the same time, if you listen carefully to Jesus’ claim, then this has an aspect of ‘I am the truth, I am the light, and I am the life’. At some point you can’t get around that, in my view.

Pioneer, interview 3

Altogether, Jesus’ inclusivity is emphasized in both groups, with some soteriological qualifications by participants from both groups. We found no real differences between pastors and ministers.

#### 4.6 *Salvation and Lostness*

Finally, we asked the participants about their view of salvation as such. The question we asked was: *‘What does salvation (soteria) mean for you? And does this mean that some people may be “lost”?’*

In the lively conversations provoked by this question, both established pastors and pioneers emphasized the here and now, rather than the afterlife, as

the arena of salvation (see table 5). In total, 19 pastors and 9 pioneers described salvation in terms like *‘that you have received everything’*; *‘that you are allowed to make mistakes’*; *‘that you are good enough’*; *‘to find joy regardless of circumstances’*; *‘that you don’t have to do it alone, there is a force in good people and in yourself that empowers you to face everything’* and *‘that you can deal with your problems, know how to maintain your inner strength, that you don’t become cynical’*.

More than half of the respondents from both groups (21/40 vs 11/20) make some reference to salvation in the afterlife, with or without effects in the here and now.

We also analysed whether respondents explicitly linked salvation to God and/or Jesus. The majority of the pastors (29) and almost half of the pioneers (9) explicitly did so: *‘Salvation is something that Jesus brings’*, *‘Salvation has to do with people getting to know Jesus’* and *‘Salvation means you can live in freedom through the life and resurrection of Jesus’* may be seen as confessional views on salvation that were brought forward here by members of both groups. Interestingly, only a minority of the pastors (7) but almost half of the pioneers (9) don’t link salvation explicitly with God or Jesus (e.g., *‘Salvation has to do with being part of a community again’*). This does not necessarily mean that they do not believe that salvation has something to do with God or Jesus.<sup>3</sup> More likely, we see here a tendency among pioneers to communicate salvation

TABLE 5     What does salvation (soteria) mean for you?

	Exemplary statements	Pastors	Pioneers
Focus on salvation here and now	‘That you are allowed to make mistakes’ ‘Salvation to me is living in freedom’ ‘Being freed from yourself, also of what others think of you’	19	9
Focus on future salvation (eschaton, post-mortem)	‘After we die, we go to Him, (we receive) eternal life’	3	2
Focus on both here and now & future	‘Salvation can be experienced in this life, but it also has to do with eternal salvation’, ‘There is salvation prior to death as well as after death’	18	9

3 It is very unlikely, for example, that a pioneer would think that a person’s ‘value’ has nothing to do with God or Jesus (even if they are not mentioned), within the overall context of pioneers’ beliefs sketched in this study.

in terms that their audience can understand (cf. section 4.4): *'Salvation is living in freedom, relaxation, forgiveness'; 'It has to do with whatever hardships you have to endure: you are of great value.'*

Together with the question of salvation, respondents were also asked how they view lostness (see table 6). The possibility of being 'lost' was mentioned six times by pastors and seven times by pioneers, so only a minority of the

TABLE 6 Can one be lost?

	Exemplary statements	Pastors	Pioneers
Eternal lostness is a real possibility, in this life and the next	'Lostness also has eternal consequences'; 'Without God a human being is lost, you die the second death'	6	7
Agnostic about eternal lostness	'Eternal lostness: fortunately, that is not up to me'; 'If you follow Jesus, you have a chance you may join, but it is something God decides' 'Being lost forever? I leave it to God; He is much more generous than I am'	13	3
Rejection of eternal lostness	'I don't believe you can be lost after you die. When you die God is there with his loving presence'; 'God is a loving God; He lets no one be lost' 'I don't think God lets people perish' 'I think that after people die, God gives them a final chance to decide to come to Him'	12	4
Lostness only in this life	'Being lost is: all the missed opportunities of our life'; 'When you ask me about lostness, I don't think of hell, it has to do with not being noticed/found in this life'	5	5
Lostness is no subject any more for respondent, or difficult to address	'Lostness is not an urgent question for me anymore, to me it is no longer about heaven and hell' 'being lost for eternity: it is a difficult matter to address'	1	1
Ignoring lostness	Respondents ignore the question on lostness, and talk only of salvation	3	0

ministers from both groups reflect on eschatological and post-mortem lostness as a real possibility. In all of the answers to this question, the emphasis on the here and now as the predominant theatre of salvation, was seen in the tendency of all ministers to use playful references to 'lostness' in this life. Much of this is hard to translate, but respondents talked about 'being lost' in the sense of *'losing your track in life', 'feeling lost', 'getting yourself lost'* in an unhealthy habit, and the like.

Many pastors are agnostic about eternal lostness (13) or reject it altogether (12), whereas pioneers choose this standpoint less often (3 and 4 times). Pastors are almost three times as likely to keep things open, or even reject the possibility of post-mortem lostness (63% vs 22%). However, both pastors and pioneers who affirm the possibility of eternal lostness, present their beliefs often with a dose of agnosticism:

'I believe in an afterlife with two options, not three. A light and a dark one. I don't know exactly how it works, but you can end without God. I hope everyone will be saved, but I doubt it. I don't lose sleep over that. I don't have enough courage (yet) to mention it to others.

Pioneer, interview 16

Getting lost: It's a missed opportunity if you haven't come to know Jesus and walked His way. I have experienced a lot of joy in that myself. Being lost forever ... fortunately, I don't decide about that. There is, however, a certain tension, which I just have to bear for a while.

Pioneer, interview 18

There are passages in the Bible that confront, but I really want to read them, also the apocalyptic passages, they really ask for a choice. But I'd rather leave that open. I'm not going to spell out what happens if you choose against, but I'm trying to show what happens if you choose for. That gives perspective and hope.'

Pastor, interview 8

'This again is a difficult question. 'Being saved from sin' that was and still is true. But now I prefer to say: for me salvation has to do with an attitude to life: being able to let go of things and not wanting to have or possess everything. (...) If there is a judgement, it is never for me to decide. My responsibility is to make His love known. God is more merciful than we sometimes think.

Pastor, interview 30



## 5 Summary and Discussion

### 5.1 *Summary*

While most ministers in our study indicated that they had experienced changes in their career towards a more open, flexible and inclusive view of ‘others’ (similar observations in Paas, Schoemaker 2018:373), such changes do not seem to have led to a massive crumbling of traditional or confessional beliefs. Most participants are convinced about Jesus’ crucial significance, they emphasize the importance of mission, they use confessional language without hesitation, and they believe that salvation is linked to God and Jesus, even if most ministers are rather inclusivistic in terms of soteriology. With regard to the emphasis on the here and now as opposed to eternal life, we see little difference between both groups. Explicitly ‘liberal’ views, denying Jesus’ uniqueness or eternal life altogether, are articulated by a tiny minority. Altogether, it thus seems that expectations based on comprehensive secularization theories (namely, that exposure to more pluralistic environments leads to the crumbling of traditional beliefs) apply less to these ministers.

As for theological differences between pastors and pioneers, we have found only few, confirming the earlier study of Vos 2012. In fact, pioneers and pastors in the PKN seem to be largely on the same page in their soteriological views. In two respects, however, the groups diverge. First, the pioneers experience more communication problems in sharing the uniqueness of Christianity and views of Jesus and salvation, leading to formulations of ‘salvation’ in more inner-worldly terminology. Second, pioneers tend to have traditional theological notions about ‘eternal lostness’ considerably more often than pastors, even though such notions are held by only a minority of both groups. This may indicate that belief in the potential eternal lostness of people is still an important motivation to embark on a missionary career for a sizable minority of ministers.

### 5.2 *Discussion*

#### 5.2.1 Age and Gender

Foppen et al. (2018) found that pioneers in Europa are younger than established pastors. Our study confirms this trend. As for gender, in their first pilot study of pioneers only, Foppen et al. 2017 observed that pioneers were overwhelmingly male (93.2%). However, in their second and larger study Foppen et al. (2018:298–9) concluded that the gender-balance had shifted towards ca. 10 percent female pioneers. This was due to the inclusion of more churches, including some that ordain women as pastors. Our study, with a sample drawn exclusively from a church where men and women are ordained, shows

the same pattern: the proportion of female pioneers has risen to 30 percent. Apparently, early studies were biased by the early adopters of missionary pioneering (mostly conservative denominations), leading to predominantly male samples. In terms of selection and recruitment, there is thus no reason to assume that pioneering is mostly a male business, provided that denominational policies are aimed at gender equality.

### 5.2.2 Beliefs

No significant differences have surfaced between the two groups with regard to their enthusiasm for different dimensions of mission. Also, it seems that all five 'marks' are evenly represented. It thus seems that 'mission' is widely supported among the clergy of a large and theologically diverse body like the PKN. Our data suggest that the recent embarkment on mission by the PKN is by and large reflected in the views of its ministers.

Also, there seems to be little distance between the two groups in their views of Jesus as a Minister of peace and humanity to a society in which competition and achievement-pressure reign supreme. This resonates with a study of Lenten preaching in the PKN, which shows how the significance of Jesus' suffering is mostly applied in a pastoral (rather than doctrinal) way, resulting in an emphasis on Jesus' solidarity and proximity to human suffering and the ambiguities of life (Verweij 2014:254). This 'redemptive proximity' is however not emphasized at the expense of traditional notions of substitution and atonement, but such notions usually remain in the background. Our study suggests something similar: while most of our participants did not explicitly reject traditional soteriological notions, many respondents (pioneers in particular) kept those on the background. However, our study does not show that such traditional beliefs, for example about the 'lostness' of people outside Christ, are being abandoned altogether. They are rather creatively related to more mundane experiences of 'being lost' and thus articulated in a more palatable way. Also, they are kept as personal beliefs that the pastor wants to hold on to, without being able or prepared to communicate them in public. And some of these beliefs become more nuanced, less outspoken, or more 'agnostic'.

### 5.2.3 Context

The differences that we have found between these two groups of protestant ministers relate mostly to the differences between an established church setting and a missionary pioneer setting. Especially the pioneers elaborated on how Christian language was felt to be too 'theological' and 'religious' to make sense to a secularized audience. Recent studies of missionary practices in the West confirm this experience of 'speechlessness' (Wall 2014; Paas, Schoemaker

2018; Ruddick 2020; Riphagen 2021). Above, we hypothesized ‘... all things being equal – pioneers experience more pressure to adapt or moderate traditional views of the exclusivity of Christ, the uniqueness of Christianity or the possibility of being eternally lost’. The differences we have found suggest that this explanation is correct. Pioneers do experience more pressure to adapt and they are clearly more conscious of what it means to do mission in a secularized context. However, our study did not provide evidence that the pioneers succumb to this pressure. In other words, the experienced pressure may be mitigated somehow by the fact that pioneers are more resilient in their beliefs, given their zeal to reach out to people of other or no faith in the first place, while pastors in more “secure” settings could let their beliefs become fuzzy with fewer consequences for their ministry. While we have insufficient data to confirm this expectation, the pioneers’ more traditional view of potential ‘eternal lostness’ suggests that pioneers are more likely to be explicit and traditional in their soteriological beliefs – contrary to what one would expect on the basis of their increased exposure to other worldviews than their own.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Additionally, an age cohort effect should not be excluded. Recent research indicates that younger church members in the Netherlands are generally more orthodox than preceding generations. We have not explored this further.

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