

Dutch synod looks to mend historic Protestant splits

by [Andreas Havinga](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

A gathering to improve relations between the many Protestant denominations in the Netherlands recently took place on the site of an earlier historic synod, though any idea of complete church unity taking place was said to smack of "an unrealistic utopia."

About 700

Christians from 50 Protestant churches attended what was billed as a "national synod" December 10-11 in the main church in the town of Dordrecht.

The gathering's name echoed that of the Synod of Dordt, a six-month-long assembly held in the same building from November 1618 to May 1619. That synod was called to settle a dispute between Calvinists and Arminians.

Calvinists believe that God preordains only some people for salvation; Arminians say that all can be saved. Calvinism won the day at the 17th-century Dordt synod and has held sway in the Netherlands ever since. Still, the country's history has been marked by disputes that have resulted in distinct, rival Reformed denominations. Today, Protestant Christians, mainly Calvinist, make up about one-third of the Netherlands' 16.3 million population.

"Our

society can rely on us to be people who seek to go on their way in faith, hope and love," the latest synod said in a statement presented during the meeting to the government's home affairs minister, Piet Hein Donner.

Despite its title, the national synod had no authority to make binding decisions. Instead, its members discussed what religious beliefs they have in common. An often-heard phrase was: "There is more that binds us than divides us."

The country's ecumenical broadcaster, IKON, reported that the establishment of a single Protestant church was not one of the assembly's aims. One participant was quoted saying that to hope for such an outcome would be to envision "an unrealistic utopia."

Barend Kamphuis, one of the organizers, said that a national synod would not be an annual event, though there will "certainly" be two more such synods before 2018. On that 400th anniversary year of the Synod of Dordt, many have hoped that not only will a synod be held, but that it will also make binding decisions.

Gerrit de Fijter, a former president of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands who is credited with the idea of a modern-day national synod, said that the next step will be to involve denominations that refused to attend the December meeting. Absentees included both liberal and conservative denominations. Notable among the former was the Remonstrant Brotherhood.

The 17th-century synod condemned the Remonstrants as heretics and banished them from the Reformed churches. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands was founded in 2004 as a result of the merger of the nation's two largest Reformed denominations and the smaller Lutheran church. —ENI