

**Roots and Fruits – Robert Calvert**  
**SCOTS INTERNATIONAL CHURCH ROTTERDAM**

**History**

The Scots Church began in Rotterdam in 1643 after Scots chaplains served army battalions in the Netherlands. The community of Scots abroad represented a kind of 'diaspora' of folk connected with textile trade, seafarers and military. Between 1660 and 1690 when Episcopacy was imposed by Charles II in Scotland, many Scots exiles found the Netherlands more congenial. With more than one thousand members, the church in Rotterdam was much the largest Scots community in the Netherlands and the mayor even provided the stipends for two ministers to keep them in order! The church was very Scottish and mono-cultural in character. As exiles (unlike than modern refugees) most expected to return to Scotland and many did so after 1690.

As Scots abroad the church developed a strong cultural connections - its members spoke Dutch, some married Dutch people and took up positions of influence. The church developed an increasingly bicultural character as post-war brides brought their Dutch husbands to the church and the expatriate families mixed with Dutch members. Even the request for a new minister after the destruction of the church in 1940 came from the Dutch members who wanted their Scots church back. Patterns in migration in Rotterdam have moved from the religious exiles to guest-workers and expatriate businessmen to political and economic migrants. In the 1990s people with origins in the Southern hemisphere (especially Africa) came to the Scots Church and a photograph on the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary is evidence of a new multicultural identity.

**Expectations**

For twelve years I learned about the 'urban' Jesus in ministry in Drumchapel, Glasgow. After three months study leave in Chicago and becoming spent in pastoral care of families connected with a serious bus accident, we found ourselves ready for new challenge in a similar kind of city. My wife and I understood that we were coming to serve a mixed community and relate to Dutch urban context. We were interviewed by five groups including a psychologist and were surprised to be readily accepted. The Board of World Mission made it clear that the church was problematic and the Europe secretary suggested that I must have a 'death wish'! There had been a history of short term ministries since the 1980s when the church was split over the excommunication of persons over their homosexuality. From the advertisement of the church vacancy in the Glasgow Herald made it clear that the church was looking for a minister who would help the church to develop a new mission and image. The long vacancy was a healthy period when, under the shared ministry of auxiliary minister and three elders, the church started to look forwards. The Board of World Mission wanted the new minister to build up the team of elders and to provide some continuity.

**Rotterdam**

The congregation in Rotterdam numbered about sixty to seventy on the first Sunday and they received us with warmth. It was not difficult, however, to feel hurt and annoyance under the surface as memories ran deep over divisions over barring homosexuals. Problems included disagreements with previous ministers as well as the Board of World Mission and the Presbytery over their heavy-handling. Wherever I

travelled I discovered that there were many who had left the church with such great pain that they were unlikely to ever return. One Dutch minister even greeted me as the minister of the church that hates homosexuals! I did not say very much directly about the homosexual issue but instead gradually increased the importance of 'inclusiveness' through focussing on uprooted people. In order to create a new identity and image, I sought to provide regular ministry of word and sacrament and to reflect on the context. In 1996 the congregation decided to add the word 'international' to its name and the modification permitted the church to be seen as a more inclusive community. Recently another Dutch minister described the church as one that loves refugees!

One of my first friends in the local neighbourhood was a Belgian community worker whose team was 'homeless' after losing their office. Our church elders decided to invite them to share the old Manse (my family was living in rented accommodation elsewhere) and pay a annual rent for it. At this early stage I asked the elders permission to spend one day per week to visit local institutions and people who did not relate to our church. Two other members joined in some of these visits to leaders of local business, social initiatives, community projects and clergy. This networking became a terrific learning experience and brought many long-lasting friendships. After eighteen months I hosted a 24-hour consultation on city ministry with some of them and we began to talk about the different roles for the church in the city. I found myself on a steep learning-curve about the 'universal' Jesus. The church now had people from more than forty nations and the team of elders was drawn from four continents. African traditions were 'blended' with our liturgy and an African rhythm group had been started by our first West African elder. A Korean Methodist church was renting space in our church and we extended the same offer to Dutch, Portuguese and French-speaking churches. Opening the hall as a place of hospitality eventually led to a weekly reception for refugees and a safe house. Following visits from several Moderators, the 'Mamre' project was featured at the General Assembly and received early support from the Parish Development Fund. A major change in Dutch society took place after a populist Rotterdam politician was murdered and a new realism made life extremely difficult for foreigners. Increasing number of immigrants and migrant churches struggled for positive relationships and Dutch society quickly lost its image for tolerance. As an old migrant church we decided to stand alongside vulnerable immigrant Christians and I published a guide on migrant churches. Some church members helped to found an organization with office and staff to represent their interests. I believe that owning our church history is a useful tool (see below) in developing ministry and stimulating vision.

### Congregational history

Poor Fund established  
 Church of Scots refugees  
 Shared space with French church  
 Developed concert / lecture hall  
 War-time destruction  
 Managed house for orphans

### Congregational values

Caring church  
 Migration ministry  
 Ecumenical relations  
 Enterprising church  
 City-centre interests  
 Urban ministry

