

# Planting and harvesting:

**A study on evangelism and  
conversion in growth-oriented  
churches in Leiden**

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Course:	Bachelor Thesis Religious Studies Leiden
Date:	29-05-2019
Examinator:	Corey Williams
Word count:	10.000

# Contents

Introduction	p. 3
1 International Christian Fellowship Leiden	p. 5
1.1 Church style: a mini megachurch	p. 5
1.2 Evangelism policy: a marketing strategy	p. 6
1.3 Successful evangelism: the appeal of modern culture	p. 6
1.4 Conclusion	p. 8
2 Jehovah's Witnesses in Leiden	p. 9
2.1 Church style: school of wisdom	p. 9
2.2 Evangelism policy: knocking on the door	p. 10
2.3 Successful evangelism: answers in the Bible	p. 10
2.4 Conclusion	p. 11
3 Power City Leiderdorp	p. 13
2.1 Church style: place of excellence	p. 13
2.2 Evangelism policy: miracles on the streets	p. 14
2.3 Successful evangelism: an overwhelming Sunday morning	p. 14
2.4 Conclusion	p. 16
Conclusion	p. 17
Bibliography	p. 19
Appendix I Questionnaire	p. 20

# Introduction

It is one of the first warm days of spring, so you have decided to invite some friends over to Leiden for a nice evening. When you go to the station square to pick them up, you notice a little stand with a short slogan on top: “A life without sadness.” The stand is filled with hundreds of little booklets in dozens of languages. When you walk up to the stand to look at the booklets, you are suddenly approached by two very nice women who ask you whether you are sad sometimes. But you politely say goodbye and go to your friends. After meeting up with them, you go to a little restaurant where you order some nice food. One of your friends starts telling you about the party he went to last week. It is only minutes later that you figure out that this party was actually the opening of a new church. After paying the bill, you walk to the Haarlemmerstraat: it is Thursday, so the shops are still open. When you walk past the Marekerk, you see a poster that invites you to join an Alpha course. The Hartebrugkerk is also open: they invite people in to burn a candle. You and your friends ignore it all and walk on, but then you are approached by someone who is asking you whether you feel pain somewhere. You sigh deeply, but your friend says that his leg is hurting, and the random guy starts praying...

Evangelism is everywhere. Many churches and Christian organizations try to promote their activities and persuade people to join their faith. They do this in very different ways, as was demonstrated in the story above. For various reasons, churches have different policies. They might like one kind of evangelism more, or they might think that it does more justice to their mission. And they probably think their evangelism strategy to be the most effective one. But what does an effective evangelism strategy look like? How does one convert people? And how does conversion even work?

In the last decades, scholars views on conversion have shifted dramatically. Conversion used to be seen as a radical and sudden change. This idea largely originated in pietist churches and was adopted by the famous scholar A.D. Nock. Conversion was a “deliberate” and “definitive” break with the past, sudden and complete. This way of describing conversion has been highly criticized, most importantly by John Lofland and Rodney Stark. They have focused their critique on two different areas. First of all, conversion is not sudden, but gradual. Secondly, it is not a complete departure from the old identity. Rambo gives the example of the Icelanders who got converted to Christianity. In practice, this meant that traditional and Christian beliefs and practices were mixed.<sup>1</sup>

These insights make the evangelism discussed above even more interesting. If the process of conversion is gradual, what part of the process is influenced by a particular evangelistic strategy? And if conversion means that the old and the new get mixed, then what is the role of evangelism in this? For my thesis, I want to use these new perspectives on conversion to analyze the role that evangelism plays in people's conversion stories. My main question will be the following: “What role do evangelistic efforts by growth-oriented churches in Leiden play in people's conversions and how can this influence be explained?”

For practical reasons, I have decided to focus my research on Leiden and Leiderdorp. I have chosen three churches that find evangelism very important: they try to attract new members and reach people with the gospel. For this reason, their evangelism strategy is much more developed and that makes it more interesting. I will focus on a Dutch evangelical church, a Pentecostal church and the local Jehovah's witnesses. The Reformed and Catholic churches in Leiden often also have some sort of evangelism, but are much less focused on it. The Mormon church would also have been very interesting to study, but I only had the time for a limited amount of churches. Of the local

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1 Andrew Buckser en Stephen D. Glazier, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003): 123-126. Lewis R. Rambo en Charles E. Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 5-7. David W. Kling, “Conversion to Christianity,” in: *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 602-605.

evangelical churches I chose the International Christian Fellowship (ICF) because I find their Hillsong-like style fascinating, especially when it comes to evangelism. Of the Pentecostal churches I have chosen Power City, mainly because I know someone there. There are other evangelical and Pentecostal churches around, but I have to limit myself for practical reasons. Some might wonder why I am including the Jehovah's witnesses. I think that it is mainly for their belief that Jesus is an angel that they are often not seen as real Christians by other churches. From an etic perspective, however, Jehovah's witnesses have a lot in common with other churches. Whatever they may be, their belief that Jesus is the lord and savior of humanity and firm trust in the authority of the Bible makes them more Christian than not, so I include them in this research. I will leave it up to the theologians to decide whether they are real Christians.

Another important question people might have, is what I mean with conversion. As explained above, conversion is a problematic concept because it is often depicted differently from how it actually works. The term 'conversion' places some kind of milestone in someones life. Before this milestone the person was very different. Because the process of conversion is gradual, placing this milestone is always somewhat arbitrary. And because the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is highly based on your theology, it is not the same for everyone.<sup>2</sup> Most of my interviewees have been brought up Christian. Some of them lost their faith, others always kept believing in God or even in most Christian tenets. But still they all have the idea that a tremendous change has taken place, and almost all of them call this a conversion. In these cases, conversion primarily means a re-affiliation and an intensification. As a usable definition, I consider it a conversion when people start to experience faith in such a new way that they see it as the most important spiritual change in their lives. In the end, the term 'conversion' is linked in such a regard to the narratives that people make, that we cannot separate it from these subjective stories. People must remain the arbiters themselves.

To do my research, I will use three methods. First of all, I will read literature on conversion in general and on these specific churches. I will also use some literature of the churches themselves. Secondly, I will visit at least one service of all these churches. Thirdly and most importantly, I will interview three or four people per church. To protect their privacy, I will not use their real names. These different methods will help me to find out how evangelism works in these churches and how it influenced people to be converted.

My chapters will each consist of three parts. The first part will give a general analysis of the church. The second part will give an overview of its evangelism strategy. The third part will be based largely on the interviews and deal with the question how evangelism influences people who convert.

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<sup>2</sup> Rambo en Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 9-11.

# 1. International Christian Fellowship Leiden

When you enter *Theater Ins Blau* on a Sunday evening, you are greeted by people giving you high fives and music that is so loud that the floor vibrates. When you have crossed the lounge, you enter a cinema hall, where you can sit down in a comfortable red chair while the noise of the band below makes it impossible to talk to the person next to you. But this is not a concert about to begin. It is a church.

## 1.1 Church style: A mini megachurch

There has been written little on the International Christian Fellowship (ICF) movement, but this is made up for by an abundance of articles and books about the famous Hillsong church. I will use this literature because of the many similarities between these two churches. There are of course a lot of differences, but the comparison with Hillsong will bring these to the surface and help us to better understand the choices that this church makes.

While discussing Hillsong Church, Miranda Klaver gives an interesting description of megachurches that is worth quoting in full:

*Key features of megachurch networks are their size, Evangelical/Pentecostal background, unwaveringly growth-oriented vision, shared cosmopolitan lifestyle and the integration of the latest digital media technologies in their religious practices and organizational structures. Megachurch networks like Hillsong share a world-affirmative orientation stressing relevance over truth and hold a materialistic view of salvation often captured by the term "prosperity" gospel. They offer cosmopolitan spaces of community and identity formation beyond categories of ethnicity and race. Additionally, megachurch networks are supported by extensive online media practices in the form of videos, blogs, live streaming and continuous updates of the church, pastors, and other leaders through social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Periscope, accessible 24/7.<sup>3</sup>*

In this definition, Klaver focuses especially on megachurches' embrace of modern culture and life in this world. Another scholar, Matthew Wade, gives a similar description, but he adds charismatic leaders, a comfortable environment and a minimum of 2000 attendants. These two definitions together describe Hillsong and many other megachurches very accurately.<sup>4</sup>

Almost every part of this definition can also be applied to ICF. Digital media play an essential role in ICF. Behind the band, there is a huge screen which shows a beautiful lyric video during the singing. Apart from that, it is used for pictures and videos. The music equipment and lights are also very professional. On their website, Facebook and Instagram account, you can find very beautiful and professional pictures of the services. The church is also very world-affirming. During the service, everyone is very happy and enthusiastic. Sermons are about things people struggle with, like insecurity and stress. It is emphasized a lot that the listener is awesome. Laurance, who is one of the people I interviewed, explained that the leadership team was thinking about a series of sermons about a Bible figure, but in the end decided to do a series on our mind, which encompasses for example burnouts and the enormous amount of information that we have to process. The comfortable environment that Wade discussed is also present in the church: the services take place in a cinema, so everybody is sitting on very luxurious chairs.

There are, however, also some ways in which ICF is different from Hillsong. Examples of this are the lack of an altar call and the absence of church 'goodies.' The most important difference,

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3 Miranda Klaver, "Media Technology Creating 'Sermonic Events': The Hillsong Megachurch Network," *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 4 (2015): 423.

4 Matthew Wade, "Seeker-friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution," *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (2016): 664.

however, is the fact that ICF Leiden is not even close to being a Megachurch. They have two services, which together attract about 150 people. This falls far short from the 2000 people that a megachurch has to attract according to Wade. The mother church of ICF, which is located in Zürich, attracts 3500 attendants weekly according to a Christian website, which makes it a megachurch.<sup>5</sup> The pastor of ICF Leiden seems to strive to make it a megachurch, because he said in one of the services that they will have to move to a bigger building once they have four services with 200 visitors each. But right now, that is still very far away and ICF is clearly not a megachurch.

We can conclude that ICF operates as a megachurch when it comes to its professional use of modern technology and focus on becoming happy in this life. It is, however, quite small. Interestingly, this makes it some kind of mini megachurch.

## **1.2 Evangelism policy: a marketing strategy**

ICF does not do classic evangelism. There are no Alpha courses, no mission trips and no outreach on the streets. There are however two ways in which ICF engages with outsiders and tries to get people to church, but it would be more accurate to call this promotion, because discussing faith is not the primary aim.

First of all, ICF puts a lot of effort into online promotion, as was already mentioned in the last paragraph. Laurance, one of my interviewees, is in charge of this. She told me how they try to put very professional pictures on Instagram. Church should look like a festival and the people on the pictures should be passionate. She also finds diversity very important. On the Instagram page, we can see people of different ages, races and genders, although there is a focus on younger people. Even though they put a lot of effort into this, Laurance said the page is for the most part only seen by members of ICF. This is why she finds personal invitation very important, which brings me to my second point.

Secondly, ICF encourages people to invite others to their church services, which they call celebrations. Laurance explained that ICF hands out flyers for special events to their members which they can give to people they know. Every celebration should be accessible for people, but this is especially true for Easter, Christmas, baptisms and weddings. This Easter for example, a musical was performed by ICF Leiden which takes place in modern times but reflects the story of David and Bathsheba. In their discussion groups, which are called SmallGroups, people are encouraged to have a VIP list of people that they would like to meet Jesus. They pray for these people and invite them to activities. ICF also tries to be open by letting members go out together and organize parties. This makes the line between the church and the rest of the world vaguer, which makes it easier to invite people.

Using these two methods, ICF's evangelism looks more like a marketing strategy. Members are not encouraged to discuss faith or do Bible studies with nonbelievers, but to invite them to the Celebration. The social media primarily serve the same purpose. For ICF, the celebration itself is the evangelistic event. Because the service is wrapped in modern culture and the sermon is about things that everybody struggles with, it is relatively open to people that are not Christians themselves.

## **1.3 Successful evangelism: the appeal of modern culture**

After an e-mail and a visit to ICF, I was introduced to four people that had had some kind of conversion experience. They were all willing to be interviewed. Their stories will give us some examples of conversion experiences and the influence of ICF on this.

All of them have been raised as Christians, but in varying degrees. Esther was raised very actively in a Pentecostal church, where she was touched by the music and the sermons. She

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<sup>5</sup> Warren Bird, "The world's largest churches," bezocht op 14 mei 2019, <http://leadnet.org/world/>.

described her experiences there as 'wow' and 'real.' Laurance, on the other hand, was raised in a mainline liberal church, with parents that were only moderately involved. Joy was born in Italy and has been going to various Coptic and Catholic churches with her parents. Both Laurance and Joy mainly found the social aspect of church important during their youth. Berend's parents were not really involved in faith when he was born, but when he was a small child, they became involved in an evangelical church for a few years.

It is true for most of them that at some point they started to become critical of their church: they did not feel connected anymore. When she was sixteen, Esther discovered going out and went to a lot of parties. This made her come to the conclusion that faith was not something for her and that it was not cool, so she stopped going to church. Something similar happened to Laurance:

*Ik vond het belangrijk wat andere mensen over me dachten toen ik jonger was, en als je dan kan kiezen tussen stappen en jongens en leuke dingen doen dan paste kerk daar niet bij. (...) Ik had niet zoveel vrienden die christen waren. Er was één ander meisje, maar dat was zo'n suffe vriendin. Met dat beeld wilde ik niet geassocieerd worden. Ik geloofde het wel, maar het was saai.*

Both Esther and Laurance described church and faith as boring, as something that could not be combined with going out and being young. Joy had a completely different problem. In her newest Coptic church, she knew almost no people, so the social advantage of church disappeared. She found it also difficult that a big part of the service was performed in Ge'ez, a liturgic language that she does not speak. Then there were also many things she was critical of. Examples of these are the rules that menstruating women cannot receive the Lord's Supper, that men and women have to sit separately in church, that you have to fast on specific days and that you have to ritually greet the priest when he walks past you. She was wondering where this could be found in the Bible. Berend's parents became very busy and they stopped going to church. So for him, church naturally disappeared again from his life.

Esther and Joy did not completely lose their connection to the church. For ten years, Esther did almost nothing with her faith, but once a year she visited a church service. During her stay in Melbourne, she even became a regular attendant of Hillsong. The music and the message really touched her and she really liked the combination of church and modern culture. Still, she did not want to commit and her church attendance dropped again when she had returned to the Netherlands. Joy kept attending the Coptic church. She started praying for a new church. She could not believe that life was just about ordinary living and asked God to let her know Him better.

At one point, they all got to know someone from a church and were invited. Esther was invited to ICF by someone she vaguely knew. She came to the church about once a year. She was reminded of it often because church members added her on social media and liked her statuses. She liked it that the church was not judgmental and much more positive. Laurance met the pastor on a barbeque. When the pastor found out that her boyfriend wanted to work with lights, he asked him to come be a volunteer at their new church. Because of this and because they wanted new friends, they became involved in the founding of ICF Leiden. Laurance was asked to help with promotion and communication, which made her also feel part of it. Joy went to the opening of ICF with her sister, who got invited. After that, she continued visiting because she was looking for a new church and ICF seemed liked the answer to her recent prayer. Berend was asked by a friend to join a secular band as a drummer. He happily accepted this, because he was very insecure about his skills. That friend later asked him whether he wanted to join the churches band. This was not ICF, but it was an evangelical church. Berend said yes.

From this point on, their stories are rather different, but doubts play a role in most of them. Esther's conversion was triggered when she was staying at her parents house. Her father had some nightmares and voiced his suspicion that Esther was doing something weird. At that point in her life, she was following expensive courses in yoga. She had already doubts about this: was not God

the only good spiritual source? The remark of her father scared her and made her start reading the Bible again. This touched her a lot: she came to the conclusion that Jesus is the only source of cleansing and rest. She did not have to seek this in other places. She decided to visit ICF again and quickly became a member. Laurance was involved for a very long time in ICF, and slowly began to find the prayers very beautiful. A year after she had met the pastor, she went to an ICF conference. She was going through a very rough time and came to the conclusion that she wanted to build her life on Jesus. Joy did not have a clear conversion experience, but her faith became more personal over time when she started to attend ICF. She had some doubts in the beginning because it was so different from her Coptic church. Were the celebrations not disrespectful to God? At some point, Joy was also asked to help the welcome team. An important point for her was the decision to be baptized by immersion, which is very controversial in her family. While attending church, Berend really started to like the person of Jesus and the emphasis on being allowed to come as you are. He also found it quite special that the people at church asked him deep questions and were interested in his dreams and pain. At some point, his friend asked him whether he wanted to be baptized, and Berend agreed.

There are clearly some common factors in these stories. All had been brought up Christian. Most of them were not content with their church. They found their church too different from normal life. It either was not cool or was too ritualistic. Still, two of them did not completely stop attending church. Something there inspired and attracted them, but they could not harmonize it with their other beliefs and practices in life. They all started visiting an evangelical church because they got invited by someone they knew. They kept visiting for various reasons: they liked the people, the music or the way that God was experienced. Slowly, the things that they had against faith were taken away. ICF is not boring and not ritualistic. Joy also had the idea that they followed the Bible more seriously. This in the end led all of them to undergo some kind of conversion process, sometimes within and sometimes outside of church.

## **1.4 Conclusion**

With its professional use of modern equipment and digital media and its focus on becoming happy in this world, ICF uses the successful formula of many megachurches. This makes the celebrations themselves the primary evangelistic events. Members only need to invite other people over, which is much easier for them than trying to convert someone. This makes it possible to reach a lot of people, of which some will stick around and in the end become a member.

My interviewees had two main inputs in the development of their faith: the church of their youth and ICF. The church of their upbringing ingrained Christianity deeply within them and made it a reasonable option for them. Although they became distanced from the church because they found it boring, ritualistic or impersonal, ICF managed to show them what a church could also be like: exciting, down to earth and very personal. The celebrations themselves did not always trigger the conversion, but they surely helped these people to get there. ICF managed to close the bridge between the modern life they experienced and their Christian upbringing. We could call it a third option between secular modernity and religious tradition, an option which brought the best of both together for these people.

## 2. Jehovah's Witnesses in Leiden

When you decide to visit the Kingdom Hall in Leiden on a Sunday morning, you will probably find out that you are extremely under dressed, except if you are wearing a full suit or a fancy dress. It is a special day, because today you are being educated. After the sermon and dozens of Bible quotes, it is time to study the article of the Watchtower. This means that the person that is leading this part asks the questions at the bottom, while the people present raise their hand and give the answer – which most of the time means that they repeat what the article itself says. When this study is over, you might wonder whether it is now finally time to sing some songs. But nope, it is time for the second sermon. When you leave the Kingdom Hall, you have heard at least a hundred Bible quotes.

### 2.1 Church style: school of wisdom

The Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the few Christian denominations that consist of only one organization. This extraordinary feat is something that makes the Witnesses very proud. According to them, their unity on matters of belief and practice shows that they really let the Bible speak for itself. This central focus on the Bible makes their Kingdom Hall meetings look a lot like some kind of school. As was explained above, a normal service has two sermons and a public discussion of a Watchtower article. Short quotes from the Bible are used very frequently, instead of discussing a larger portion. This makes the Bible feel a lot like a book of wisdom: its short quotes can be used in practical situations. Especially the discussion of the article feels a lot like being in school, because of the simple questions that the 'teacher' asks. Sometimes people came up with original answers, but most of the time they just parrot what the article itself says. When I talked about this to one the Jehovah's Witnesses afterwards, she said that normally the article is first fully read and the answers are more original. But William Zellner in his dissertation on the Jehovah's Witnesses testifies to the exact same thing, so the parroting effect is probably always there in some sense.<sup>6</sup>

Such a school-like model of course also introduces power relations: one does not easily disagree with the teacher. And indeed, the Jehovah's Witnesses have a strong top-down model where the the leaders of the international organization write the literature that is used as authoritative source of knowledge. It is essential for a Jehovah's Witness to agree with this literature, or he or she risks to be put outside of the community and to be 'shunned,' which is a terrifying prospect for a member of such a segregated community.<sup>7</sup> I was unable to find any way in which my interviewees disagreed with official doctrine. When I asked this, they even corrected me: "I do not agree with Jehovah theology, but with the Bible." According to them, however, Jehovah theology always agrees with the Bible. My interviewees explained that the society is quite critical and that some minor doctrines and interpretations have changed over the years. This is certainly true, but in all of these cases the changes were implemented from above. An optimist would say that the organization has great leaders that take the Bible very seriously and are able to win the unwavering trust of their members. A more cynical person would say that this is mainly due to a mix of indoctrination and the threat of banishment from the community.

This school model is completed by the great distinction that is made between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the world. One of the sermons that I listened to was about the poisonous gas of false ideas that is hanging in this world. The world is a dangerous place. According to Zellner, the Witnesses often have the idea that they are being persecuted and scoffed. They segregate themselves as much as possible.<sup>8</sup> This dualism strengthens the school model. The Bible and the Watchtower teach the truth. Outside of the organization, only lies can be found.

6 William Zellner, *Of Another World: the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Proquest Dissertations and Theses, 1981): 110.

7 Ibidem: 101-102. Gary Botting, *The Orwellian World of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University Of Toronto Press, 2014): xxxiii-xxxiv.

8 Zellner, *Of another world*: 101-107.

## **2.2 Evangelism policy: knocking on the door**

Jehovah's Witnesses are of course the famous door-knockers. This does not make them very popular. Negative stereotypes abound about them, for example that they put their foot between the door and that they use very bad reasoning. Another stereotype, which is neutral in nature, is that all Witnesses evangelize. This one is quite true: almost all of them spend a few hours a week to cooperate in this. Some members of the congregation even do it part-time or full-time, even though they have to take care of their own finances.

Knocking on people's doors is their most famous strategy, but as Mark explained to me, it is definitely not the only one. A relatively new but immensely popular strategy is to stand in public places with small book stands. Because the book stands are on wheels, they do not need a license for this. According to Mark, this strategy is mainly useful for making them more well known and spreading the name of their website. Less well-known strategies are to put letters with an invitation in people's mail boxes, to phone people up whose number can be found on the Internet and to organize Bible studies in nursing homes. All these strategies have in common that the Witnesses try to meet strangers where they are.

The Watchtower Society publishes legions of books and magazines that can be used in evangelism. Currently, they mainly use a book that contains several Bible studies, but this is not the only one. The practice book that the Witnesses receive every month also contains some ideas for evangelism. They give an example of what you could discuss during the first three sessions, how you could invite people for the service of Good Friday and how to write an evangelistic letter to a stranger. It also contains links to video's that can be used during evangelism.

We can conclude that the evangelism of the Witnesses has three distinct features. First of all, almost everyone in the congregation is involved in this on a weekly basis. Secondly, the Witnesses try to meet strangers where they are. Third of all, the purpose is to get people to do Bible study together, using the literature that is provided by the Watchtower Society.

## **2.3 Successful evangelism: answers in the Bible**

I already knew one member of the local Jehovah's witnesses. He has introduced me to two other members of the Kingdom Hall. They are all of middle age. At least two of them have a partner and children.

They have all had some kind of Christian upbringing, g. Mark is from a reformed family, but his parents stopped attending church while he was still a child. He did read the Bible sometimes, especially the wisdom literature in it. He believed in a Creator, but that was about it. Ellen also has a reformed background, but her parents were much more active. She went to catechism and also to activities of Youth for Christ. However, she was not completely content with this. She liked it that the Bible held a central place, but was critical of the political stance and financial policy of her church. She also thought that Youth for Christ was interfering too much in people's personal lives, for example by discouraging some romantic relationships. This in the end made her decide to stop going to Youth for Christ and not do communion. Johnny was raised in a Catholic family in Ghana. He also went to catechism classes. In contrast to the others, his faith was very stable.

At some point, all my interviewees met the Jehovah's witnesses when they came to their door. Mark was only 23 and still living with his parents. He had said to God that he wanted to know His will. A few weeks after that, there came some Jehovah's witnesses to the door. He showed some interest and kept meeting up with them. At some point, they started doing Bible studies. He was really touched by the idea of a new earth, which he liked much better than a nonphysical heaven. He also found their answer to the question of suffering convincing, which is that the world now falls under the dominion of Satan. He was especially fond of the fact that they tried to base everything on the Bible. He became more curious about this book. Ellen only met the Witnesses much later. For a

long time, she did almost nothing with her faith, but this changed when she became a mother. What would she tell her child about God? At that point some Jehovah's witnesses came at her door and she decided to keep meeting up with them. Although she did not take it as authoritative, she had a lot of respect for the Bible, so she wanted to know more about this book. During the Bible studies she learned a lot: about Jesus' pre-existence in Heaven, demons, the afterlife, the reason for suffering, etc. Before, she never understood what the main theme of the Bible was and how the stories were connected. She also did not understand how Jesus saved humanity. She only knew the formula's. The Jehovah's witnesses helped her to understand the Bible better and what it had to do with her life.

The start of Johnny's story is very similar. When he was a teenager, there came some Jehovah's witnesses to his parents house. They claimed that in the Bible God has a name and that it is not allowed to pray to Mary. Johnny asked his priest to explain to the Jehovah's witnesses the Catholic faith, but he refused. This made Johnny suspicious. He stopped with the catechism classes and started studying with the Jehovah's witnesses. He liked it a lot that they based their beliefs on the Bible. They convinced him that the Bible does not teach the Trinity. They also criticized charismatic Christianity and the prohibition of alcohol in many churches. Up until this point, Johnny's story is very similar to the other ones, but in his case, he lost contact with the Jehovah's Witnesses after moving to a different city. He started to explore other things, like Pentecostalism and Buddhism. When he emigrated to the Netherlands, he also became interested in self-help books. This changed when he became a father, just as in Ellen's story. He wanted to know how he should raise his child. Because of this, he became interested when there came some Jehovah's Witnesses to his door. He had always experienced some kind of emptiness. Buddhism and self-help books made life better, but they were not for everybody. Johnny started to really like the idea of a new earth where humans could live in peace.

After studying for a few years with the Jehovah's Witnesses, they all decided to join them. Mark thought that this was a really big step. He was a bit afraid of what people might think. But on the other hand, he thought this was not a good motive. He really appreciated it that the Jehovah's Witnesses did not pressure him to join them. Ellen needed a long time to study with the Witnesses. She quickly came to the conclusion that she should get married with her partner. It took her longer to accept the prohibition on blood transfusions. When the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers occurred, she felt that she was really living in the End Times. A year after that, she converted and was baptized. Johnny also needed a few years when he met the Witnesses again. He wanted to think it really through and do a lot of studying. After a while, he converted too.

We see again some common factors in all of these stories. My interviewees were all raised as Christians and already had some affinity with the Bible. They liked or respected it. It is also true for all of them that the church did not completely satisfy them or was just absent. In the case of Johnny, he only became critical of the church after a discussion with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Two of the three interviewees drifted away from their faith for a few years after becoming disappointed or distracted. Their interest was sparked again when they became parents. All of my interviewees came into contact with the Jehovah's Witnesses because they came to the door. For a few years they did Bible studies with them and were impressed by the fact that they based all of their beliefs on it. At a certain point, they all converted.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The Jehovah's Witnesses do not have a good name. This happens naturally to evangelists, but is probably also due to their hierarchical structure and strong opinions on what is true and false. It seems, however, that this also attracts some people. My interviewees are people who already had an affinity with the Bible, but were not content with their church and liked the way that the Witnesses

tried to base everything on this book. It gives security and certainty to know that there is one clear truth which is easily available. The Jehovah's Witnesses can also point at a lot of things which are happening in churches but do not agree with the Bible. This focus on studying the Bible must be very attractive to some people.

The conversions of my interviewees were really slow ones that only happened after years of doing Bible studies with the Witnesses. The potential convert is slowly influenced by their ideas. They often do not plan to join the Witnesses. They are afraid of what their friends and family might think, do not want to evangelize, disagree with some teaching or are just not interested. They do appreciate, however, the thorough Bible studies and Witness literature, which after some years makes them join the group.

### 3. Power City Leiderdorp

While the second song is playing, a man in a suit enters the church. Silently he walks to the first row, which is still empty. The worship goes on for forty more minutes. During the last song, the man walks to the front and starts to sing along with the band. When they try to end the song, he looks a bit frustrated and gestures with his hand that they should continue. The band immediately obeys. When he gives another signal, the band stops playing. When the music is done and the offering has been made, the man explodes into a passionate speech on the overcoming of sin in our lives. He keeps talking for almost one hour, going from Bible passage to Bible passage. He is clearly not content with the crowd: he says multiple times that he hears too little amens and that he is preaching way better than they are reacting. This man, that is both feared and loved by everyone, is Pastor Rolph.

#### 3.1 Church style: a place of excellence

Most scholars are a bit careful when they try to define 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic.' With the extreme amount of diversity within this movement, it is easy to give a definition that is too narrow. In her book on charismatic Christianity, Poewe loosely defines the charismatic movement as those Christians who have a particular interest in the supernatural.<sup>9</sup> In their book on worship in pentecostal churches, Ingell, Ingell and Yong say about this type of worship that they “share an emphasis upon the presence, work, and gifts of the Holy Spirit as manifest in glossolalia, healing, ecstatic worship practices, and prophecy.”<sup>10</sup> This is very similar to Poewe's definition, but more concrete. The main characteristic of charismatic churches is their expectation of God to clearly interfere in the world.

Power City is a very good example of this. During the worship there are moments where almost everybody starts to pray in tongues. When the offering is made, it is often emphasized by the pastor that God blesses Christians financially. Supernatural acts of God are often discussed during the sermon. For example, the pastor once gave a sermon about overcoming sin. One of the sins that he discussed was not believing that you have been healed. If you still feel pain after someone prayed for you, you should not believe the pain. Doubt is dangerous. These examples show that the supernatural plays an important role in Power City. God gives worldly blessings: the famous health and wealth.

On the other hand, Power City and pentecostal churches are also very anti-worldly. There are a lot of things beautiful and even fun about the church services, but they are also uncomfortable, even for church members. Pastor Rolph's sermons are very confrontational: they confront the listener with his own behavior. The church members are challenged to become different from the world. Gossiping, lack of faith, divorce and pornography are warned against. The Devil is mentioned often: believers always need to be aware of his attempts to draw them away from God. In her dissertation on two church denominations, Miranda Klaver also called the battle between God and Satan as one of the most important ideas in Pentecostalism.

We can conclude that Power City on the one hand promises worldly blessings, but on the other hand warns against worldly behavior. Church members should have successful lives, but also be very different from other people. It is often stated by the pastor and church members that Christians should live a life of victory. In the prayers in the church, a standard phrase is that people are the head, not the tail. This is a good summary of what this church tries to be: a place of excellence. This means that it is excellent in finances, health and happiness, but also in faith and

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9 Karla O. Poewe, *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture: Studies in Comparative Religion Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1994): 2.

10 Yong Ingalls, Monique Ingalls en Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015): 3.

moral behavior.

### **3.2 Evangelism policy: miracles on the streets**

I have had the privilege to interview Thomas, who is in charge of the evangelism within Power City. He explained to me that Power City primarily has two ways of evangelizing. First of all, two times per month some church members go out on the streets to pray for healing and to tell people about Jesus. They do this in many different cities: Katwijk, Alphen and even the Hague. They almost never evangelize in Leiden. According to Thomas, the people there are not open for it. Secondly, once a month some church members visit a festival to do the same there. Recently, they went to a Hindu festival.

According to Thomas, people get healed three out of four times when they pray for them. He calls these miracles God's 'bait.' It also regularly happens that people pray with them and ask God for forgiveness. Thomas even said this was easy. The hard part is to get them to Power City: the church almost always loses contact with healed and converted people. It has only happened a few times over the years that someone joined the church after meeting Thomas and his crew. He concludes:

*Meestal komen mensen tot geloof als ze worden uitgenodigd door iemand die ze kennen. Dat is gewoon een feit.*

Evangelism definitely also has a place within the church service. It always ends with a call to give your life over to Jesus. First-time visitors are also asked to raise their hands to receive a gift: a CD with Christian music on it and two food coupons for after the service. One of them can be used on that day. The other one is for your next visit. In this way, visitors are encouraged to come again and given the chance to convert.

We can conclude that Power City has two main evangelism strategies. The first one is to go out on the streets and to festivals to pray for people and to tell them about Jesus. This achieves a lot, but is not capable of attracting new member. The second one is make visitors feel welcome and give them the chance to convert.

### **3.3 Successful evangelism: an overwhelming Sunday morning**

I interviewed two members of Power City and one former member of a different charismatic church. This last person, Anna, contacted me when I was still trying to interview people from a reformed church. She had converted to Pentecostalism, but left this movement and found a place at a local reformed church. Because of her interesting story and different perspective, I decided to interview her.

Thomas and Anna both had a Catholic upbringing. Thomas' parents were not that active, but he himself really liked reading the Children's Bible. He especially liked the stories about Jesus, who was a very inspiring figure for him. Anna's parents, on the other hand, were very active. They went to church on a weekly basis. Her mother was in the choir and her father helped with collecting the offering. She herself found it interesting, but did not understand most of it. Miranda was not raised in a Christian family, but when she was a toddler, she once walked into a church and attended the service. The pastor invited Miranda's parents to bring her to Sunday school, so she went there for a few years. When they moved, she exchanged her Christian primary school for a public one. Her grades suddenly dropped, so Miranda asked to be placed in a Christian school again. Her parents agreed to this.

Both Thomas and Anna became very critical of the church. Thomas though the church was hypocritical, especially for the things it had done in history, for example by letting the rich people

sit in the front of the church and by selling indulgences. For this reason, he decided never to go to church again. He kept believing in God and tried to be a good person, but faith largely lost its relevance for him. Anna found it difficult that a large part of her faith was only about the form. Her parents always said a prayer before eating, but it was said as quickly as possible. Her aunt was a nun, but when Anna asked her something about God, she had no answer. When Anna married, she wanted to do this in the church, but she did not want to walk to the altar of Mary and give her an offering. The priest in the end allowed it, but many of her friends and relatives found this very inappropriate, although they could not explain the meaning of the ritual. These and other things gave her the idea that faith was only about the outside, about the rituals. Because of this, she and her husband slowly lost interest. For a time, they became heavily involved in transcendental meditation after being introduced to it by a colleague. It did not, however, give her the rest that she was looking for. She also found it tiring that you always have to strive for a higher level. When she became a bit unstable mentally, she decided to leave the group. Miranda did not become critical of the church, but as she grew up she became occupied with other things and she slowly drifted away from it.

At some point, my interviewees all decided to visit a charismatic church service. Thomas had a girlfriend who sometimes went to Power city (then it was still called *de Levensstroom*). She told him about the miracles that she had seen there. At a certain Sunday morning, he decided to go there with her because of curiosity. Anna and her husband came into contact with the wife of one of his colleagues. She went to a charismatic church. When she talked about it, this really intrigued Anna and she asked her a lot of questions. After an evening of discussing faith, she was invited to come and visit the church sometime. Miranda had had some weird experiences, for example that she had a feeling beforehand on what day her sick aunt would pass away. A few months after this, in which she had some other abnormal experiences, she divorced. Something sparked her interest in Christianity again, so she asked one of her colleagues, who was a member of Power City, about faith. After this conversation, she remarked thoughtlessly that she might visit the church, not really meaning it. He answered: "I'll see you on Sunday then." Then he walked away. This made her feel forced to keep her promise, so she went.

This first charismatic experience had a tremendous impact on all of them. Thomas had the idea that the pastor knew him personally and that everything was revolving around him. The sermon discussed all the questions that he had. When he visited the church again next Sunday, he had the same experiences, although he cannot remember what those two sermons were about. When the service ended with the call to convert, he walked forward and said the sinner's prayer. Something very similar happened to Anna. At some point in the service, the pastor stood up and gave a prophecy: "My daughter, I have seen how you have been looking for me for all these years. I am here, you are welcome in My arms." Anna felt really touched by this. Nobody noticed, but she had to cry and became very emotional. When she and her husband visited again the next week, there was an altar call. They walked forward and converted. Their lives and marriage were a mess at that point. They found the emphasis on God's forgiveness really beautiful. Miranda also converted on her second visit. During her first one, she was really touched by a song about freedom. She wanted the same thing to happen to her that happened to the other people in the church.

Miranda and Anna quickly became members of their church, but it took Thomas a bit longer. He quickly felt the need to lead a holier life, especially when it comes to sex, but he found this very difficult. At some point he decided that he would obey God half of the days of the week. That Sunday, he decided to visit the church again. He had not done so for some time. That Sunday, pastor Rolph said that you cannot make compromises with God. At that point, Thomas felt caught. He surrendered himself fully to God and from that point on visited Power City weekly.

These stories have a lot in common. They all had an interest in Jesus, the Bible or faith in general, but were not satisfied in this. When they met someone that attended a charismatic church, they became interested and decided to attend a service. This first service made a huge impression. It

could be the sermon, a song or a prophecy, but it promised them freedom and love and answered their questions. When they visited a second time, they converted. They either became a full member right away or doubted for some time, but that first service touched them all so much that it led to a very quick and unexpected decision.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Power City puts a lot of effort into street and festival evangelism, but this is not where they get most new members from. All of my interviewees had been invited by someone they knew after they showed some interest. This makes the church service in practice the most important evangelistic event. Both in the songs, the sermon and the prophecies, the same message is given: there is love, success, freedom and healing with Jesus. Two of my interviewees were going through a very rough time. A message like this must be especially attractive at such a moment. It offers hope to someone, especially if they have a background and interest in Christianity. This interest, that had never been completely satisfied, was overwhelmed by their first experience of charismatic Christianity, where God seems so close. The preparation work that had been done during their youths and the intense experience of the service made it possible to convert in a really short time. None of my interviewees were expecting this when they decided to go there. It just happened.

## Conclusion

The stories of my interviewees differ tremendously, but they all have one thing in common: Christianity was part of their youth. In nine of these cases, this did not work out for them. Six of them disaffiliated because they became critical of the church. It did not fit with their teenage life, was only about incomprehensible rituals or seemed to be hypocritical and unreliable. The three others who left the church did so simply because their parents were not involved in church or stopped attending. Without an active Christian family, it was easy to forget about faith when they were not going anymore to any religious activities. The last person became critical of his church after talking to some Jehovah's Witnesses. The reasons for disaffiliating seem to be distributed quite evenly over the different churches.

But then something happened. Faith always remained in their veins, and most of them kept a vague belief in God. At some point, they came into contact with a church. The way in which this happened differs a lot between churches, but is strikingly similar when you look at only one of them. Some people were invited by someone they knew to come to ICF or another evangelical church. Most of them quickly felt at home. This church was not boring! This was not ritualistic! No, it was modern and relevant for this life! Most of them remained active within the church, for a large part due to the nice people and the quick invitation to join the volunteer team. In the end, they converted. Other people got invited to Power City or a different Pentecostal church and were touched very deeply by the beauty of a prophecy, the lyrics of a song or the contents of a sermon. The very intense message changed them. It took only one more service to make them walk to the front and give their life to Jesus. Still others heard the bell ring: there were some Jehovah's Witnesses at the door. Out of curiosity or a desire to know more about God they did a Bible study with them. They slowly started to trust them and really liked how everything was based on the Bible. After a few years, they got baptized.

We can see clearly how the old and the new came together in these conversions. All of my interviewees had a Christian background: it was a part of their identity. The church' evangelism gave a new reason to believe and took away the criticism that many of them had. We see this in the case of ICF, where three of my interviewees found the church of their youth too boring or too ritualistic. This critique was for a large part canceled out by ICF, which made them reconsider faith. Power City also triggered something in the visitors, a positive promise of the love, freedom and truth that they were searching for. The intense services activated the faith again that was still somewhere deep down. The Jehovah's Witnesses are a bit different. The evangelism did not take place in a community event, but in a personal Bible study. My interviewees really liked it that the Witnesses based everything on the Bible. They already had a certain respect for the Bible, which was magnified by studying it. In the end, it was very attractive to them to believe in the Bible as the ultimate source of truth in a world with so many opinions.

It is also very interesting to see how gradual or fast the conversions were. ICF offered my interviewees a modern and warm community of young people. Within this community, they could slowly and gradually start to consider faith. By first inviting people to join the community, it is an easier step for people to do so. When you are a member of such a community for a long time, this often leads to a conversion because of the constant Christian input you receive. The Jehovah's Witnesses also accommodated a very slow conversion process. In their case, however, joining their church is a very big step, both because of their theology and the negative name that they have. For this reason, they opt instead to slowly win people's trust and to persuade them that the Bible is the truth. Only after people have converted, they become active in the church. Power City stands out a bit, because my interviewees described their conversions as unexpected and sudden. It only took two services. This is probably due to the very intense experience and the fact that most of my interviewees were already searching for something spiritual. The completion of the conversion process could take a bit longer, but people quickly decided that they wanted to do something with

this church.

We can conclude that the main accomplishment of evangelistic efforts is that they combine the new and the old in a way that is attractive to the potential convert. This happens in many different ways and can both be gradual and very sudden, but it always activates something which is already present in the person. In the cases that I have studied, this was a belief in God, respect for the Bible, search for a modern community or spiritual hunger. With church services and Bible studies, the church managed to persuade the potential convert that it was the answer to its fragmented desires. ICF persuades people that modernity and faith are friends of each other. The Jehovah's Witnesses show that in an uncertain world, the Bible can be trusted. Power City offers intense experiences and the promise of victory to anyone who is open to it. Evangelism is successful when it offers something that the potential convert is craving for, whether he knows it or not. They offer something new to people who need something new. In this way, the old and the new are combined.

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## **Appendix 1 Questionnaire**

1. What role did faith play during your youth?
2. What did faith mean to your parents?
3. How did your views on faith develop during your life?
4. What made you join this group?
5. Were there other churches, Christian groups or people that you had contact with before joining this church?
6. Were there things in this group that you were critical about or did not agree with?
7. Are you involved in evangelism?
8. Do you want to add anything?