

# TRIBUTES

TO REINDER BRUINSMA

## What I Like ABOUT THE DUTCH

By Andreas Bochman

In 1986 George E. Vandeman published a little book with a title “What I like about ...the Lutherans, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Charismatics, the Catholics, Our Jewish Friends, the Adventists,” adding as a kind of punchline or subtitle: “Rescuers of Neglected Truth” (or was it a qualifier of Adventists?). The idea, of course, had been to dialogue in a kind and friendly manner with believers of other faiths about the superiority of Adventism, a somewhat ambivalent motivation.

When I think about Reinder Bruinsma, I first and foremost perceive him as a Dutch neighbor. Historically, the relationship between Germans and the Dutch has been a tense one. During World War II, the Germans attacked and occupied the neutral Netherlands, bringing terror to its peace-loving citizens (think Corrie ten Boom and Anne Frank). Thus, from a historical perspective my title may serve a similar purpose as the evangelistic booklet from the 70s or 80s—tongue in cheek, though, for this piece is not about superiority, but deep respect and admiration.

When Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands intended to marry the German Klaus von Amsberg, strong opposition ensued. Well, he changed his name to Claus (Dutch spelling), converted from the Lutheran to the Reformed

Church, and they did get married—despite public protests. The couple worked hard to earn the trust of the Dutch people and succeeded. As history somewhat repeated itself with Máxima of the Netherlands, it may be fair to assume that there is something “typical” Dutch here. And that is indeed what I like about the Dutch. They stand up for what they believe in with great frankness, yet tolerate opposition, even to the point of changing their minds once they are convinced. They like to laugh a lot, and at times laugh problems off, but can be quite determined when it matters, even though the endearing sound of their language never appears to be dead serious.

For a long time, the Dutch were admired for their robust and lasting bicycles (in fact, the Nazis confiscated this national symbol). In current Germany they are known for their caravans with which they like to travel on the German Autobahn, slowing things down for the fast and furious (there still is no universal speed limit on German highways). If, however, the Dutch don’t pull a caravan, you can be sure to be overtaken by them.

Sounds too much like a cliché? Fair enough. Testing my description against the life and work of Reinder Bruinsma, please, indulge with me in clichés: a fellow sojourner, sometimes cautioning us to slow down with all our (denominational) baggage, at other times overtaking reservations with mind-boggling speed, demonstrating a robust and lasting intellect, a high level of tolerance, an amazing sense of humor, a willingness to adjust when needed, and a passion to “stand for the right though the heavens fall.” Adventism needs more of the Dutch. Reinder, van harte gefeliciteerd!

By Denis Fortin

I have known Reinder for many years, but it is only during the last 15 years or so that I have become better acquainted with his writings and insights on Adventism.

I remember a delightful conversation we had in a little café in Germany during a conference some years ago. While listening to him, I sensed that his many years of experience as a pastor, teacher, and church administrator had given him perspectives on human life and our Church like few people have.

Anyone who follows Reinder's "(almost) weekly" blog ([reinderbruinsma.com](http://reinderbruinsma.com)) can see how prolific a writer he has become and that he is able to write knowledgeably on many, many topics. Whether he writes about tulips in Holland, or the latest decisions of an administrative council of our church, or the discoveries of science, he is able to discern some helpful observations about life. And this is what I have particularly appreciated about Reinder's blogs, books, and articles—his ability to explain Adventism and make it relevant, not only to Adventist believers, but also to people living in a very secular context, such as the one he knows in the Netherlands and one that America will one day know. Many of these insights have arisen from knowing and realizing the complexities of human life in a sinful world and our limitations on really understanding this world or making sense of it.

Dear friend, I wish you a happy 80th birthday. Thank you for your gift of insights and for sharing your experience with us.



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My close personal journey with Reinder has been short, but I have known him for almost 25 years through his books. I think I first saw his name when reading his book *It's Time to Stop Rehearsing What We Believe and Start Looking at What Difference It Makes*. The title alone is worth buying it!

From 2006 onward, his dissertation, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes on Roman Catholicism*, was a frequent reference in classes I taught and research that I did (on Adventist interchurch relations in general, for my habilitation thesis to be published next month). It was good to know that at least one person had walked on paths similar to mine—actually quite a minefield! Well, he defused the explosives rather than blowing them up.

Since 2020, I have had the privilege of cooperating closely with Reinder in publishing the theological journal *Spes Christiana* ([www.eastrs.org/spes-christiana](http://www.eastrs.org/spes-christiana)) for EASTRS, the European Adventist Society of Theology and Religious Studies. Reinder serves as the editor. (I am just a volunteer looking at articles before publication.) When I look at the amount of his own published writings, it is simply overwhelming!

Thank you, Reinder, for surprising us again and again with wise words on almost all significant topics in the denominational sphere—and for supporting Adventist academia in so many ways. May many leaders like you bless the Church with their presence and their encouragement of research, discussion, and ministry that reaches beyond the traditional.

By Stefan Höschele

#### Editorial

Dear one here in the distance in order to engage in academic theology it may well be that one does not need to belong to a community of religious people, and/or believe in a particular version of religious teachings, or hold to doctrinal truths, or be a member of a church, or be a member of a denomination. I would like to see a study of Christian theology in a study program, not only of the kind that is often found in the United States, but also of the kind that is found in other parts of the world. The study of Christian theology should be a study that is not only of the kind that is found in the United States, but also of the kind that is found in other parts of the world. The study of Christian theology should be a study that is not only of the kind that is found in the United States, but also of the kind that is found in other parts of the world.

The issue of the 11th volume is dedicated to the topic of "Christian Spirituality." The authors present with the proceedings that Christian doctrine must always be accompanied by Christian prayer and that Christian theology and spirituality are inseparably intertwined. Without being anchored in Christian faith, spirituality lacks its theological and ecclesiological foundation. It is not a neutral, scientific, or philosophical study, but a study that is rooted in the Christian faith. The issue of the 11th volume is dedicated to the topic of "Christian Spirituality." The authors present with the proceedings that Christian doctrine must always be accompanied by Christian prayer and that Christian theology and spirituality are inseparably intertwined. Without being anchored in Christian faith, spirituality lacks its theological and ecclesiological foundation. It is not a neutral, scientific, or philosophical study, but a study that is rooted in the Christian faith.

First page of Reinder Bruinsma's editorial that appears in *Spes Christiana*, volume 33 issue 1, July 2022 (first published in December 2021).

By Robert Johnston

I first became acquainted with Reinder Bruinsma when he came to the Andrews University campus as a guest lecturer for the Institute of World Mission. We became friends, and since that time we have had a number of interchanges that were edifying, at least to me. We have similar interests and outlooks. I have made his book *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* recommended reading for my class in New Testament ecclesiology.

Dr. Bruinsma loves the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but it is not a blind love. Like many of us, he wants it to learn to be better, a better servant of our Lord. But Reinder is no sour complainer, no disillusioned idealist; he is always positive and sensible. His example encourages us not to give up on the Church but to serve our Master where we are, as He enables us. Narrow triumphalists may not find this sufficient, and some may even think him dangerous. But it is a good danger, faithfulness in the highest sense. May his tribe increase.



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By David Larson

Protective of the past, some leaders are steady, stable, and cautious. Leaning into the future, others are willing to risk new ideas and new ways of doing things. Reinder Bruinsma is both. “Balanced” is the word which best summarizes him to me.

He is a balanced leader who has served in many different ways in Europe, Africa, and North America. Although she is perhaps a bit more exuberant, his wife is also a balanced person. Her name is Aafje, and she is an editor, translator, and artist. Their lives began in the Netherlands, where they are now enjoying an active retirement.

In addition to translating many things for others, he has published 20 books and hundreds of articles. At this time, he is preaching, teaching, writing, posting a weekly blog, and editing a scholarly journal.

Bruinsma’s publications are as balanced as he is. They evenhandedly address controversial issues from abortion to Last Generation Theology and many things in between. He has views of his own on all these controversial matters, which he shares after he has surveyed the options. Yet he does so in a way that enables others to have their own views, too.

Bruinsma’s balanced approach is especially evident in a book which deserves more attention than it has received so far. Its title is *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church*. The Review and Herald published it in 2010 as part of *The Library of Adventist Theology* which George Knight and Woodrow Whidden II edited. Although it consists of 222 pages in 13 chapters—more scholarly than most of his other books—it is easy to read.

Its first and last chapters are about the present. They examine contemporary Christianity and its prospects and perils. Four of its chapters look to the past. They retrieve relevant materials from the Old Testament, New Testament, biblical metaphors, and Christian history. Seven of its chapters are about the future. Some are about the Church’s inner life: structure, governance, spirituality, and ordination. Others are about the Church’s relationships with the world: ecumenism, mission, and social justice. That this book about the doctrines of the Church includes a chapter on social justice is just one reason why we should read it!

His chapter on ecumenism is my favorite. He begins with the claim that Christian diversity is not necessarily “a sin.” He reviews the ecumenical movement and its fading energy. He traces Adventist attitudes toward interacting with other religious groups, especially Roman Catholicism, and he explains how they move in positive and negative directions. Here was yet another opportunity for him to side entirely with one way of looking at things or the other. He doesn’t. Splitting the difference, he (1) looks with favor on such interactions, (2) but only if they are in harmony with six principles which he articulates.

Typical Reinder Bruinsma. Typically balanced!

By Johannes Naether

In recent years Reinder Bruinsma and I have had many encounters from which I have benefited greatly. In Germany he was and is a very appreciated speaker and discussion partner. It makes no difference whether he is speaking to an academic audience or discussing with church members on Sabbath afternoon—Reinder always builds a bridge to his counterpart. It is his warm and approachable manner that puts people at the center and makes them feel: here is someone who is genuinely interested in me. In addition, Reinder has the gift of always combining deep thoughts with a bit of humor, which is simply pleasant.

With Reinder, I always sense a deep love for the Adventist Church. That is precisely why he is passionate about justice and open and honest dialogue in the Church. What will our Church look like in the next five to 10 years, and what changes do we need to be a relevant church in the 21st century? Reinder often focuses on these important questions, and the answers will contribute to the survival of our Church. He may sound radical in places, but Reinder rightly states that with the Holy Spirit we can take bold steps forward. In doing so, he strengthens trust in God.

I am impressed by the variety of topics he deals

with. Yet he is not superficial; he is truly a wise man who immerses himself in life with all his senses. As a leader of a church, I am fascinated that Reinder still credibly conveys his loyalty to the Church while dealing with critical topics that are not always in the mainstream of the Church. He has his own profile, so he comes across as very authentic when he speaks up for minorities, especially his courageous commitment to the LGBTQ issue. By doing so, he creates trust among those who have already distanced themselves from our Church and need good words to stay.

Throughout his life Reinder has become a role model. He has a deep Advent faith and a firm trust in God. He is hardworking, and he sees possibilities and opportunities which encourages many to continue to stay and get involved in the Church. If you want change, you have to contribute. Thinking outside the box is worthwhile. Creativity is rewarded.

What do I wish Reinder? Lots of time with Aafje, his dear wife, who supports him so valuably. I wish him good health and a lot of inspiration for further topics.

A special wish from me as a German: Dear Reinder, maybe we will have the opportunity to watch a soccer match sometime: Netherlands vs. Germany. We will eat good Gouda, matjes, and German bread. That will be a feast, wonderful!

By Helen Pearson

I first became aware of a bespectacled Dutch theology student called Reinder Bruinsma in the Newbold College school year 1964-65. He was a senior student, often seen in serious discussion with other budding theologians. I had newly arrived for a pre-university year. Junior females were mostly invisible as equal conversation partners for these serious young men. But I associate one sentence with him: “Dutch,” he asserted, “is the language they speak in heaven!”

With typical Bruinsma humour—a vital asset for any successful church leader—he expressed the serious concerns that have marked his work. Words and language, culture and identity—all of these matter to him. Reinder has always been a proud Dutchman and an equally proud European. Unlike many of his theological colleagues, few of his ideas about God or his Church come from a disembodied perspective. They are profoundly and knowingly rooted in an awareness of the motherland that nurtured him and of his own culture.

His perspective as a European Adventist has always been deeply grounded in a recognition that both the language and the style of faith expressions vary culturally. European Adventists, frustrated by the ethno-centrism of some Church leaders, have found in him a champion who understands the value and values of European history and culture. In every sense, he speaks his people’s language.

Reinder’s popular contributions to Newbold Diversity Lectures offered reliably straight speaking on language, culture, and identity. In 2000, in his lecture on “Adventism and Fundamentalism,” he looked at

Our paths first crossed some 50 years ago. Reinder was principal of our school in the Netherlands (Oud Zandbergen), established primarily to train workers for service in the Church. I taught then at Newbold College in England, and he invited me to come to his school and conduct a week of prayer for the students. I remember it well because it started a stimulating conversation that we have never finished. Whenever we have met since, whether in passing or working together, the conversation picks up and continues.

Do we always see eye-to-eye or agree in our analysis of the life, mission, and values of our Church? Of course not. “Of course not” because the conversation is with Reinder! These conversations have taught me the importance of talking, honestly and earnestly—especially with those with whom you do not agree. Genuine conversation does not require an agreement point of arrival. But it does require a shared care, or it becomes quite pointless. In the midst of our differences, Reinder and I share a deep, unqualified passion and love for the Church and her mission. Right or wrong, we know that the Lord expects loyalty of us. Reinder never gave me cause to question his loyalty to the Lord—including, or maybe particularly, at moments when I felt he should back off a bit and give it a second thought.

Around 1990, while I was president of the Trans-European Division, a departmental position became vacant at the division office, and I felt that Reinder should come home to Europe. He had by then spent many years in international service, and our Church and mission in Europe could benefit from his calling and skills. He came, and he stayed on at the division office after I had left, as one of the executive officers.

Reinder cares. He cares about the Church, about his colleagues, his friends, and his family. Reinder has the mind of a thinker and the heart of a caring person.



Adventists’ attitudes to biblical language. In 2005, recognising the deepening cultural rifts in the Church, his topic was “Diversity in Adventism: Boon or Bane?”

His leadership is marked by an ongoing pastoral concern for dialogue and growing understanding between the differing groups in the Church and beyond. In 2016, his topic was “Difficult Conversations between Adventists.” His words speak for themselves: “Ideally, the enormous diversity among Adventists should make conversations rich and rewarding, and should provide a continuous learning experience. But ... our diversity, more often than not, changes open and constructive discussion into scenes of hostility, mistrust and polarization.”

Rifts between dogmatic groups both in and between Christian churches often make dialogue impossible. But not for Reinder. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard him verbally attacked by those who disagree with him face to face. He gently holds his ground—always with a fraternal reconciling spirit.

Reinder and Aafje, his gifted and artistic wife, do more than “talk the talk” of concern for different groups elbowed out of the Church by exclusive power-based theologies. They also “walk the walk”—regularly spending social time with those in the LGBTQ+ community and ministering to those whom he has christened “the alphabet people.”

Reinder’s approach has come a long way since he discussed his ideas only with other theologians. If his brand of honesty, justice, and inclusivity is an echo of the language of heaven, I long to be there!

“A day  
without  
potatoes  
is a day  
wasted.”

Reinder Bruinsma has spoken and written many wise words. But these are the ones that I remember most readily: “A day without potatoes is a day wasted.” Not profound, it is true, but certainly memorable. I very much share Reinder’s views on potatoes—and much else besides.

Reinder has been able to communicate these shared views on a very broad platform. Hearing another express such views about Scripture and the Church has reduced that sense of isolation that I have sometimes experienced—and still do. It’s helpful that they are views expressed not just by anyone, but by somebody with authority and influence in the Church. His very broad experience as an administrator and a pastor means that his words cannot be summarily dismissed as the irregular musings of a mere academic. I owe him a debt of gratitude.

Reinder has the common touch, as the popularity of his many books demonstrates. He is a popularizer of difficult ideas without being a populist. He does not seek to divide. His criticisms of the Church are never mere carping. They derive from a deep and thoughtful loyalty to his Church, that is, from loyal opposition. He seeks to dissolve that complacency which too often characterizes the thinking of the Church’s leaders.

There’s a breadth to Reinder’s world. He knows a lot about Adventist faith and work but also about secular history and modern social political contexts. He knows and loves a great deal about his native Netherlands, but his knowledge is complemented by the life he has led in a number of other countries. This has fed his natural curiosity and readiness to listen to ideas different from his own.

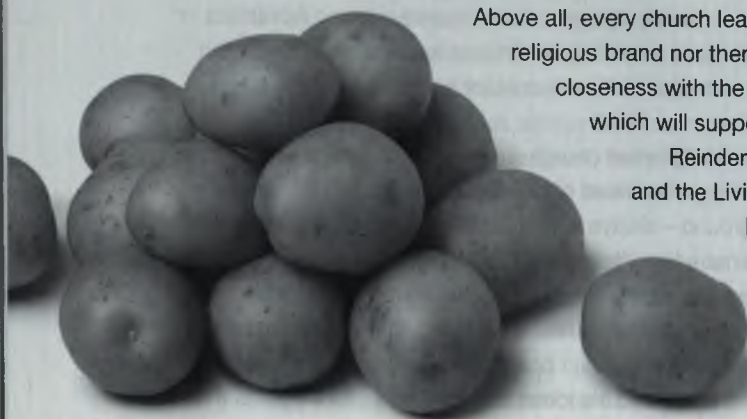
Thus he has been able to champion the interests of those who have been treated with suspicion by Church hierarchies—LGBT people, women, and academics among them. His labors have sometimes required a measure of courage. He also has huge energy for preaching, writing, and teaching—and a certain relish for life. He knows that the kingdom is now.

Unusually perhaps, this openness lives together with a grasp of detail. He has been able to master policy without obsessing about it. Because the bigger picture is always in view.

Credit for some of this is due to his artist wife, Aafje. She has helped him to see that truth and beauty often take different shapes. Reinder would not be who he is without her, and he is big enough to admit it. Every leader needs someone who will tell them privately and firmly about their misjudgments, their conceits, and their foolishness.

Above all, every church leader needs to be clear that they are promoting neither a religious brand nor themselves. They are inviting needy human beings into a closeness with the Living God, fierce and tender—and into a community which will support them in love.

Reinder can talk with a passion about potatoes, the Church, and the Living God. That’s the best qualification for Adventist leadership I know.



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