In this article, we present some results of a survey among Dutch Catholic pastors about their attitudes toward the church and professionalisation. After clarifying attitudes based on theological concepts like authority, apostolicity and local leadership, we examine attitudes towards aims and responsibilities of professionalisation policies. Then we interpret the relationship of the two groups of concepts as a theological legitimisation of pastoral aspirations towards professional development and emancipation. According to a multi-level party model of professionalisation we discuss church constraints relating to professionalisation, and the chances of support for a policy aimed at professionalisation. Finally, we discuss the theological advisability of pastoral professionalisation, by determining its moral contribution to the development of the church.

Rural metaphors in which devoted shepherds lead the meek to pastures of plenty still have not lost their attractive aura. They offer warm feelings of solace and relief in times when a religious orientation often seems to be lost and pastoral leadership is longed for by at least part of the flock. As enriching as these Christian metaphors may be from a devotional point of view, one-sided Arcadian ponderings may also present a serious threat to denotative communication. This is the case when we take feudal images to be in themselves adequate concepts for understanding basic problems of pastoral work, church development and social modernisation. A more adequate approach to understanding and managing such problems is professionalisation theory. In this contribution we empirically clarify some ecclesiastical conditions and constraints of a policy aimed at the professionalisation of pastors. To be more specific, we describe some church concepts on the basis of ecclesiological literature, and establish their empirical basis in the attitudes of pastors, and subsequently determine how they influence support for attitudes about professionalisation. Studying the professionalisation of pastors is by no means a novelty. Priesthood was often regarded as a classical profession, and various studies have been dedicated to this subject (Fichter 1961, 1965; Schreuder 1964, 1970; Gannon 1971; Hall and Schneider 1973; Vera 1982; Bryman 1985; Keizer 1988; van Gerwen 1988; Brouwer 1995). Our study is based on a representative descriptive
and explorative empirical survey conducted among Dutch Catholic pastors in 1992, aimed at providing insight into how these pastors conceive of the theology of ministry (Schilderman 1998). In this contribution, we describe some attitudes held by pastors about professionalisation and the church and hope to clarify whether and how church theology legitimates pastoral policies by which pastors themselves gain professional control.

Our study is based on a representative sample of Dutch Roman Catholic pastors. Among the basic social characteristics are the following. Three fourths of the pastors were priests, one fifth were ‘pastoral worker’ (not ordained), and the rest were deacons. The average age of 55 was relative high, and we note that priests are on average ten years older than the ‘pastoral workers’. The majority of pastors report having had religious and mystical experiences, and regard closeness as an important source of religious experience. A majority of pastors exhibited little or no traditional pastoral devotion. When questioned on their pastoral working tasks, pastors reported that they wished to spend more time on pastoral care, catechesis and diaconal work, and less time on church development and liturgy. Pastors regard themselves as being competent in pastoral ministry. Our findings confirm this by a high level of support for professional attitudes (Schilderman c.s. 1995). At the same time this is undermined by a very low level of professional skills. Generally, pastors are satisfied with their various working tasks but only a small minority are satisfied with their career and employability. Furthermore, pastors experience very little professional support outside their immediate work situation. They report role conflicts, especially in contacts with church members. Pastors expect that the Christian identity of their ministry will survive in the future, though they also expect that there will be a certain amount of specialisation towards existential aid.

We will now clarify the pastors’ attitudes towards the church, on the basis of ecclesiological concepts (1). Subsequently we illuminate the pastors’ attitudes towards professionalisation on the basis of professionalisation literature (2). We will then go on to examine the extent to which the church attitudes offer legitimation for various aspects of the professionalisation policy, and explore the relevance of other characteristics of pastors (3). We will indicate some constraints of a policy of pastoral professionalisation (4). Finally, we will take the shepherds back to their sheep, by illuminating some theological notions which validate a pastoral professionalisation tuned to church development (5).

1. Church

What are the attitudes of Catholic pastors towards the church? From a theological point of view, this question has to be answered from the stance of