

## **11. The pastoral congregation**

*Pastoral care: also for people outside the church*

**Pastoral and missionary work are often seen as opposites. The minister and the elders are busy doing (crisis) pastoral work, which means they do not have time for 'looking outward'. According to this point of view missionary work is seen as 'additional activity', whereas pastoral work is often seen as something that belongs inside the church. Is that correct? What would that mean for the pastoral care provided by your congregation?**

It is the experience of many ministers that pastoral work has missionary aspects at the crossroads of life (baptisms, weddings, funerals). People come to a service who have not been to church for years or perhaps never. That does not mean that you must immediately give them an evangelisation talk, but it does mean that by being thoughtful you may be able to give people a positive image of the church. They are given food for thought (again).

*When the little girl next door had to go to hospital I asked often how she was doing. I also sent her a get well card. 'Saying prayers is a habit we have and we will also pray for you.' I was surprised when our neighbour was touched by that sentence, she was very pleased I had said it.*

*'I wish I belonged to a church', someone said to a colleague, 'you got such a lot of help from them when you moved, seems ideal to me.'*

*Our local minister does not just visit the members of his congregation who are ill but also sees other people who are in the village or the neighbourhood. He offers his condolences to all people who have suffered bereavement.*

*Sometimes the church flowers could be given to people who are not church members.*

**A number of suggestions**

- Pastoral work does not have to be a completely internal affair. Pastoral care is aimed at ‘all people whom the Lord brings us into contact with’, says the Dienstboek (Church ‘Manual’). It is exactly in the personal conversations that connections can be made between the Big Story of the Gospel and the everyday lives of people. When that is missing, people switch off. That is why the personal encounters during which faith and life can be discussed are of such vital importance.
- Pastoral care is not a task that is entrusted exclusively to the minister and the elders, it is a task for the whole congregation. Training is important. How do we learn to listen carefully without prejudices? How do we give people space, including those that are ‘different’? Are outsiders able to tell us about their difficult experiences with the church and faith, or do we immediately interrupt them and become defensive? In particular conversations with people outside the church need to be held in a calm atmosphere and they often challenge our ability to take it on the chin. Are we able to practise empathy?
- Pastoral care does not only consist of the individual contact in the home (‘home visit’). Pastoral work also takes place in house groups. Sometimes people can be helped pastorally by inviting them to discuss a particular subject: faith education, grieving, faith questions, how to handle stress.... You might consider a course about faith education or a marriage or relationship course. That is interesting and relevant, also to people outside the church.
- All sorts of encounters in the neighbourhood, where you as congregation members are on the lookout for relationships to be forged, have a pastoral aspect. You might like to organise an ‘open house’ in the neighbourhood, a games afternoon with a meal on Boxing Day, a New Years Day reception for the whole neighbourhood, a Mums and Toddlers morning, a coffee morning, a meal for singles or a drinks afternoon on a Friday for senior citizens. In short, pastoral work is also something for the wider circle.

NB: it is a misunderstanding to think that every registered member costs the local congregation money that for that reason payment has to be made to the national church in Utrecht. The local charge, the so-called church quota, has not been based on the number of members for years, but on other criteria such as the local income of the congregation. Only the diaconal quota and the solidarity chest are based on the number of confessing members of a congregation. This means that it is not an economy measure to encourage congregation members who are adherents to give up their membership. Don’t do it! It is much easier to approach people who are registered and to invite them to take part in a conversation.

## **Possible approach for the church council**

- If as a congregation you want to make pastoral care one of your strong points, then strengthen this work. All sorts of training courses are available Good pastoral care is demanding. It is important to be a good listener, to ask the right questions, to keep the right balance between distance and closeness. You can receive training for this as church council and offer the congregation training as well.
- Emphasise that it is not just the 'own circle' that is important, but that pastoral care also encompasses relationships with people outside the church.
- Offer training. Good pastoral work is demanding, it takes it out of you. You can get training as church council and also offer courses to the congregation. Ask your congregation advisor for help.
- Look into opportunities in small groups and all sorts of forms of meetings. What suits your congregation, what does your neighbourhood need? Pastoral care is a wide field. Do not try all sorts of things simultaneously. Start with one or two opportunities that suit you and your environment.