

13. The congregation as monastery

Looking for meaning

People are looking for meaning in all sorts of ways. The questions about the meaning or otherwise of life, about love, about meaningful relationships and the task you have in this life occupy people's minds, inside and outside the church. Do we as church have something to offer in this respect?

Religion is 'in' again. Reflecting, experiencing, feeling something of the divine, in yourself, in other people, in the world around you. Meditation and prayer, interest in Buddhism, reincarnation, living thoughtfully, and also: letting yourself be led by people who 'see' more, being a medium, having paranormal gifts. Bookshops are full of books about esotericism. People in the church, too, occupy themselves with these subjects, they look for other ways and connections with this new religiosity. Very often all this searching is referred to as 'new spirituality'. Spirituality is a word that can mean many different things, but one thing is certain: it has to do with 'spirit', with what there is 'more' between heaven and earth.

Can the church accommodate these questions? Are they picked up and heard? When people are searching and have special experiences, can they be discussed in a safe environment? Do we as church have something to offer?

Our celebrations are often very verbose: many words. Would it be possible to have more silence, more concentration? What is there we could learn about mediation, from the point of view of the Christian tradition?

The church as monastery

The books of Henri Nouwen, Anselm Grün, Jurjen Beumer and Wil Derkes are very popular. They point the way in terms of spirituality. They connect, search for and describe the experience of having been found. They offer a good basis or a discussion group, which also has something to offer to people outside the church. The Benedictine spirituality and thoughtful way of living helps people to make connections between faith and life. During monastery weekends participants can have a rest and catch their breath.

Jeroen Jeroense, a minister in Elst, thought of an ‘umbrella’ for the congregation that wants to use this method to give people space when they want to look for meaning. That umbrella is ‘the church as monastery’. The monastery is a community of monks that offer hospitality and many ways to catch one’s breath. More than words and meetings. There is room for celebration, for silence, for meditation and prayer. People eat and drink together, they exchange experiences, people work together using their hands, and in all these meetings there is room for God.

A number of suggestions

- *Every year a group from our church go to a monastery. This group includes people who hardly or never attend church.*
- *We spent a few evenings watching the BBC series ‘The Monastery’ about people from all layers of society who entered the monastery. What are their experiences? And how do we respond? We all invited a friend from outside the church to join in both watching and responding.*
- *Every season our minister organises a series of evenings during around an author or thinker. We have discussed mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Hadewych, but also contemporary authors such as Hans Stolp. We read and hear about all sorts of forms of spirituality. We make sure that there is good PR in the door-to-door paper.*
- *We go on a pilgrimage every year. We walk and the conversations become conversations about faith as a matter of course. We stop off at chapels, churches or monasteries for a rest. We go inside and are quiet for a while. Then somebody reads a text. After that we leave the church in silence. We continue walking and talking. Who takes part? People from our circle of friends and acquaintances. Church members as well as non-members.*
- *In the protestant congregation of Elst life is based on the model of the monastery. The church is a place with a number of different ‘rooms’: for meals, for reflection, for silence. The Rev. Jeroen Jeroense said: ‘We can learn things from the monastery. From that tradition we only took over the chapel and the meetings. But the monastery is much richer. In the monastery you find everything that can be found in a community. Eating, sleeping, making music and brewing beer. I try to integrate all these things in the congregation. We have a meal group, a learning house and a spiritual café. God does not only speak to us in celebrations, we can look for him in all things.’¹*

¹ The Rev. Jeroen Jeroense, *De kerk als klooster (The church as monastery)*, Publisher Narratio

Possible approach for the church council

- Do you as church council recognise this searching attitude, these questions about meaning and the new forms of spirituality inside and outside the congregation? What is the evidence you see of this in your environment? What are the questions you come across and what is on offer (bookshop, courses, and spiritual centres)? Do you think that you as congregation have something to offer here? How?
- Discuss the brochure ‘The church as monastery’¹. What are the rooms in the monastery you recognize as your own? Which ones would you open to your community? What is on offer?
- Start a conversation with people who are asking or have asked questions about meaningfulness and the new forms of spirituality. Are there people in your congregation who have experiences in this respect? Invite them to tell their story.
- What kind of offer could your congregation make to your environment? How does that fit in with your own identity? What are the Christian sources you could use in this respect?
- Make a concrete offer (group, course, celebration) and invite a target group. Good PR is very important here! Make sure you have a secure atmosphere. Very often there is suspicion of the church (‘is there really space for my experiences?’). Also, make sure that there is clarity with regard to your own story. Ask people outside the church for their ideas and their evaluation.

¹ The Rev. Jeroen Jeroense, *De kerk als klooster(The church as monastery)*, Publisher Narratio