

## 15. The congregation for the village

*Being small is an opportunity as well!*

**‘We are small.’ The same applies to many congregations in (small) villages. Are we *only* small?. Is that a crisis or perhaps an opportunity? Being small also means: being non-threatening, to know each other and to be known, community. That is the strength of a congregation in the village. ‘Having a recognisable presence’ and showing that you are church for the village.**

To be small and to get smaller can be discouraging. What can you do? The village is greying, the people are moving away, there are hardly any facilities left. ‘How God disappeared from Jorwerd’<sup>1</sup>?

And yet, the small congregation is still a congregation! *Jesus says: ‘For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.’* (Matthew 18:20).

That gives hope. The question is: to which extent is this realisation alive? If there is no longer a connection with the Source, with the life in Christ, people switch off. The connection with Christ, despite of the different ways in which it is experienced will at least have to have some meaning in the life of everyday. That is inspiring, even in the village.

The trouble is that in particular for people in a village it is often difficult to start a personal conversation about their faith. Perhaps you know each other too well. And yet... it can be very meaningful when the congregation as a community is strong in the personal encounter, in the joint prayer. That is inspiring, and you notice that more quickly in a village than in a big city, where the anonymity is great.

*Our church emblem is surrounded by the following text: church in the village and church for the village.*

### **Having a recognisable presence**

It is important for the church in the village to have a ‘recognisable presence’. To be church for the village, not only for the church members. Do we only pray for those who are ill and are church members or do we also pray for the family whose members are not active in the church and who mourn a father who died this week? Is the pastoral work only for the church’s own members or also for ‘everyone we meet’? And the diaconal work? What are the needs of the village? How can we as church do something about these? How can talk about the Good News, especially in an environment with which we are so familiar?

It is trickier when there are several churches in the village and the cooperation is limited. It is also possible that the church is a gathered church and that a number of villages form one congregation. If that is the case you might think about the opportunities that exist to mean something to your environment, to be present, not as *the* church in the village but as a caring community.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd

*The reformed church in Zuilichem has a number of congregation growth groups, one or more in each village. In this way the congregation members show solidarity and are also involved in their environment, their village, their neighbourhood.*

*The church council of the reformed church of Winsum in Friesland responded to a call from the authorities in Southwest Friesland in connection with the Law on Social Support<sup>1</sup>. The church created a working group: Wellbeing in Winsum, which organises all sorts of activities in the village (casserole meals, sports afternoons, coffee mornings). The working group does not have church flavour but there is appreciation in the village that the church is working so hard for the village, according to the minister, the Rev. Hibma.*

### **Getting on with it**

All this means that you have to get your finger out. Think about how things are going. Try something new. Not getting stuck in the old and familiar routines if they stop you from becoming pro-active outside the walls of the church. Not hanging on to old family feuds that started ages ago. Start talking.

What is our village really like, what sort of people live there, what are their hobbies and interests? Villages are the places where there are age-old traditions of village festivals, fairs and all sorts of cultural, sporting and folkloristic events that are attended by the whole village. Are you in attendance as church? Before the minister is called to the church does he or she know what is expected of him or her in this respect? To have a recognisable presence and in this way to show everyone that you are church for the village. In this way you do not remain an outsider but you will gain sympathy, even from outsiders.

The minister has an important role to play in this. Have a look at churches in other villages and see what they have come up with.

### **A number of suggestions**

- Discussion groups about faith and life to which acquaintances and neighbours are welcome too.
- On the starting Sunday keep the church open during the whole day with all sorts of activities. The whole village is invited by means of a colourful folder and an announcement in the village newspaper.
- Every Wednesday a small library in the church.
- Concerts and exhibitions in the pretty little church.
- Cooperation with neighbouring villages: you do not have to do everything.
- In a church in a tourist area keep the church open during the summer. Serve tea and soft drinks for visitors.
- Create an information booklet for summer visitors and have a think about other activities that may interest them (a children's club, summer evening concert or choral singing in the evening).

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<sup>1</sup> WMO or: Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning

- During the winter months meals as a meeting opportunity for the whole village, to break through the loneliness of many elderly people.
- Being stylishly and creatively present at village festivals
- Distribute the church newsletter door-to-door with a degree of regularity. (If necessary reduce the costs with advertising for local enterprises). Think carefully about the content: internal church matters are not interesting, think about what might interest your fellow villagers. Not too much text, include some photos!

*We are taken seriously as a church. When the village hall organises something the church is involved and vice versa. The church magazine and the door-to-door newspaper have joined forces: church announcements are included among other announcements.*

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

- As church council think about your position in the village. What will the future bring? Are we prepared and able to change? What is important to us in terms of faith and being church? How do we do something about that?
- Are you able to have a discussion about faith? See also model 2
- Do you want to be church for the whole village? What are the concrete ideas that occur to you? Make an inventory of plans, involve the congregation in them.
- Then select a few and carry them out.
- Do not try to everything yourself; invite congregation members and people from the village to take part in the organisation and outworking.

*In the folder 'Opportunities for the small village church'<sup>1</sup> (June 2004) you will find more information and examples. You can order this via [bestellingen@pkn.nl](mailto:bestellingen@pkn.nl), tel. (030) 880 13 37.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kansen voor de kleine dorpskerk