

18. The congregation with a heart for young people

Relations, relations and once more, start relations with them

There are congregations that give priority to young people (age group 12 - 25). Does that mean that older people are neglected? Not necessarily. The present situation means that not attention is given to young people. They feel as if they are invisible, neglected, not at home, they do not have the impression that church and faith involves them. Would it be possible to change this?

An elderly man said to his minister: I know very well what I have to look for in my life. Please give our young people all your attention.

In the Dutch Reformed Church in Houten the congregation decided years ago to make young people their priority. At a congregational meeting one evening they drew up an inventory: where do we expect to be in ten years' time? How will things be for our children? Will they still come to church? The members' own predictions painted a less than rosy future. Immediately they decided to change course. We'll go for young people! This meant among other things a change in the way the church service was set up. The main service is now at 14:00 hours in the afternoon. In the morning there is a more traditional service (see also model 10). In the meantime there has been an enormous growth spurt. Every year many young people are received into membership, some of them are baptised.

It starts with the young people

'To go for young people' does not mean that suddenly you have to start preaching and speaking in a popular style. Nor does it mean that immediately you have to adopt all sorts of different forms, hymns or styles of music. The forms will change, but that is not where it starts. The start lies with the relations with the young people themselves. Who are they? What is important to them. How can we take them seriously, involve them? What is important is joint responsibility.

Ria (49): 'Sometimes I ask young people questions that I cannot even answer myself. At first I thought that this meant that I was a bit ill equipped due to that fact. But a little while ago I had a personal conversation with Pieter, a teenager, about being scared of God. This touched me and I told Pieter about the fears I used to have and how that had changed for me. It was a very good conversation, Pieter asked me all sorts of questions, he felt able to share more of his doubts and when he left he was obviously a lot calmer. And all this despite the fact that we talked for less than 10 minutes and I had not really given him an answer!'

So you can see that it requires a new attitude on the part of the congregation. Will the congregation be open to the concerns of young people? If so, that means that there will have to be changes.

A number of suggestions

- What is needed is dedicated congregation members, people with a passion for young people and willing to empathise with their feelings and concerns. People who have something to contribute without wanting to be centre stage. Not people who have answers to all the questions, but those who know how to listen and who are fascinated by young people. Activities and forms take second place. The most important question is and remains: are we prepared to change, to contribute thoughts and to go along with the ideas of the young people?
- What we are talking about here is a process. Is it possible for a youth group to be formed? That can then be the base from where other young people can be contacted. It works much better when teenagers and young people invite each other.

Our congregation organised a Youth Alpha course on Saturday evenings. The evening finished at nine o' clock. After that the young people went out together and in the pub they would continue their conversations, sometimes until very late at night. They did not need adult leaders for this.

Hanneke (16): for some time now we have been doing Provider in our church; this some sort of catechism course, but much more interesting, more varied. The atmosphere is good and we deal with very interesting subjects. Now I am taking two of my friends along, whom I know through school. They do not go to church, but never miss a Provider evening, and they also come to the teen service.

Possible approach for the church council

- Are you a congregation with many young people? What do you do for them or with them? JOP has a 'quicksan' to help you find out what the situation is like with regard to young people in your congregation and where the white spots are. See: www.jop.nl/diensten. The HGJB and Youth for Christ can also help you with training. See www.pkn.nl/missionair at this model.
- If you decide to make young people your priority, what does that mean in terms of your policy? How much money can you spend on this, but also: how many changes are you prepared to make in the church service? Before you come to a decision some reflection is needed. Where is our heart, what do we long for? Do we believe in the possibility that we can start up something with young people and that we as congregation can be of importance to them?
- Which congregation members are willing and able to start up a conversation with young people? Make contact with them. When starting these relations do not forget resources such as internet, email, Hyves.

- Right from the start involve the young people in the congregation in the process: ask them to contribute ideas, to join in, to search, and to accept responsibility.
- Also ask young people to be co-organisers of current activities; challenge them to make their own contributions.
- Do young people have their own space in the church? Ask them to contribute ideas for decoration and furniture.
- Find out what the possibilities are. Go and have a look at congregations who have made more progress than you in this respect. For examples: see website.
- Find out what opportunities there are outside your own congregation for young people. Taize, the Xnoizz flevo festival¹, other conferences and camps. Other impulses might also be fruitful for strengthening the ties within the congregation.

¹ An open air festival in the Netherlands with a Christian identity, with live music, speakers, theatre, cabaret and sport.