

## 19. The congregation with an eye for target groups

*A flourishing community will attract new target groups*

**A congregation that thinks about target groups is better able to connect with people. When people are approached and invited with a programme that is attractive they will be more ready to come. For that reason you need to think about your environment in a focused way and be concrete in you offer to your target group. Is the congregation no longer there for everybody? Practice has shown that when you choose one target group this does not exclude others. A flourishing community will always attract new target groups.**

People differ. There is no 'average' family. Every minister knows how difficult it is to write a sermon that speaks to people in the church. Young, old, single, married, different levels of education, different backgrounds. This is despite the fact that most church congregations are reasonably homogenous: white, average professional education level and the average age a little older than those around them.

*A pastoral team in a large city realised that it was impossible to visit all members of the congregation with any degree of regularity. They decided to visit a different age group every year. Together they concentrated on that phase of life. They exchanged the subjects that occupied people. They found it instructive and inspiring. In some cases it led to starting up a discussion group around a subject that occupied that particular age group.*

*A village near a university town had many people with a university education. In addition many millionaires moved to that village. The church council started to think about this target group. They do not go to church and are not very likely to get over that threshold. At the same time there are many life questions that occupy them. A member of the church council belongs to this target group and started to organise a themed drinks hour at his home on Sunday afternoons. 'Rich people also want to mean something', he says. 'Let us ask them if they would like to be involved financially in the maintenance of the church building. In exchange for a beautiful concert.'*

*In a commuter village many young women are at home with their children during the day. They hardly know each other and feel alone and isolated, according to a report from the GP to the church council. They set up a women's discussion group on a Wednesday morning, with a crèche. They also start a 'fathers' counselling group'. How are we as fathers involved with our children? Men from outside the church join in as well.*

*This is a medium-sized town with many care homes. The church congregation has to spend much energy to visit all those elderly people with any degree of regularity. 'Missionary work? We really cannot take on this as well. Until we thought that all that visiting might have a sort of missionary effect. We really do not just look out for our own members; we also make contact with other elderly people. This target group is our strong point and we getting ever more creative in finding ways to be there for them; there are good contacts with the directorates of the homes, we contribute ideas and to give an example organised for a children's choir to go to the homes to sing on a regular basis. We are there as church, in particular for the elderly! We used to think: if only we could get these visits done then we could go on to something else. Now we concentrate specifically on this group and on our encounters with them. That has a relaxing effect and gives energy. We do not have any younger people or children in our congregation and therefore we do not focus on them.*

### **A number of suggestions**

- In addition to concentrating on children and young people you could also think of other 'groups'. Which is the age group that is missing in your church? Very often people speak about 'the hole in the church': the generation between 25 and 40 years of age. Even within this generation there are many differences. You might think of young families, but also of single people, of people who are still studying or those who are making a career. What characterises this group? What are their questions?
- You could also think of the elderly as a target group. A congregation that consists mainly of senior citizens should not think that it is easy to connect with young people and children. It is probably better to concentrate on other senior citizens in the neighbourhood or town.
- When talking about target groups you might also think of singles, people who are divorced (either with or without children), people from different 'layers' of the population, homeless people, people who have a profession in common - and probably would like to exchange experiences about that.
- When you think about 'target groups' in your neighbourhood it is important to establish in how far your own members have contact with this group. If this is not the case it will much more difficult to mean something to this group. In that case cooperation with another church congregation might be an option.

*We re a church of elderly people in an older district of the town. We do not have any younger people. We concentrate on the older people around us. And the remarkable thing is: despite the fact that we are greying we are not shrinking. Every Friday afternoon we organise a drinks hour in the church and we invite our friends and acquaintances out to join us; as a result some of them have started coming to church again. We do have contact with another congregation in the neighbourhood that has many children. We regularly organise a joint missionary children's service in our building. The children's choir comes to sing and the church is nice and full. We invite the whole neighbourhood to this service.*

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

- As church council find out which target groups in your vicinity need your attention. Ask GPs and social workers. What is going on in your town? What different sorts of people live there?
- Which activities in your congregation are suitable for particular target groups? How can you open them up to outsiders?
- Which activities could you start and who would be willing to take part in them?
- Would it be possible to involve people from that target group in organising these activities? Ask them from the start to contribute ideas, ask them for advice.
- Do not try to do too much, start with one or two activities for a particular target group.