

22. The congregation at the crossroads of life

The church comes into the picture at times of crisis or celebration

For many people the church comes back into the picture at the crossroads of life, at times of crisis or celebration. This does not just apply to the church's active members but also to those that are more at the periphery and to outsiders, who come to the church at such moments. The church has something to offer.

A baby is born.

People have found love and continue the road together.

A great loss in the family.

You have lost your job, what will you do now?

A broken relationship.

Illness strikes.

An anniversary.

Retirement and then.....

People have life-changing experiences. The church offers help with rituals, symbols, gestures of comfort and nearness, hymns, prayers and texts. For many people the church comes back into the picture at the crossroads of life. They come to church, for grandmother's funeral, a wedding of friends who married in church, for the baptism of a nephew. They feel that there is much empathy in a church community during times of illness and sadness and in times of joy.

The church has something to offer, has resources for the road. Gestures of faith, hope and charity.

A number of suggestions

- The sacrament of baptism
- The funeral service
- The wedding service
- Anointing the sick
- Prayers for the road
- A discussion group about (faith) education

- An offer to parents and children when the children take the step to secondary education, during the church service or sometime during the week.
- A mourning group where people exchange experiences and comfort each other.
- Marriage catechism: a course for people who are getting married.
- A relationship course for people who have been together for years and want to build up their relationship further.
- An information evening for people who are in the process of ‘taking leave’.

The churches of Woerden put together a booklet with as title ‘When you have to say good-bye’¹. This is a quote from the foreword: ‘As early as the first centuries the Christian congregation recognised that one of their tasks was to give people a decent funeral, including those that did not belong to the congregation. Today we as churches want to provide this service based on the belief that every human being is a unique creature of God and that for that reason everyone deserves a dignified funeral.’

Are we as church willing and able to be there for people who only come occasionally? Even for those who are not faithful churchgoers, the ones on the periphery? Are we prepared for the minister to be available? Are there other church members who could play a part in this? It does not need to be complicated. Here are some suggestions:

- A New Year reception for the neighbourhood or the village
- An Easter brunch in the church square
- A brochure about the church in the hall, including for those who only come to funerals and weddings
- A little book about baptism, about wedding celebration, about mourning, to be distributed to relatives, friends and others who are interested in these celebrations
- An offer for a discussion groups for parents of children to be baptised
- Prayer cards for the passer-by who is looking for words and enters the church
- A discussion evening for people who will stop working in the near future (with people with experience and expertise)
- A ritual about divorce in order to acknowledge the powerlessness, the hurt and/or the guilt and to bring these before God.

Not all those who come on these occasions will keep coming. They come in for a moment and leave again. Sometimes there is only one chance to give an impression of what church and faith are. That can be a positive link on the road through life. Exactly at these moments hospitality is important. An attitude that is inviting. Not thinking (and showing the feeling!) ‘this is the only time they come’ or ‘they are sitting in my pew’. Or: ‘it is a failure if someone does not want to come again’. Just joining them on the road, making an offer from the strength and own identity. Because people may have a need for more, in particular at the crossroads of life. Or because they come along for the sake of their family and friends. Just getting across the threshold is quite a big deal in such cases.

¹ Als je afscheid nemen moet

Important 'crossroad' in people's lives can also be a disaster that affects the whole community. Just think of Volendam and Enschede. Or a fire in which people in the village are killed, a murder. Something that has a great impact on the whole community. Especially on such occasions the church can play a valuable role. Is the church included in the local 'disaster plan'? Find out.

After the attempt on the Queen's life on the Queen's birthday in 2009 the Rev. Rob Visser from the Grote Kerk in Apeldoorn went immediately to the place where the attack happened to be there for the rescue teams. The church remained open in the days after the disaster. People were given the opportunity to tell their story and to light a candle. There were special memorial services, including one for children.

Possible approach for the church council

- As church council think about the crossroads of life. Make a list of possible crossroads. How were you helped by the church at such moments, how was your faith strengthened? In what way could you mean something to people outside the church? Is that a question of 'you ask and we do it' or do you do it from your own strength and identity? If not how?
- Look for people in the congregation who are able and willing to be present and available for others. To give an example: A funeral service does not need to be led by the minister. Training is available for people who want to learn to do this. At crossroads hosts and hostesses are very important.
- Work out the possibilities into concrete plans. Distribute the task among a number of people, depending on their affinity with a particular crossroad.