

## **25. The congregation in a multicultural context**

**When you eat together you learn to live together**

**Psalm 117:1 Praise the LORD, all nations! Praise him, all peoples!**

**Many churches in the larger cities are in the middle of neighbourhoods that are populated by new Dutch citizens, people from other cultures. Some of them are Christians, but there are also those who belong to different religions. They may be new neighbours, but they may live a bit further along, in the centre for asylum seekers just outside the village. What does the church do when it is surrounded by people from other cultures? What is there to be discovered and learnt?**

The first congregations consisted of people of a great variety of cultures. The congregation in Corinth consisted of all sorts of nationalities and ranks and estates. In the Netherlands there are not only about 850,000 Muslims but also 850,000 Christians who meet in migrants' churches. The organisation SKIN (Samen Kerk in Nederland or: Being Church together in the Netherlands) supports these churches.

What is obvious is that the church is not an island.

### **A number of suggestions**

- First of all: look for the encounter, the conversation. A joint meal offers good opportunities for this. In addition informal meetings between women from different backgrounds and cultures can also be very fruitful. This breaks the isolation, across boundaries there will be recognition and appreciation. People who eat together will learn to live with each other, listen to each other, even when it involves things such as intolerance, discrimination and exclusion. When we get to know each other we discover how we can work and live together and together fight for justice.
- How about interfaith discussions? In this way you can discover similarities and differences between faiths. Such conversations can of course be held only when they are based on equality and mutual respect.

- From the policy plan of the services organisation: *Missionary work presupposes that there is an attitude of dialogue when we regard it as legitimate that salvation is also carried by others outside our own circle. God has turned to the whole world. In the Christian community we cannot do without the realisation that there are other religious traditions in our country. We are looking to have a dialogue with them, with respect for their religion.*
- Sometimes church and mosque can cooperate in the neighbourhood, to remove suspicion, to counter unrest. A precondition for this is of course that you know each other and that you know where to find each other. The schools can play an important part in this too.

*In May 2009 the Council of Churches in Tilburg organised an interfaith, intercultural day. A day on which people were given the opportunity to experience that religion and culture make a positive contribution to the encounters between people of different origins, faiths and cultures.*

*The Joriskerk in Amersfoort has much experience with caring for asylum seekers. For information you can contact Leendert Wolters, [lwolters@hgjb.nl](mailto:lwolters@hgjb.nl).*

- Open your own ‘white’ church for people from different cultures. Are they made to feel welcome? Do you have a loop for translation purposes?
- There are of course all sorts of possibilities on weekdays: house groups, help with homework and housework, and help with learning the Dutch language.

When people are really allowed to take part, then this does not just change the composition of the congregation but also the colour, in a literal and a figurative sense. The congregation will begin to look more like a collection of people from all sorts of nations, races and cultures and from all ages. The homogeneity (white people with higher professional education) makes place for a greater diversity. That is a big change, but not an impossible one.

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

- As church council have a look at your neighbourhood. What do you see? What are the contacts that are in place already? What is there you can build on?
- Are there people and organisations from other cultures you can ask for advice? We recommend strongly that you do so. Go to the municipal advisor, have a look at municipalities that have experience in this field.
- Go to other churches and congregations that have experience with this. (See also the website for model 25).

- Start with small steps that are suitable to your situation: an invitation for a meal, a visit to a migrant church, making contact with the mosque around Ramadan. If it concerns asylum seekers it is advisable to make contact with refugee work organisations.
- Do not give up too quickly. It is a question of getting used to each other, on both sides. Keep looking for opportunities and remain faithful and reliable.

A good example of a congregation that has several nationalities is the Scots International Church in Rotterdam, part of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The church council consists of a number of nationalities: Dutch, American, Nigerian and Ghanaian. See [www.scotsintchurch.com](http://www.scotsintchurch.com).

For help and advice you can also contact Theo Visser, [www.icpnetwork.nl](http://www.icpnetwork.nl) and SKIN, [www.skinkerken.com](http://www.skinkerken.com).

Theo Visser, a Christian-Reformed minister in the Tarwewijk, a neighbourhood in Rotterdam says: *In my opinion there is nothing more enervating than being the minister of an international congregation. All these different cultures, habits and personalities! More than forty nationalities that together form one family! In the challenge of our multicultural society you see than nobody can be more unifying than the living Christ. (...) I dream of a new movement of God's Spirit by congregations where the cultures can find each other in the worship of God. He is worthy to be praised by all tongues, languages and ethnicities!*