

27. The shrink without cramp congregation

*The pleats of the shrink contain the opportunities**

Churches are closed, faith communities disbanded. They can no longer manage. It is impossible to find the funds to pay the expenses for the church that is emptying. The small group of elderly people managed to struggle on for a bit longer, but now the axe falls. The church is closed, sold, sometimes it is even demolished. What can they do? 'It was unavoidable?'

It flourished for years, but now it is going down. In addition to the pain there can also be a feeling of failure: that it has all gone wrong. It is very likely that the congregation compare themselves with the flourishing congregation a few miles down the road. 'What did we do wrong?'

There can also be a feeling of relief. It is really not possible to carry on. We will just cut the knot and stop trying so hard.

Support will be needed

There are goodbyes and there is sorrow. The familiar church building will be closed. The place where people got married, the place where children were baptised no longer exists. There are also goodbyes and sorrow because of the community that is on the point of disintegrating. Sometimes church members are accommodated in a church building nearby, sometimes distributed over a number of neighbourhoods. Or else they will have to go to church in the next village. Do they have the courage and energy to do that? To start all over again, or that is what it looks like. Certainly not easy for older people.

It is very good to involve people from outside in these complex and emotional processes. Support will be needed; it would be too much to ask the cc to cope with everything.

The discussions about how to shape the farewell (the final church service, a meal to say goodbye, exchange reminiscences, giving objects from the church a new home) and the future are very important. Would it be possible for the remaining members in the village to form a circle, perhaps a small house church? Jesus promised: "Where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them." (Matthew 18:20).

It is also good to look back, to have discussions with people who 'switched off' and to listen carefully to what they have to say. Why did they stop coming? Or why did they go to another church somewhere else? This can lead to new initiatives and a newly found élan.

* *Quotation from Lutsen Kooistra: In de plooiën van de krimp zitten de kansen verborgen*

A number of suggestions

- Being 'small' does not have to be a weakness. People are returned to the basic forms of being together, of trust, of prayer, singing, listening to the scriptures and to each other and to look for what is good together.
- For some congregations this is a time of pioneering and a new start. (See model 26).

*Without small groups the chance of a successful new start is considerably reduced. We could even turn this around: it is possible that the gathering of small groups where two or three come together in the name of Jesus Christ and in his Spirit form the germinating cells of a new faith community. When the discussion about the faith in the small circle is the first form of building a church we also see what becomes possible when these same small groups are formed again (Henk de Roest in *The Living Body*¹, publishers Kok page 227).*

- Some congregations leave the old forms behind and start afresh. That requires vision and people who want to make a go of it. It also needs perseverance and faithfulness.

The pain and the resignation do not need to be the end of it all. Sometimes surprising new opportunities arise, close by or far away. In cooperation with others or in the small circle of the remaining congregation members.

Possible approach for the church council

- When church closure threatens or is imminent, make sure you as cc provide good support. You can appeal to your congregation advisor or other external supporters for help.
- Make sure that there is good pastoral care, emotions will run high. There will be sorrow and anger.
- Keep reminding the community of what lies at the heart of the church: singing, celebrating, reading the bible, prayer. The business side of things should not overwhelm everything else.
- Look for opportunities of hope in cooperation with others, from the community of those people who remain. What can we start? Can we form a small circle? Where can people go?

¹ Levend Lichaam