

### **30. The congregation that peeks to see what the neighbours are up to**

*Getting to know others is refreshing*

**“What do others do?” This is one of the four questions we asked at the beginning of this file. You are not the only church congregation in your area. In the Netherlands we have a rich variety of denominations. Do you know the churches in your area? What do they all do? What can you learn from them?**

When congregation members are abroad they sometimes come back with encouraging tales of what they saw there and what they experienced in the church. That can be inspiring!

This is sometimes more difficult in one's own country. Sometimes a neighbouring church community is seen as a 'competitor'. They have many young people, but also the young people from our congregation! Sometimes a neighbouring congregation was formed after a painful split. A church congregation sees whole families move away to the next village or town. That is painful. And it takes courage to go there, to want to learn and even to work together.

*'Our young people no longer go to church, but you do see them in the youth church in another village.' Have you been there to have a look? Would we be welcome there? Also, those kinds of celebrations are not my cup of tea, all that hallelujah business.'*

*'Young people? They all go to the one congregation in the town centre; they are stealing our young people.' But what could you learn from that one congregation in the town centre?*

Sometimes we only look at the differences. Don't! That can only keep you from learning the lessons that are there to be learnt. Are there perhaps forms that could be suitable for your congregation? And if you are not keen on what they do there, what are your strong points? The encounter and confrontation with a community that is completely different can encourage you to start thinking about your own church, your own identity. It is a bit like looking in the mirror. When you do have a look at the other church it is important not just to point out what is wrong with the others, but also to look for their strength and any weaknesses that may exist in your own congregation. In that way you can discover more and more about yourselves, about what you are and want to be, and why.

Having a look at what the neighbours are up to can be refreshing and therapeutic.

### **A number of suggestions**

- It is fortunate that many local congregations know all sorts of ways of cooperation and meeting. Local councils of churches, a pastoral team, and a prayer group for local ministers. When people know each other they become less shy. Very often congregation members already work together. Young people very often do not find church boundaries all that important and when left to their own devices start up all sorts of initiatives that are very often mission-driven.
- Very often morning meetings for women are driven by women from all sorts of local congregations. It is an eclectic mix: from protestant to catholic, from Baptist to evangelical. What binds them together is the desire to meet and have discussions about subjects that are not limited by church walls
- Don't forget the migrant churches in the Netherlands. There are about 800,000 migrant Christians in our country. Very often the churches are grouped according to nationality, but Christians from all sorts of countries also find each other in migrant churches of many different sorts. Contacts between these churches and the protestant congregations do exist, but they do not always run smoothly. Despite this fact, there is much to be learnt, in particular if it concerns the missionary challenge of the congregation. Sometimes cooperation is possible. In any case, the encounters and the relationships between the parties are very important for both sides. This goes further than the use of a building. When we learn to look across the boundaries this can lead to initiatives for the life of our own congregation. Sometimes a visit to a migrant church is less threatening than a visit to the local evangelical congregation, although form and content are often very similar.
- Then there are the contacts with churches in other parts of the world. The Protestant Church is part of a worldwide missionary network. Relationships with partner churches are often inspiring for our own way of being church. See also [www.kerkinactie.nl/interactief](http://www.kerkinactie.nl/interactief).

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

- As church council have a look at which church congregations and communities there are in your area. Do you have contact with any of them? Could you visit them? What can you learn?
- Do you have contacts with congregations in other parts of the world? What can you learn from them?
- Which inter-church activities are being organised in your area? Women's morning meetings, youth church services, purchasing cooperatives or anything else?
- Have a look around as church council. Divide into small groups and visit a church service of another denomination or a local congregation of a completely different colour. What strikes you? What do you find attractive?

- Look actively for contact and discussion. Do not try to do everything at once, start with what strikes a chord and what is most obvious. Gradually you will find opportunities for cooperation. Very often this starts with diaconal activities or meetings for young people. But it is also possible to strengthen each other's missionary efforts.
- A relatively simple way to make contact with each other is to have a meal together. Organise a nice meal, invite another congregation to be part of it and the next time go to them to eat (and cook) a meal. In this way you will get to know each other in a relaxed environment. See also model 28.

*In our town a number of different courses about the Christian faith are held. One congregation offers the Alpha course, the other one 7+1. We publicise them jointly in the local newspaper.*