

4. The congregation with a heart for communication

Words of this time, media of this time

Who are you as a congregation? What have you got to offer and how do you invite people to join in? Communication and PR are very important in every congregation. Some congregation are already very good at that. For others this may be the opportunity for a good start.

There is a lot that can go wrong with communication: people fail to understand each other, because there is 'interference' on the line. That can have many different causes:

- There is too much interference (sometimes you literally do not understand each other)
- You have a prejudice with regard to the other person and you colour him or her in: 'no doubt he will.....', 'she always.....'
- You do not understand each other's language, even though you both speak English
- You feel put under pressure by the other person and your resistance mounts
- Your lives do not touch each other and you no longer really talk; there is a distance.

When you want to tell others about the Gospel extra effort is needed. *Together with the congregations we will look for words that explain the Gospel in such a way that people will be moved*, the synod writes in 'Learning to live in amazement'.¹

All too often we speak the language of Canaan that nobody understands. What do we mean when we use words like 'forgiveness', 'justice', 'reconciliation' and 'mercy'? What does that look like in everyday life? Do we have words for these concepts? Of course the minister plays an important part in this way of thinking. Theology is connected with people's daily lives; the Gospel is relevant for people today.

In addition to this communication about the Gospel there is the more everyday communication between people. It is important that there are clear arrangements, that invitations are really inviting, that people know they are welcome, on the basis of words and gestures.

A number of suggestions

- Image a broad spectrum of suggestions, varying from a welcome in the pew, an information booklet and a folder to an overview of what is on offer in terms of education and equipping

¹ 'Leren leven van de verwondering'

- Try for a change to look ‘in from the outside’. How would an outsider read this text? Does he understand what it says? How does she see it? An example: *The neighbourhood team organises another house group. You are very welcome to join in on 13 March in the evening at the home of the Ter Steeg family, Hoekstraat 14. Subject: Willingness to serve.* Neighbourhood team? What is that? Something to do with the police? And house group? For someone on the periphery of the church that can be a very strange concept. What happens at such an evening? And at what time does it start? Does it finish at a particular time?
- Involve an interested outsider in your PR. Give him or her the messages to read. What do they make of them? Are they inviting? Do they make them want to go? *On some church congregations’ websites you will look in vain for an address or a telephone number. Sometimes the address of the church is not given and it may be quite difficult to find out when the church service starts. Just because these things are self-explanatory for you (‘everybody knows that’) does not mean that they obvious to an outsider.*
- The churches use an ever growing number of communication channels. In addition to the announcements during the Sunday morning service there are the weekly newsletters, church magazines, websites and people make more and more use of email. Then there is the local press (door to door papers, regional radio, newspaper). In all these cases it is important to ask yourself: what is the target group we want to reach? Is the message clear? Inviting? Does it contain all the necessary information (times, addresses)?
- Youth workers are on Hyves¹. They use images, film and You Tube videos.

Possible approach for the church council

- The church council decides to make ‘communications and PR’ a priority. This is not just about the ‘how’ (form) but also about the ‘what’ (the content of the message).]
- Then two lines are followed:
 1. A working group that concerns itself with the ‘content’: how do we communicate the Gospel with words of our time? The minister will be part of this working group.
 2. A working group that concerns itself with the lines of communications and PR within the congregation and towards those outside the congregation.
- Are there communication experts within the congregation? Involve them.
- Working group 1 approaches as many congregation members as possible. The faith discussion is stimulated via discussion papers and other written material. The church council’s mission is disseminated as clearly as possible. (In this context see also model 2, 3 and 29).

¹ Dutch equivalent of Facebook

- Working group 2 makes an inventory of all the possible communication channels. Which ones do we use? What have we got? What haven't we got? How can we publicise the activities we are already engaged in more widely? Outsiders are involved in judging the accessibility of texts and website. Evaluation will of course be a continuous activity: has this action produced anything via this channel? How can we do it differently/better?
- Do not forget the communication with children and young people. Are young people involved in the working groups? Do they contribute ideas, are they allowed to give advice?
- There is of course consultation between working group 1 and 2, this can be done via the person who acts as 'linking pin'. Work together to make a clear plan.
- Ask a number of people to monitor the communication and PR for a limited period. This assignment might be given to an elder with a special task.

Members of the congregation are encouraged to focus their thoughts on all communication aimed at 'guests'. Any ideas?!