

12. The congregation with a heart for culture

Beauty heals and comforts

Church and culture belong together, they influence each other. Art history students need to know the bible, otherwise much in art will be a closed book to them. Novels and poetry collections are often full of biblical images and references. And then there is music, with Bach's cantatas and St. Matthew Passion as highpoints for many. Not surprising then that many churches use their often beautiful, monumental buildings for cultural activities. What are your opportunities in this respect?

So the *building* can be a spur to a cultural activity, but the *environment* can be that as well. In Elst in the central part of the Netherlands there are many highly trained people who are interested in social and artistic subjects. (See also model 13). The Jordaan is a district of Amsterdam which is home to many artists.

Art and culture often ask questions about the meaning of life, about death, love and religion. That can be the basis for meetings and conversations.

A number of suggestions

- Open the church buildings in the summer months, tourists are shown around and around midday there is an organ concert.
- Organise a concert that is open for everyone, every month sometimes even weekly.
- Organise exhibitions.
- Ask congregation members to exhibit holiday or other themed photos.
- Ask different artists in the region to hold a joint travelling exhibition to be held in a number of churches.
- A poetry group can attract people from outside the church. Poets offer a language they can understand and which also provides new ways of expressing faith.
- Organise a film house: watch a film together and discuss it together.
- Stage a musical as church community.
- Join in with national days or weeks: the open monument day, the book week, the poetry festival, the 'belles lettres' festival, film days.

- Via the Christian literary consultation (www.christelijkliteraioverleg.nl) get hold of a poetry course for your congregation.
- A church-based painting club could paint bible stories and exhibit them once a year.
- In the province of Drenthe a number of churches open their doors with exhibitions between Ascension and Whitsun, see www.feestvandegeest.nl.

When you speak of culture, the question is: which culture?. The classical culture? Pop music? Bach or Andre Rieu? Large city or village? That will depend on the context of the congregation and the possibilities or limitations of the church building. Cultural activities can be organised in cooperation with local associations, book shop or gallery. Another possibility would be to bring in people from outside: theatre, musicians, and poets. Involve different target groups and ages.

Possible approach for the church council

- As church council appoint a working group that will draw up a year plan. Look for organisers but also for creative people.
- Make sure you have sufficient resources. What is the budget maximum? Funds are available for activities like these.
- Involve congregation members in the activities: hosts and hostesses, making folders, taking care of the interior, decoration and atmosphere.
- Involve people from outside the church as well in the setting up and organisation (local artists).
- Think about a possible follow-up: what if people show an interest in the church, in the church's message, in the meaning of all the stories? In the course '7+1 Meetings with God'¹ use is made of paintings to explain the bible stories. During a poetry or film group the discussion may go further than listening to beautiful poems.

At Monnickendam 'Areopagus' is showing, an initiative of the rev. Rieks Hoogenkamp. See www.areopagus.nl; see also: 'The Angel of Hoorn'². www.engelvanhoorn.nl.

On the website you can find all sorts of examples: www.pkn.nl/missionair, under model 11.

There was a VPRO programme called 'About beauty and solace'³, and beauty can indeed be comforting and healing. A concert as a bath of grace, good for the soul. Beauty makes you long for more, for a world that is different, full of harmony and peace. That can also be painful and such a contrast with the life of now that it makes you weep.

¹ 7+1. Ontmoetingen met God

² De Engel van Hoorn

³ Van de schoonheid en de troost

Art can also irritate, engender resistance, make you think, provoke from time to time. This too makes people alert and awake, not soothed to sleep by the amusement, but challenged to give a response.

Can we as church be a place where people are challenged to creativity? Where beauty is a value, where an institution can be allowed to be 'beautiful'? Could the plastic Formica tables and the plastic flowers be replaced by a more tasteful ensemble. Are we allowed to spend money on this? The gifts of the Spirit are not limited to providing leadership, serving, managing and good stewardship. There are also the gifts of creativity in all sorts of fields. Moses knew this when during the construction of the tabernacle he asked for people who are good at designing and making beautiful cloth. 'Dressing' matters. (...) Artists need space, the confidence of the congregation. The challenge from the church: come to us, take your place and show us what you can do! And, yes, sometimes they also need money. You cannot get ministers or musicians to work for you at a bargain price.

'If you no longer surprise people with beauty, they will lose courage'. (N. T. Wright)