

1. The hospitable congregation

The church as inn

Hospitable: it is a basic concept for the missionary congregation. Wanting to be missionary means practicing hospitality. For that reason this is the first model of the file. To which extent is your congregation hospitable?

Practicing hospitality. How do you do that?

Look at it through the eyes of a visitor. What does he experience when he enters the church for the first time? How is she received? Are visitors taken into consideration? How does that show? Ask your newcomers: what do you think of how you are received?

In Ermelo two elders asked two friends who had never been to church before to come to church with them. After the service the elders asked them for their comments. What did you think of how you were received? What were your critical thoughts?

Very instructive for the congregation!

When you receive guests in your home you take care that the house is tidy. You put away the mess. You make sure that there is a personal atmosphere in which people can feel at home.

The church as inn

Dr. Jan Hendriks, former congregation building professor uses the image of the inn for the hospitable congregation.

‘The inn is by the road that people walk. There people can regain their strength and catch their breath. The waiters are ready to serve. The same applies to the church. The church as an inn, that evokes an image of a church that:

- Stands by the road that people walk
- Is open and hospitable
- Is inviting
- Does not try to keep people inside, to convert them, but wants to provide them with what is needed so that they can go on their way, refreshed and possibly even with joy
- Offers the possibility for consultation to take joint action
- Brings companionship, rest and recreation

- Evokes an age-old image of leadership: ministers as servants, waiters at table, deacons that work in the spirit of the Owner.’

(from Jan Hendriks, *The congregation as Inn*¹, page 53, 54)

You can learn from guests

Hospitality asks for openness and vulnerability, to give people the chance to have a look t your life, what your home looks like. They can see a bit of how you do things. Perhaps they would like to ask some questions. Are they allowed to ask them? If they keep coming they may also influence the atmosphere and maybe the way your home is furnished. Do you want that?

Seen in a church parking lot: special places ‘for our guests’. The best places are for them. Or do we complain that ‘somebody has taken my space’ during a busy midnight service at Christmas?

Hospitality wants to find a balance between letting go and embracing. The guest is given space, but is not left to his own devices. He is met with concern and with an invitation. People take his needs into account. Sometimes people would like to ‘wait and see’, be present anonymously. Others would like to have a chat, to get to know more about the congregation, talk about their experiences. Tact and empathy are needed to handle this well.

Are you familiar with the 3 minute rule? Allow guests a few moments before approaching him. Wait 3 minutes before you engage them in conversation.

You can learn a lot from guests. They ask surprising questions. They are moved by a song or a text in a way that may be new and unexpected for you.

When I went to a church for the first time the minister said ‘let us pray’. And all those people put their hands together and closed their eyes at the same time. I thought that was wonderful. I thought to myself ‘God hear their prayer!’ and then I thought ‘Goodness, I am praying.’

Guests do not come automatically. It is not enough to say ‘The church is open every Sunday.’ For most people the threshold is too high. How can we be inviting and hospitable as a congregation? Go looking for possible guests! What kind of people are they? How can you mean something to them? Do not just think of the Sunday service but also of activities during the week.

A number of suggestions

- How about a cup of coffee before the service and/or lunch after the service.
- How are guests welcomed? Is there a host/hostess, with a badge?
- Is it easy to find one’s way around in the church building? Is there a crèche?
- Are there opportunities for guests in your congregation to get to know people (evenings for new arrivals, orientation evenings for guests)?

¹ Gemeente als Herberg

- Are people greeted (in the pew, when having coffee)?
- How about sending the flowers to someone in your town who is not a member?
- Ask new arrivals how they experienced their 'welcome'. How was the reception? What could be improved?
- Are there activities you could publicise in the local press? (See also the ideas about communication and PR, model 4)
- See also the book by Jan Hendriks, *Looking with other eyes*¹ for appealing examples from all sorts of congregations.
- The Foundation 'Leve de Kerk' (Long live the Church) issued a practical manual in 2008, entitled 'Time Out' which can help congregations to reflect about their own spirituality and hospitality.

Possible approach for the church council

- As church council start with a day of reflection with as subject 'hospitality', with your congregation advisor as possible leader. Translate the reflection into concrete ideas that are achievable for your congregation. In doing so use the ideas on the website and the books of Jan Hendriks.
- Have a look at the activities that are currently being organised in all sections of the church. To which extent are you inviting and do you take possible guests into account? Is there space for them in the church services, in the diaconal and pastoral activities? And in the youth work?
- Involve members of the congregation in the realisation of these plans. You can use house group meetings to discuss the subject. Stimulate them to look for possibilities in their own network. 'Whom could I invite for an activity or a church service?' 'How would I be able to contribute to a hospitable congregation?'
- Involve people from outside the church as well. What do they see, what strikes them?
- Do we also remember space and hospitality for children and young people? Are they allowed to help in deciding what that will look like?
- What can you put into the hands of your members when they invite a guest? A booklet, a DVD, an invitation for a special guest service? A gift makes it easier to get a conversation going.
- Think about what is to happen next. A guest is more than welcome, but are there also possibilities when he wants to know more? Low-threshold discussion groups are a key in this respect, see also model 7. Make sure that there is a welcome package for new arrivals.

¹ Kijken met andere ogen