

## 29. The reflecting congregation

*Look in the mirror more often*

**Looking at ourselves as church council and congregation can be an important missionary stimulant. Who are we? What is our strength? What are our weaknesses and where are our blind spots? If you examine the congregation closely you will come across ideas and opportunities for missionary work.**

Many people have thought about these questions from a missionary point of view. Practical hints are offered by among others Christian Schwarz and Robert Warren. They asked themselves: what are the characteristics that flourishing congregations have in common? They came to comparable conclusions. Schwarz emphasises concrete activities, whilst Warren concentrates more on the underlying values.

Robert Warren lists a number of characteristics of a “healthy congregation”:

- energised by faith: a deep realisation of the reality of God’s presence, goodness and love;
- Outward-looking focus: involved in the practical care for the local environment, for the world in which we live and what is going on in it;
- seeks to find what God wants: a clear purposefulness, driven by a divine calling, keeping on the go whilst praying;
- faces the cost of change and growth: the courage to face up to painful facts and to carry out real changes, even when the price is high.
- operates as a real community: generous and sincere relationships, congregation as ‘family’;
- makes room for all: others are welcome, the whole life of the congregation is filled with generous openness;
- does a few things and does them well: a combination of quietness and purposefulness; not allowing oneself to be driven into stress, but enjoying what one does, with quality.

*From Robert Warren 'The Healthy Churches' Handbook, pages 29 and 30.*

*The book offers more detailed advice how to work this out and how to make an analysis of the congregation. For more information about a ‘scan’ of your congregation you can contact your congregation advisor.*

Christian Schwarz provides the following list:

- . Empowering Leadership: the leadership equips a new team of leaders, to give an example, the leader of a circle has an assistant leader, and a member of the church council is the mentor of his or her successor.
- . Gift-Oriented Ministry: the vacancy is not the element that is all-important, but the people with their talents and possibilities.
- . Passionate Spirituality: enthusiasm, fire, not a 'duty'.
- . Functional Structures: a structure that supports the movement, which makes growth and progress possible and does not hamper them.
- . Inspiring Worship Services: attending a church service is inspiring for people.
- . Holistic Small Groups: in small groups people's faith, community and hospitality are nurtured.
- . Need-Oriented Evangelism: what are the questions and needs of those around us: that is what evangelism chimes in with.
- . Loving Relationships: the climate in the congregation is loving, warm, people invite each other, and there is laughter.

*See Christian Schwarz, Natural Church Development*

### **A number of suggestions**

- There are other models and instruments that can be used as 'mirrors'.

A simple SWOT analysis can also help church councils and commissions to get going:

What are our strengths?

What are our weaknesses?

What are our opportunities?

What are our threats and pitfalls?

- A refreshing viewpoint expressed by an outsider can put ideas into our heads and get us moving. Outsiders' eyes see more clearly, somebody who observes, asks questions, and perhaps carries out some research, interviews, and offers assistance. That person could perhaps be your congregation advisor.

*In the district of Peel and Kennemerland congregation advisor Atie de Vos carried out a research together with other experts. Together they formed the 'future team'. They interviewed representatives from 24 church councils. On the basis of this research they presented the church councils with a number of recommendations. Such a research programme itself may get church councils thinking and the recommendations may lead to movement and renewal.*

An external impulse can also come from people outside one's own congregation, because they see things from a different perspective and can contribute ideas based on their own experience. In the project 'bridges of hope' (originating in England) they are called 'critical friends'. They are volunteers who are prepared to be companions for part of the way and to contribute ideas in the renewal process. These 'critical friends' will come and visit a few times. They are not necessarily ministers or theologians, but may be PR experts, sociologists, or journalists. 'Bridges of Hope is the broker between offer and demand. What are the possibilities do others perceive with us? The critical friends may come and visit two or three times, each time after an interval of six months. Sometimes one visit is enough.

A look in the mirror can also consist of attending a conference, experiences another congregation, invite somebody from outside who has a look at the situation and contributes ideas.

If after having perused this file you still don't know what to do, if you do have a wonderful idea but are without a clue as to how to put it into action, if you are considering a number of options and are in need of an opinion from outside... ask a critical friend to have a look. He or she may well see something that would never have entered your head. You can go to [www.bruggenvanhoop.nl](http://www.bruggenvanhoop.nl) to register. There will be a charge for larger projects for which a congregation advisor is needed.

*In Ermelo a congregation organised a 'context consultation'. Members of the congregation invited people from outside that are knowledgeable about situations in the neighbourhood or the village. General practitioner, a social worker, town council members, somebody from children's services, from the police, a teacher. At the evening itself all they did was listening to answers to the question: How do you see us, in which way do you notice us as a church?*

*In the book by Jan Hendriks 'On the way to the Inn, building an open church'<sup>1</sup> you will find a checklist which may help you to have a look at yourself. See also the brochure 'Time Out' from the foundation Idee-en-kerk.*

*A creative, playful way to get to know yourself is offered by HETLEF! [THE NERVE!] Two theatre makers, Suzanne Groote and Ferdinand Borger get to work with you immediately. Via sketches and improvisations they deal with dilemmas and questions. You can hire them for a church council day or a congregation evening. See [www.tradere.nl](http://www.tradere.nl)*

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<sup>1</sup> Op weg naar de Herberg, bouwen aan een open kerk

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

- As church council you might use a Saturday, or even better Friday evening and Saturday, to have a look in one of the mirrors. Evaluate the lists, what are your strengths, what are your weaknesses? Then ask your congregation advisor or another 'critical friend' for outside assistance.
- Which characteristics are strong, which ones are weak? Make concrete plans to make changes. In doing so pay attention to your outward focus: how does your environment perceive the congregation?
- Include people from outside in your analysis. How do they see the congregation? Do not forget children and young people.
- An analysis is a starting point. It will only make a difference when it is translated into something concrete in everyday life. Which steps can we take and how can we become more of a church with an outward focus?
- Organise a context consultation like the one in Ermelo. Don't forget to invite the press!