

5. The congregation that wants to learn about the neighbourhood

Listen first, then show what is on offer

Who are the people who live near the church and what are their needs? This model starts with a ‘neighbourhood market research’. First find out exactly what the needs are of the neighbourhood, the village. All pioneering churches start with the context and they are often thorough in their research.

Would it not be very exciting to visit all the people in the neighbourhood, not with attitude of: I have got something to give you (the Gospel), but with the attitude: I want you to give me something (your story). Who are you, tell me! Please tell me your story!’
(From a text published by Evangelical Working Group¹)

A number of suggestions

- Suppose there is a working group that is having a detailed look at the neighbourhood. It would be helpful to talk with GP’s, social workers, teachers and the police. They often know what is going on and what is important to people. The local door-to-door newspapers also provide an image. Just go for a walk in the neighbourhood, the district: what do you see? Go to the town hall and ask for details about age, professions etc. This will help to put you in the picture.
- You can also go further and interview people that live in the neighbourhood or the village. The Evangelical Working Group has developed a ‘course’ for this. The participants ask people questions with the help of questionnaires. Such a conversation will have to be announced beforehand by letter. It means that you as a church congregation do not want to ‘offer’ something, but to ‘get’ something: their answers to your questions. It will provide a wealth of information. Then that information is linked to what the congregation has to offer. Will it leads to connections? The group of participants can get wider in a number of rounds; in that case the stream of information will become wider too.
- In Apeldoorn Peter Hendriks developed ‘Faith can be found in the street’². He too went out with groups of visitors and started conversations with people in the neighbourhood, starting with people on the periphery of church life

¹ Evangelisch Werkverband

² ‘Het geloof ligt op straat’

The visitors are trained first, then they ask for someone to participate in a conversation which lasts for about an hour. During this time they ask people what preoccupies them on the basis of life questions, life subjects etc. What are the answers people are looking for and where are they looking for them? On the basis of these conversations follow-up possibilities are given, to which the participants are invited. The book 'Faith can be found in the street' gives a detailed description of this method, including model invitations and training for the visitors.

At all times it is important to remember the rule: start with asking and listening before you start offering something.

Possible approach for the church council

- In the church council meeting think about your immediate environment. What do we know about our village, our neighbourhood. What do we think we know? Has there been much change in the past years? What strikes us?
- If it seems appropriate to follow this up in more detail select a working method. One method is more intensive than others, so do your research well!
- Appoint a working group whose members are willing to get involved. Take your time. And plan to use the results to get some work done. What will happen next?

If you are interested in having a neighbourhood research carried out for your own congregation, possibly with a subsidy to cover some of the costs, contact Missionary Work and Growth of the Church of the Protestant Church¹, tel. (030) 880 18 83, email: missionair@pkn.nl

¹ Missionair Werk & Kerkgroei van de Protestantse Kerk