

6. The serving congregation

Church that means something to society

From its start the church is known for its good works: visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, burying the dead and giving hospitality to strangers. To serve one's neighbour is a task for the whole congregation.

Six of these good works are based on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25: 35, 36: I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me. In the Middle Ages a seventh work was added: burying the dead. At the time of the plague that had a special value.

In the church charitableness is often called: 'diaconate': service. The deacons have a very special responsibility in this respect. But service to our neighbours is a task for the whole congregation. This is just where the church can be of great importance to the immediate neighbourhood and to society as a whole: in other words a serving church as a missionary church.

In large cities such as Rotterdam research has been carried out with regard to the many volunteer services that are offered by the church to society. The churches, including migrant congregations, save the city of Rotterdam about 130 million each year. That is quite a sum!

Being there where people are in trouble

The rock band U2 singer Bono said during a prayer breakfast in the White House:
I mean it is quite possible that God lives in one of our owner-occupier houses too. I hope so. He may well be among us, he is contrary, after all. But we can agree about one thing at least, regardless of our religion or ideology: God is with the poor and the vulnerable, God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor live. God is in the silence of a mother who infected her child with a virus that will kill both of them. God is in the crying that can be heard in the rubble of a war. God is in the ruins of lost opportunities and lives.

And God is with us, if we are with him. 'If you put an end to oppression, to every gesture of contempt, and to every evil word; if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon. And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things. I will keep you strong and well. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water, like a spring of water that never goes dry.' (Isaiah 58:9-11).

The serving congregation has a mission in the world, is present with people with problems. Because God is there. The serving congregation lends works together with people and organisations in our society to alleviate hardships and to really help people.

There are of course many possibilities. The choice you make depends on your context and the possibilities of your congregation. We think in the first instance of contacts in the immediate vicinity, but of course it does not exclude relations with churches and projects in other countries.

A number of suggestions

- In a congregation with a number of financial experts a surgery is organised for the many elderly people in the neighbourhood who have problems with their tax forms.
- Good contacts have been made with the local asylum seeker centre. The 'strangers' find an 'inn' in the congregation.
- Groups of congregation members regularly contribute to a one-off project of the foundation 'Present' or cooperate with the Foundation for Practical Help (HIP) (see www.stichtingpresent.nl or www.stichtinghip.nl).
- Congregation members share holiday money: everything is put in a big pot and redistributed, so that people on benefits can also have a holiday.
- Congregation members take part in all sorts of networks that are involved in the neighbourhood, district, and the common village interests.
- Women members and women on benefits get together and get to know each other.
- In the town centre a house is bought to serve as a drop-in centre - for a chat, a cup of coffee and a good conversation.
- The church asks that attention be paid to the environment and sets a good example by being a good steward of the creation.
- The Micah course is a good opportunity to be and to become a good serving congregation (for more information: www.micacursus.nl).
- Young people go out into the world: they go on a working holiday in a country where their help and contribution are needed desperately. The congregation sponsors.
- The congregation as a whole is involved with a 'partner congregation' somewhere else in the world: there are exchanges, both partners learn from each other. The congregations help each other with advice and action.

Possible approach for the church council

- As a church council reflect on the 'serving congregation'. Answer two questions: what do we have to offer? What are the needs of our environment? Your deacons will of course be your 'experts'.
- Organise a consultation evening to get a better understanding of what is needed in your environment. Invite a number of organisations and people (youth care, police, social work, GP's, teaching personnel). What is their awareness of the church? What, in their opinion, could the church mean in their environment? (See the example of Ermelo on the website.)
- Make a plan that is concrete and achievable. Make sure it filters through to all sections of the congregation, so that it does not remain the hobby of individuals.