

2. The inspirational congregation

Deepening faith radiates

Many church councils complain that their diary is full, that there are many things to be taken care of, but that they have hardly any time for real discussions. But a congregation that wants to be missionary, that wants to inspire, must start among its own members.

A generation has grown up that has not really learnt to speak about faith in a personal way. Faith used to be a question of learning the right answers, not a meeting or a relationship. There does however exist a longing for discussions about meaning and faith. At the same time there is powerlessness. When guests and newcomers start asking questions it is important that there is an opportunity for the discussion to take place. That does not mean that the answers are cut and dried. It does mean that you have something to say.

If your congregation wants to be 'missionary' to the world around you, then that starts with you: Who are we? What do we have to offer? How do we put this into words? There are many possibilities to get the process of deepening faith going. This often happens via an indirect route: no direct questions but indirect ones. Such as:

- How did you come into contact with faith and church? Who played a part in this? What did you find inspiring?
- What is your favourite hymn and why?
- What does this section of the bible mean to you, can you tell me something about that?

You can use these questions and similar ones to open a church council meeting and start off discussions about faith. Make sure you involve the different generations in the congregation. What can teens and middle-aged people learn from each other?

We had invited a group consisting of ten teenagers and ten 40plussers. After introductions had been made in small 'mixed' groups we started a discussion about a number of faith issues. Each time one teenager and one 40plusser as discussion partners. The underlying question is: is it possible that the God's Spirit has something to say to me via this teenager and this middle-aged person? They were fascinating meetings. The middle-aged persons in particular were moved by the openness and freshness of the teenagers. They are thinking really seriously about these questions!

The small circle that is safe and familiar offers excellent opportunities to deepen your faith in heart to heart meetings. This is not just about *studying* but also about personal thought processes. How does this theme affect my daily life?

Your faith does not come alive until it ‘lands’ in the practice of everyday life, only then will it radiate into the immediate environment.

A number of suggestions

- There is a wealth of discussion material for the small circle. This can be realised in a series of a limited number of evenings, or it can be a group that meets every two weeks.
- An orientation course for the Christian faith can also be enriching for your own congregation members. Stimulate the faith discussions in your congregation, via the formation of small groups.
- The Evangelical Working Group introduced the ‘congregational growth group’: small groups that want to strengthen their faith, community and hospitality. Material is available for this.
- ‘Renovare’ is a movement that wants to learn from six different Christian traditions. These movements from the history of the church are described on the basis of the life of Jesus. Small, concrete ‘exercises’ make the material practical. This material is especially suitable for pluriform congregations.
- During lent we often find material that is useful for small groups. In this context we want to mention the Micah course with a more diaconal slant
- ‘Emmaus’ is material that is published by the IZB. Very practical studies are offered about a great number of subjects. ‘To see and to be seen’¹ is IZB material that you can start using yourself, before a meeting to stimulate the faith discussion.
- The congregation advisor is also available for a course or church council day about the faith discussion.

Possible approach for the church council

- The church council itself can start the ball rolling by holding a faith discussion. That can be done during a reflection weekend or day, under the leadership of your congregation advisor.
- Stimulate the faith discussion in your congregation via the formation of small groups.
- Make sure you have a plan that can be evaluated after one year.
- Ensure that the discussion leaders are well equipped.
- Do not just think of short-term courses but also of house groups that can keep going for a longer period.

¹ Zien en gezien worden

- Stimulate discussions about the church service (discussion after the end of the service, themed services that offer the opportunity for conversations and/or question and answer rounds).
- Set an example as minister and church council: keep looking for opportunities to deepen your faith, including during pastoral meetings.

A congregation for which faith is a matter of heart and hands is inspirational!