



**Protestantse  
Kerk**

Geloof·Hoop·Liefde

# **Survey of the spiritual life of the congrega- tions and the denomi- nation**

**Four-yearly report of the general visitation board  
2008-2011**

November 10, 2011  
AZ 11 - 24

Summary and translation by E. Overeem



## Table of contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1	Visitation: a critical observation	5
1.2	Extraordinary visitation	5
<b>2</b>	<b>MINISTRY AND THE PERCEPTION OF MINISTRY</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Shortage	6
2.2	Small anthology from the visitor's reports	6
2.3	Ministers	6
2.4	Office-bearers and tasks	6
2.5	Office-bearing essential for the church?	6
2.6	Church councils with working groups	7
2.7	Ministry and conflicts	7
2.8	Ministry only by confessing members?	7
2.9	Finally	7
<b>3</b>	<b>UNIFICATION AND VISITATION</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1	Summary	8
3.2	Friesland	8
3.3	Overijssel/Flevoland	8
3.4	Zuid-Holland	8
3.5	The Evangelical-Lutheran congregations	8
3.6	A pattern in the mosaic	9
3.7	Recommendations	9
<b>4</b>	<b>EXPERIENCES IN BEING A MISSIONARY CONGREGATION</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1	Congregation of Christ as missionary congregation	10
4.2	Developments in church and society	10
4.3	New possibilities	10
4.4	Sharing what is touching us	10
4.5	Becoming a disciple and sharing what is understood	10
4.6	Whatever you do, do it well and carefully	11
4.7	Paying attention to the signs of the time	11
4.8	Faith crisis hitting us and asking our conversion	11
4.9	Recommendations	11



# 1 Introduction

The first post-unification visitation survey was presented in 2007. It was highly colored by the unification and its aftermath. The three elements of this second survey are:

- Difficulties in finding office-bearers (par. 2)
- The effect of unification (par. 3)
- Missionary awareness and activities (par. 4)

The common denominator of these elements might be characterized by “identity”.

## 1.1 Visitation: a critical observation

Even after the unification different visitation cultures still exist in the Protestant Church. Moreover a traditional tension occurs between a more supervising way of visitation and a more pastoral approach. A common concept was identified: care for the quality of the congregation. Structural improvement of the visitation remains however advisable:

- Recruitment and selection of the visitors
- Equipping and educating visitors
- Cooperation between the different ecclesial bodies.

## 1.2 Extraordinary visitation

In addition to the four-yearly regular visitation an extraordinary visitation is possible; this may be done on request of the church council, the board of the classical assembly or the minister. Tensions sometimes come up concerning a more evangelical perception experience of faith and worship, sometimes in connection with a different view on baptism. A data-analysis of extraordinary indicates that 46% of the situations requiring this visitation concern the functioning of the minister. Sometimes this is caused by loss of motivation; mostly the issues are linked with communication problems with the church council, with the congregation or with the colleagues. This high percentage troubles us. We don't know yet whether this will prove to be a trend; we are aware of an increasing number of cases where the general board for discharge of ministry releases ministers from their responsibilities. The lower number of extraordinary visitation concerning ecclesial workers may be caused by the temporary terms of employment they have; problems can be “solved” by non-renewal of the contract.

## **2 MINISTRY AND THE PERCEPTION OF MINISTRY**

### **2.1 Shortage**

Many congregations complain about a lack of office-bearers: elders and deacons. Many are called, few are actually elected. In our visitations we only meet office-bearers. The reasons for this shortage therefore are hard to trace. Some congregations don't meet the minimal requirements of the Church Order regarding the number of office-bearers. In many congregations however the enthusiasm isn't declining.

### **2.2 Small anthology from the visitor's reports**

A local lack of office-bearers causes problems in the classical assemblies and the general synod as well. We should recruit office-bearers from the age group 30-50; however few people from this age group might belong to a congregation and those who do belong are very busy working and taking care of their families. The standard terminology of elders and deacons does sound very traditional and isn't appealing. Discussing and experiencing faith questions causes a sense of ministry; however there are many tasks that are not felt to be linked with ministry and office-bearing. Even in the Reformed Alliance responding to the call of being an office-bearer isn't self-evident anymore. Whenever in congregations an evangelical influence makes itself felt, the question rises why certain tasks need to be performed by office-bearers.

### **2.3 Ministers**

The workload and the spending of time are an important theme, in particular when congregations are served by part-time ministers. Tensions may rise between the possibilities of the minister and the expectations of the congregation. Reduction in members causes a shortfall in resources. The tasks and responsibilities for ministers are increasing. Tasks may change; the perception of ministry however does not. Ministry is not identical with the way ministers perceive their duties.

### **2.4 Office-bearers and tasks**

Many tasks in congregations are being performed by non-office bearers: congregation members willing to serve in many capacities, except in ministry. What specific dimension do ministry and office-bearing add? In the reports of visitations many things are said appreciating the ministry positively. But all these expressions can be applied to volunteer workers in the congregations as well. They feel called also; they likewise confess that they do not take on this responsibility with the intention to serve themselves - just like office-bearers.

### **2.5 Office-bearing essential for the church?**

According to Noordmans the dogma that might sleep, but wakes up when required. The ministry might be compared with a watchdog sleeping before its kennel, however waking up when it scents danger. In all descriptions of ministry common elements occur: concentration on the church's essentials, the authority of the Lord, the space for salvation and the guarding of the spiritual integrity of the church. The ministry is shaped in ecclesial assemblies. The ministry is not determined by the tasks performed, but by ecclesial assemblies in their expression of faith and serving the Lord. This orientation is fed by what the participants bring with themselves to the ecclesial assemblies.

## **2.6 Church councils with working groups**

In the Lutheran tradition the “priesthood of all believers” is valued. A church council with working groups (there is a provision for this in the Church Order) enables congregations to cope with a lack of office-bearers and to make instrumental the willingness of many believers to perform tasks. The final responsibility however rests with the (small) church council and there the ministry aspect officially is warranted. In practice the ministry aspect is present in the working groups as well, even when only a minority of the participants actually is office-bearers. The ministry is more than the actual offices of elders, deacons and ministers. The church council however should not become rather a governing board than an ecclesial assembly.

## **2.7 Ministry and conflicts**

Where conflicts or difficulties occur the ministry should prevent that the integrity of the congregation is harmed. Both parties in a conflict should be aware that the ministry transcends personal interests and human deliberations. This principle however isn't always applied in practice.

## **2.8 Ministry only by confessing members?**

Church councils sometimes face enthusiast congregation members unable to serve in ministry because they are baptized members (and have not yet made profession of faith). They can become confessing members by being confirmed in office and responding to the questions of confirmation. However some baptized members consider themselves to be full-fledged members of the congregation and are willing to serve in ministry as they are, and not willing to be registered as confessing members. We expect this not to be exceptional in the future.

## **2.9 Finally**

Many tasks can be performed by congregation members without them being office bearers. Ministry doesn't become discredited by this. Office-bearers could concentrate on ministry instead of being burdened by many tasks. Ministry keeps the question on the agenda whether the actual policy of the congregation is well related to the essence of being a congregation.

## **3 UNIFICATION AND VISITATION**

### **3.1 Summary**

The general visitation board has asked three regions (Friesland, Overijssel/Flevoland and Zuid-Holland) to provide data about the effects of the unification on the spiritual life and organization of local congregations. Lutheran input has been asked for as well.

The picture is a diverse mosaic. Some tendencies:

- The different nomenclature of congregations (protestant, hervormd, gereformeerd) causes confusion.
- There is a lack of awareness of connection with the denomination, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.
- Strengthening of the classical assemblies and working communities is required.
- Theological debate is lacking, there is a weak sense of identity.
- The Protestant Church needs to improve its communicative power.
- The large loss in membership, secularizing tendencies, decreasing resources and loss of church buildings aren't mentioned very often; this is striking.

### **3.2 Friesland**

The visitation reports show a positive atmosphere. Even when some congregations had to deal with the consequences of schisms, positive experiences of the unification are brought up. After the loss of church buildings some embittered congregation members do need specific pastoral care. Some church councils have been very busy bringing about one united congregation; after the unification there has been more opportunity for reflection.

### **3.3 Overijssel/Flevoland**

In Flevoland, the polders reclaimed from the IJsselmeer, there haven't been separate congregations from the very beginning (with the exception of the former island of Urk). In Overijssel a difference occurs between the cities and the rural areas. In the cities cooperation between the congregations already happened because of secularization, because of decrease in engagement with the church and a shortfall in resources. In the rural areas unification happens slowly, because there is no financial need for cooperation. Sometimes cultural differences between the former separate congregations are mentioned; in two instances unification even failed. Congregations belonging to the Reformed Alliance still have reservations about the Protestant Church.

### **3.4 Zuid-Holland**

The congregations struck by the schism are slowly recovering, even when they sometimes are still in mourning because sisters and brothers with whom the Holy Supper was shared now belong to a different church. Church councils have to act very carefully.

### **3.5 The Evangelical-Lutheran congregations**

There is a general feeling of having been taken over and of having been absorbed by a Calvinist majority. Promises concerning church buildings and liturgy have been broken. Lutherans always are a minority, not fighting on the barricades. The retaining of the name Lutheran warrants visibility. The financial costs of unification have been much higher than expected. In many places lectures or courses about Luther and his theology have been arranged; other Protestant

congregations have been expressly invited. Many Lutheran congregations cooperate loyally with their local or regional partners.

### **3.6 A pattern in the mosaic**

New Protestant congregations show a flourishing spiritual life, a new impulse, and an exploring of new ways. Other congregations without local partners to unite with show similar tendencies. Many congregations did not choose the Protestant Church, but settled for it; these congregations did not feel any financial need to unite. Many congregations belonging to the Reformed Alliance actually are not integrated in the Protestant Church; many congregations continue their own inward-oriented existence. In these congregations the Ministry Office in Utrecht, working for unity, is distrusted. Isolationist tendencies continue even after the schism. Many congregations are not looking for solidarity with other congregations or even with the Protestant Church. How do we prevent a new development of “ecclesiola in ecclesia”, small churches within the church? The Protestant church shouldn't become a repository of local communities with an administrative office for common interests. Classical assemblies and working communities can play an important part to build up a sense of belonging. Nevertheless there is a certain feeling of resignation, expressing itself in a weak sense of identity and in a lack of theological debate.

The influence of the evangelical movement is a new development. Its gaining influence is being perceived differently. This item will be on the agenda of the visitation in the coming years.

### **3.7 Recommendations**

- Improve the uniformity in nomenclature of congregations in order to strengthen the identity of local congregations in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.
- Encourage cooperation of local congregations with a different character.
- Improve the relationships of the local congregations and the national denomination.
- The classical assemblies have an extended sphere of activity and many responsibilities. Synod should pay attention to the question whether the classical assemblies are sufficiently equipped to perform their tasks.

## **4 EXPERIENCES IN BEING A MISSIONARY CONGREGATION**

This chapter deals with the outcome of a small survey in Groningen/Drenthe and in Zeeland.

### **4.1 Congregation of Christ as missionary congregation**

The ministry's team for missionary work and church growth already is making a second round trip throughout the country. In the team's visits the missionary identity of the Christian congregation, which is a given, is rediscovered. A portfolio with missionary models is made available, and a DVD shows new initiatives by local congregations.

### **4.2 Developments in church and society**

The thesis of secularism, that faith will disappear because it is outdated by modernity, has been superseded. Some people call our culture even a culture of "dissecularism". Interest in religion is increasing, connected with a growing need of experiencing. In German: our society is an "Erlebnissegesellschaft", a society centered on experience. This however does not mean that interest for a church is increasing. The church is an institute asking engagement and lifelong commitment; it carries many negative narratives. Some people even speak about an implosion of the church: the number of actively engaged congregation members is decreasing and ageing. This development isn't encouraging and even evokes feelings of dejection. Congregations live in a "survival mode" and missionary renewal seems to be the umpteenth attempt to turn the tide.

### **4.3 New possibilities**

Many local congregations are making connections again. They do so with the local village and in the local context. They want to be an "open church". These connections require new forms because there is in the context no knowledge of Bible stories or traditional hymns. Negative narratives become less important and people are unprejudiced toward the church. Many congregations open their church buildings for concerts, expositions etc. They operate well-maintained websites. The presence in local media however leaves a lot to be desired.

### **4.4 Sharing what is touching us**

What does it mean to be open? Is it just a more or less passive attitude leaving the initiative to other people without bothering them? Or is it rather an active attitude? We believe in the good news of Jesus Christ who is present in a vulnerable way; in Him we have recognized God. Being present in a vulnerable way seems to be condition sine qua non for being a missionary congregation. Even vulnerable presence however intends to share what is touching and moving and inspiring us. Discipleship has been and always will be about sharing.

### **4.5 Becoming a disciple and sharing what is understood**

In few visitation reports being a missionary congregation seems to be linked with sharing the gospel in an explicit manner. Is this because sharing the gospel is self-obvious? Or is timidity the real issue? This timidity may be twofold: not knowing the proper way of communicating one's beliefs, or even not knowing what to believe ourselves. Old words seem to have lost their expressiveness and we haven't found new words yet. Timidity may point out a lack of identity. This identity is not

about knowing all, but about being pupils and disciples, discussing what they have heard. Being a missionary congregation starts with listening together and experiencing a story that touches us. Without this source being a missionary congregation becomes a mannerism; this mannerism feels good because it provides the feeling that the congregation is makeable even in difficult times. The congregation however is only makeable by Jesus Christ.

#### **4.6 Whatever you do, do it well and carefully**

Growing congregations do not distinguish themselves by paying particular attention to growth, but by doing things well and carefully, paying attention to well-maintained mutual relationships and to engaging the congregation members (according to Robert Warren). Growth never is an objective in itself. The objective only can be in all vulnerability and fragility becoming a congregation of Christ, listening and sharing what is heard and experienced, in an continuing dialogue.

#### **4.7 Paying attention to the signs of the time**

In a recent address Rev. W.M. Dekker stated that secularism and decrease in membership could be interpreted as a judgment of God. The proper attitude in a time of judgment should rather be reflection and conversion than getting into being a missionary congregation. Self-criticism according to what we perceive from the Scriptures certainly is required. However: without communication the faith of the congregation deteriorates. In the same workshop dr. Stefan Paas indicated that the judgment seems to be aimed at the church as a powerful institute. Believers presently gather together in small units. Isn't however the church inevitably always an institute? And are small units and groups always exempt from criticism?

The church is the place where Christ lives together with sinners. The church does live next to others who may fail. Solidarity in failing should be one of the marks of a missionary congregation. We share our failing with other people and gather around the Scriptures to find a way of dealing with our failures.

#### **4.8 Faith crisis hitting us and asking our conversion**

Being a missionary congregation starts with ourselves admitting that the crisis of the church is a crisis of our faith? Lack of identity causes having neither color nor profile nor attractiveness. Being a missionary congregation requires listening first, before addressing other people. To be an open church does not only mean inviting people in; it is allowing ourselves to be invited out as well, to participate in society. Despite shortfalls in finance and human resources many congregations are connected with the society they are part of.

It wouldn't be right when feelings of being powerless and dejected are ignored in an atmosphere of enthusiasm and missionary engagement. We therefore have to make choices: don't ask the impossible, but do whatever you do with conviction and with flair. The Spirit breathes both in issues that are successful and in issues that are small and fragile. The question is not about achieving the impossible but about committing what has been given to us.

Being a missionary congregation isn't a marketing model of the church, but becoming aware of what has been given to us already: communicating because we have been addressed by God. What are your sources, your talents, your strengths? It would be wonderful when in the Protestant Church we would communicate more our identity, our sources, our inspiration and our encouragements. Diversity shouldn't be noncommittal, but should enable speaking and communicating the great acts of God in many languages and dialects.

#### **4.9 Recommendations**

- Faith is a communicative event. The restoring of this communication is essential. Next to the visitation synod should take initiatives to encourage this communication.

- To be a missionary congregation starts with being a disciple of Jesus Christ and listening to the Scriptures. This identity should be built up locally by initiatives of the church.
- The missionary team of the church should, after two general rounds, take a tailoring approach to the diverse local situations.
- Congregations are determined by geography; today's society however is characterized by networks. Local congregations should be encouraged to communicate and to connect via networks.
- In situations where life turns out to be fragile people turn towards rituals and words, where the church might be helpful with. Congregations should be encouraged to take up this challenge.
- Small congregations can become dejected by living in a survival mode. Connections should be made between small congregations enabling them to encourage each other and to explore new possibilities jointly.