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Passing on faith in open society

In the spring of 2024, I was appointed director of a mission organisation in the Netherlands. When I mentioned this during a meeting of the CPCE's North-West Group, one of the participants wished me the very best of luck. It was said with a touch of humour, but the underlying tone was serious. She knew from her own experience just how challenging mission work can be.

Many of us will recognise this. The times we live in are challenging. Let me take the situation in the Netherlands as an example. At present, over 18 million people live in our country. 28 per cent of them describe themselves as Christian. The number of Christians has been declining for years. In 2010, 55 per cent of the Dutch population still identified with a church; now that figure stands at 20 per cent. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands has been losing 60,000 members a year for years. Secularisation is therefore continuing at a rapid pace. That can really be disheartening. The wonderful message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ seems to be finding less and less resonance.

Moreover, concepts such as 'mission' and a 'missionary church' also provoke quite a lot of resistance and confusion.

1. When some people hear the term 'missionary' believers, they mainly think of passionate, radical believers who proclaim the good news without hesitation.
2. For some, missionary work conjures up the image of an evangelist who preaches judgement and pressures people to repent. Pushy, insensitive.
3. When we speak of missionary work, we as a church in the West are also faced with a difficult legacy. Let us not forget what happened during the Crusades and in the colonies. Is being a missionary not, in fact, driven by a hidden desire for power?

Yet the church's missionary calling cannot be so easily dismissed. Chris Wright writes in his book **The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission**:

"Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God. That mission is an outreach to the whole world, from a global God through people worldwide." (...)

"It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God's mission." (5)

God is at the beginning – He Himself ensures that His work continues. A passage that has stayed with me for years is found in Isaiah 43: 'I am creating something new.' God Himself brings about a new beginning, even in the most hopeless situations.

Since the first ecumenical mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910, there has been much reflection worldwide on the missionary aspect of the Church. Time and again, both at this conference and in the years that followed, it was emphasised that the missionary dimension is part of the Church's very DNA. Mission (the missionary dimension) is part of the very essence of the church, states the report "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes" (2012) by the World Council of Churches.

And one of the first articles in the Church Order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands states:

"By virtue of its missionary commission, the congregation is, throughout its existence, focused on bearing witness to and serving those who do not know the Gospel or have become estranged from it, so that they too may share in the salvation found in Jesus Christ." (Article X-1)

I realise this may sound rather challenging, almost like a burden. Yet the New Testament does not give the impression that the early church viewed the missionary aspect of being the church as a burden. The missionary movement did not arise out of a sense of duty, but out of an 'explosion of joy' – to quote Leslie Newbigin. Without joy, being a missionary becomes a heavy burden. Rediscovering that joy is therefore also important today (Pope Francis).

What is encouraging – and what also nourishes that joy – is that in Europe, in recent years, we have regularly heard stories of (often younger) people who are finding their way back to the church. They have

often already been through a long search online and sometimes approach the church with a very direct request to be baptised.

Let me briefly share two stories from Reverend Dick Wolters – he is a missionary pastor in Amsterdam.

Max became interested in the Christian faith. He wanted to find out more about it and went on a tour of churches in Amsterdam. He visited several services and venues until he stepped into the Eastern Orthodox St Nicholas Parish. He attended a service lasting over two hours, conducted in Church Slavonic. A service during which he also had to stand the whole time, as this church has no seats. Afterwards, he had three thoughts, which he put into words as follows. One: 'That was a long time!' Two: 'That was brilliant!' And three: 'I was gripped by the fear that if I came back, I'd never leave again.' For a while, he didn't dare go back. Until, around Easter, he couldn't resist any longer. He attended the service on Easter Eve. The church was completely dark. Everyone was holding an unlit candle. The priest emerged from behind the altar carrying the burning Easter candle. He lit the candles of the congregation members standing at the front. They, in turn, passed the light on. Next to Max, an elderly woman received the light and, with tears in her eyes, passed it on to him. At that moment it dawned on him: 'This is real!' And a year later he was baptised.

It was also in that year that I met Stan. He simply walked into the Noorderkerk in Amsterdam on New Year's Eve, where I serve as a missionary minister. Yet another tradition within the same city, this time a Protestant one. It was a traditional service – not a so-called missionary or 'accessible' service. But something happened during that service. Stan had been interested in the Christian faith for some time. As a philosophy student, he had come into contact with Judeo-Christian thinkers and his fascination had grown. He knew: 'If I want to give faith a serious chance, I'll have to cross the threshold of the church and participate in a faith community.' And that is exactly what he did that evening. And apparently it left him wanting more, because on New Year's Day morning he was back there again. And practically every Sunday since then. He, too, was baptised shortly afterwards.

Stories like these touch me deeply and are a source of encouragement at a time when we can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the decline in church attendance. Let's share stories like these with one another and encourage one another in this way.

To be honest, I've now covered the most important point. There are many ways to pass on the faith in an open society. I don't think it would be helpful for me to give a whole list of examples, from TikTok to podcasts. What I want to emphasise is the importance of the church, the local congregation.

The organisation I work for is strongly influenced by the thinking of the LICC – the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. This organisation encourages churches to equip believers for 'whole-life discipleship'. The church is then viewed in two forms: the gathered church and the scattered church. The 'gathered church' is the congregation that meets on Sundays and at times during the week for church services, small groups and other activities. But for most of the week, the congregation is 'scattered' – spread out across the world. The beauty of this vision – which I shall explore in more depth shortly – lies in the emphasis placed on the calling that every Christian has in their daily life. That is where I can make Christ visible.

The downside of this vision may be that the congregation's activities are seen merely as preparation for something else. And that fails to recognise the missionary value of the church service and congregational activities. This is evident from the examples in Amsterdam.

An important passage from the Bible that sheds light on this is 1 Peter 2:9:

But you are God's chosen and special people. You are a group of royal priests and a holy nation. God has brought you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Now you must tell all the wonderful things he has done.

The Church of Christ is compared to the priests who served in the temple. Priests in ancient Israel stood between God and the people. There is a two-way interaction: 'Priests approached God as representatives of the people from whom they had been chosen; they offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. Conversely, they approached the people on behalf of God; they blessed the people and taught them' (Paas, 190). In his book **Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society**, Stefan Paas sees these same two directions as the Church's mission.

It offers the sacrifice of praise to God on behalf of the world. Partly on behalf of those who do not know God. For it is the duty of creation to honour its Creator. Within the Church, we respond to that mission. We

bow our knees and praise the Lord. We do so in the faith that one day all creation will bow down and every tongue will sing God's praise. And in the 'meantime', we do this, inviting the world to join us and take part.

This brings us to the second meaning of priesthood: 'as a priest, the Church also represents God amongst people. What does this mean? Above all, this: that the Church is a sign of God's purposes for his creation. Israel, as a kingdom of priests, is to be a model of devotion to God; it was, as it were, to be a window through which all nations could see God.'

It is important to emphasise that drawing attention to mission can give the impression that we must take active steps. But mission is, first and foremost, doxological in nature: focused on giving thanks to and glorifying God. The Church's mission is not about itself, but about the glory of God.

It is easy to forget that. Many missionary initiatives arise in places where church life is in decline, with the unspoken hope that the church will be revitalised. This is often the yardstick by which the 'success' of the mission is measured: are more people coming to church? We would never put it quite so explicitly, but what really matters to us is our own survival – having sufficient resources and people to continue being the church as we are accustomed to. But what if we let go of that and focus on the glory of God? Of course, one need not exclude the other, but it does result in a very different focus. Instead of the world having to do something for the church (namely, joining us), we ask ourselves how we, as a church, can do something on behalf of the world for God.

In and of itself, the church has missionary value. But there is more. I'll come back to the concept of the 'gathered and scattered church' in a moment.

The gathered church is the church when believers physically come together: Sunday services, but also Bible studies, prayer groups, and other congregational activities. Characteristics:

- Focused on worship, teaching, sacraments, and fellowship
- Bound to a specific time and place
- Pastors/leaders play a central role
- The church turned "inward" - focused on building up believers themselves

The scattered church is the church during the rest of the week, when believers disperse back into their work, family, neighborhood, school, sports club, etc. Characteristics:

- Each believer is "church" in their own context — at the office, at home, in the supermarket
- No separate church structure or leadership needed; it happens in ordinary life
- The church turned "outward" - focused on witness and service in the world

Most churches spend nearly all their attention, time, and resources on the gathered church (Sunday services, church programs), while believers spend around 95% of their waking lives in the scattered church — at work, with family, in society. Therefore you could argue that churches need to actively equip and encourage people for that "scattered" 95%, rather than reducing "whole-life discipleship" to church activities alone. The point isn't that one form matters more than the other, but that they need each other: the gathered church equips, encourages, and sends out; the scattered church is where that faith is actually lived out in practice — on Monday morning, not just on Sunday.

In this talk, I am not offering quick, easy tips and tricks for passing on the faith. What I wish to emphasise is the importance of the church, the congregation. The church has a missionary significance in and of itself. But it also plays a vital role in equipping believers for everyday life. For it is in that everyday life that faith is lived out. That is where we are called to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

In his book **Fruitfulness on the Frontline**, Mark Greene identifies six ways in which Christians can bear fruit in their daily lives. Undeniably visible in the background of these characteristics are the 'five marks of mission', with the five Ts: Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, Treasure. Green mentions six words beginning with the letter M. I'll list them briefly; perhaps you can discuss them further amongst yourselves later on.

Modelling godly character: showing Christian character in how you work and treat people.

Making good work: doing your work itself with excellence and integrity, as something that honors God.

Ministering grace and love: showing practical care and kindness to colleagues, neighbors, friends etc.

Moulding culture: influencing the culture of your workplace or community (norms, behavior, atmosphere).

Mouthpiece for truth and justice: standing up for truth and justice, even when it's difficult.

Messenger of the gospel: speaking explicitly about the gospel where appropriate.

I shall conclude. To summarise: God is the God of mission, and He calls us to be part of it. This is not a heavy burden, but a sharing in the joy of the Gospel. The Church plays a key role in this. Like a priest, it leads the world in prayer and praise. And at the same time, the church is the place where Christians are equipped for their lives in the midst of this world – to pass on the joy of the Gospel and to live it out.

Let me finish with a story from the English missionary Lesslie Newbigin. He worked in India for many years and wrote the following in **Mission in Christ's Way** (Bible Studies):

"I think that a very good and valid symbol of our mission is to be found in an experience with which those of us who have lived in India are familiar. When we have to go to a distant village in our pastoral duty we try to start very early in the morning, so that we do not have to walk in the heat of the day. And it sometimes happens that we have to set off in total darkness; perhaps we are going towards the west so that there is no light in the sky and everything is dark. But as we go, a party of people travelling the opposite way comes to meet us. There will be at least a faint light on their faces. If we stop and ask them: "Where does the light come from?", they will simply ask us to turn round (...) and look towards the east. A new day is dawning, and the light we saw was just its faint reflection in the faces of those going that way. They did not possess the light; it was a light given to them. The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is given already the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness."

A few questions to discuss:

> share some reflections with one another regarding the lecture

> What challenges and opportunities do you see in your own context when it comes to passing on the faith?

> Reflect on the following quote from Leslie Newbigin:

“The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is already given the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness.”