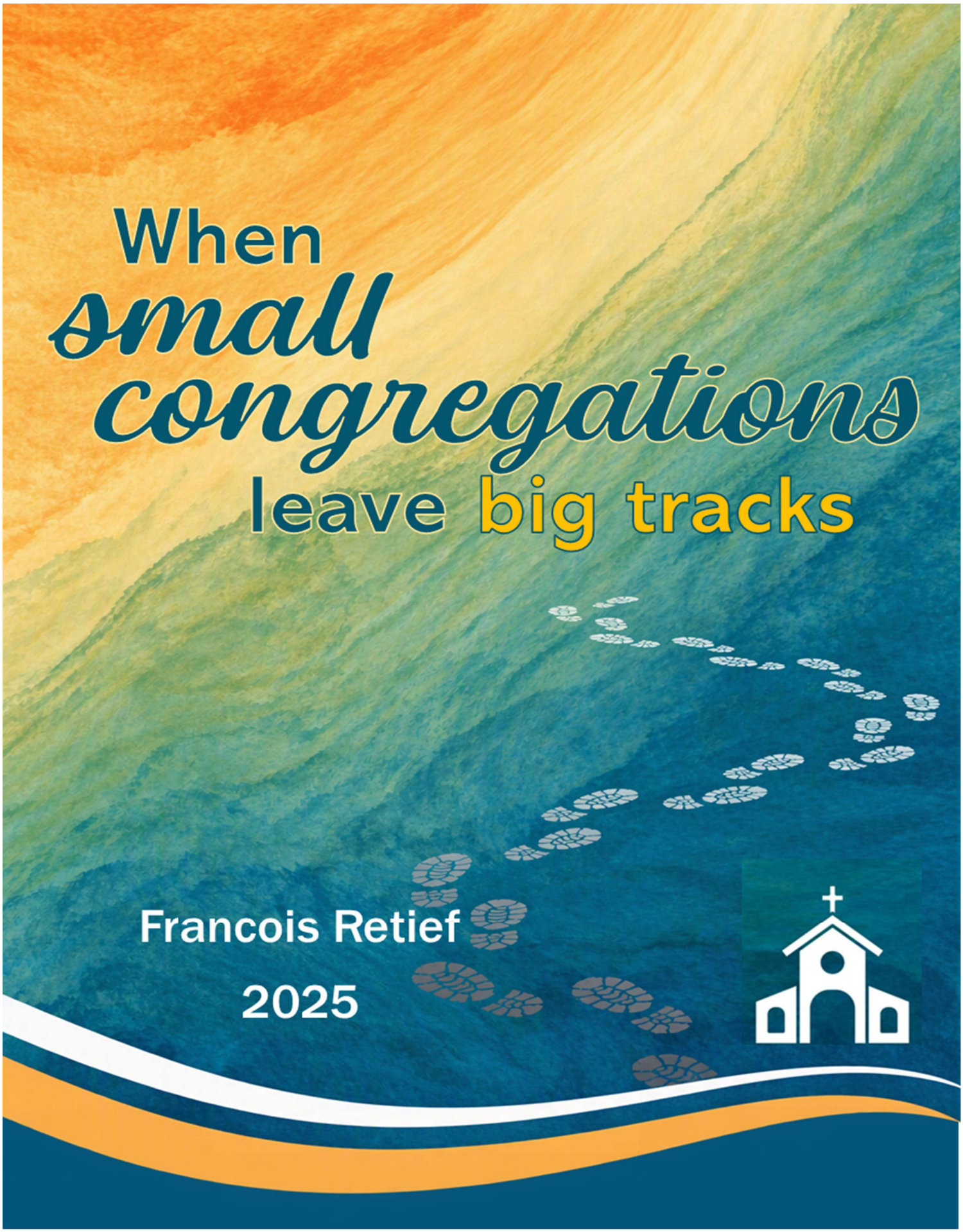
When small congregations leave big tracks



Francois Retief

2025



‘When small congregations begin to leave deep tracks…’

Francois Retief

2025

FOREWORD

It is not a matter of course that a retired Executive Officer gets an opportunity like this one. That colleagues have picked up on my passion for our smaller congregations in the meetings and conversations we have had over the years, is proof of their keen sense of what lies near to my heart. My great appreciation to the Synodal Service Council of the Eastern Synod.

My wish is that this document will serve as an aid to conversations in our congregations who may well be small—but can leave deep tracks in God's Kingdom. Our small congregations are actually pioneers—larger congregations are already asking—or are going to ask—these same questions …

A big thank you to colleagues, church council members, congregants, and church office staff who gave their input.

Francois Retief

2025

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1. RUN-UP TO THE PROJECT

The Synodal Service Council of the DR Church's Eastern Synod has always emphasised the importance of our smaller congregations. Previous projects paved the way to where we are today.

When Francois Retief retired in 2023, the Synodal Service Council decided to focus their attention on the interests of these congregations. Carl Louwrens, retired minister formerly from the Krugerwildtuin congregation—as well as Tielman Roux, minister at Hendrina—were part of the team.

An important point of departure was that smaller congregations' focus must shift from a maintenance perspective to one whose role it is to focus on the coming of the kingdom of God in the context of their local community. In today's language we call it 'being a missional church'.

To rephrase it: The focus of the congregation's debates must move from 'ministry *to* the congregants' to 'ministry *by* the congregants'.

This document tells of the journey with the smaller congregations, their unique circumstances, the role of the presbytery in their existence, the role of the Synodal Service Council and its task teams as support for congregations, as well as the input of the synod in the lives of congregations and ministers since 2023.

Further there are documents here to aid in a new kind of debate in our smaller congregations. We want to learn new language. We want to work with possibilities, impact, and God's kingdom.

'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations…'

2. DATA FROM SMALLER CONGREGATIONS

The first choice to be made was the definition of a smaller congregation—not a simple matter. What the Eastern Synod regards as a small congregation is, for example in Namibia, a medium or even a large congregation. In a conversation, Andrew Katay, Executive Head of City-to-City Australia, he said that according to my definition all congregations in his country must be seen as small!

I made the choice to define small congregations as congregations with fewer than 200 confessing congregants according to the data the congregation's church office sends to the Eastern Synod to be printed in the Yearbook of the DR Churches. I am all too aware of how 'woolly' this figure is. It is probably not an accurate reflection of the

congregants ‘on the ground’. It is even less an indication of which congregants are involved in the congregation.

Congregant numbers have three possible definitions: (a) the number of names on the congregant register; (b) the number of congregants who are actively involved in the congregation; and (c) the number of congregants who regularly contribute financially to the congregation. Often, it is the last one that actually determines the survival of the congregation.

	Congregation	Congregants Professing	Minister	Ministry Type	Presbytery
1	Gravelotte	26	Vacant	Minister EG Church	Laeveld
2	Graskop	27	Vacant	Stand-ins	Lydenburg
3	Kragveld	28	Vacant	Vacant	Middelburg
4	Breyten	29	Marius Smit	Part time	Ermelo
5	Blinkpan	34	Vacant	Proponent	Witbank
6	Badplaas	40	Vacant	Stand-ins	Ermelo
7	Olifantsfontein	40	Vacant	Stand-ins	Lyttelton
8	Krugerwildtuin	47	Juanita Greyvenstein	Part time	Barberton
9	Goedgegun	48	Vacant	Unknown	Barberton
10	Paardekop	51	Samuel Louw	Part time	Wakkerstroom
11	Machado-Boven	66	Vacant	Stand-ins	Lydenburg
12	Rietkuil	74	Hennie de Vos	Part time	Middelburg
13	Kloofsig	76	Vacant	Stand-ins	Lyttelton
14	Roossenekal	89	Vacant	Missionary	Middelburg
15	Sabie	99	Uli Trumpelmann	Part-time	Lydenburg
16	Amsterdam	101	Ruan du Plooy	Part-time	Wakkerstroom
17	Chrissiesmeer	105	Dawie Nieuwoudt	Part-time	Ermelo
18	Hendrina	117	Tielman Roux	Full-time	Ermelo
19	Krielpark	117	Vacant	Vacant	Witbank
20	Carolina	126	Dawie Nieuwoudt	Part-time	Ermelo
21	Ohrigstad	127	Vacant	Full-time	Lydenburg

22	Wakkerstroom	127	Johan Bezuidenhout	Full-time	Wakkerstroom
23	Laeveld	130	Francois Schwalb	Part-time	Laeveld
24	Morgenzon	132	Stephan Weyers	Part-time	Ermelo
25	Amersfoort	194	Hannes Reinecke	Full-time	Wakkerstroom
26	Premiermyn	200	Vacant	Stand-ins	Silverpark

Comments:

- 13 of the congregations are vacant. Only three have the prospect of calling a new minister.
- Premier Mine uses stand-in ministers from Pretoria—and has an agreement with a retired minister, dr Christo de Klerk, to handle the pastorate.
- Ministry by ministers happens in different ways: full-time and part-time posts, stand-in ministers for worship services, auxiliary ministers, ministers authorised to preach, as well as ministers from other denominations.

3. METHOD

For the first conversations two workshops were organised: in Ermelo and in Dullstroom. The facilitators were Carl Lourens, Tielman Roux Francois Retief.

The ministers and church council members as well as other leaders in congregations were invited via their presbyteries. At vacant congregations it happened that staff from the church office also came.

The leaders of this specific presbytery– that is, the Presbyterial Service Council – were also invited to the workshops. The reason for this was that a sustainable focus on the interests of smaller congregations will be determined by how involved the presbyteries are with them. The presbytery is, after all, the small congregation's next of kin.

Further on in this document extensive attention is paid to the contents of these workshops.

At the meetings of the Synodal Service Council we emphasised again and again that our Synodal Task Teams have to broaden their focus to keep the unique needs of the small congregations in view.

For the sake of a wider conversation about small congregations, I began a monthly Zoom meeting with the ten synods of the General Synod. In each synod, the person who focuses on small congregations was part of this group. From the side of the academy there were professors Hannes Knoetze and Kobus Schoeman, while Nioma Venter from the office of the General Synod was also part of the conversation. Later ministers from the Hervormde Kerk also joined. These were enriching discussions about ministry models, strategic conversations with smaller congregations, training possibilities 'opened up' by the General Synod, as well as success stories within synods. It became clear that all synods in some way have this issue on their agendas.

I had the opportunity to air a few ideas about small congregations on RSG's programmes 'Binnekamer' [Inner Room] and '*Wat het jy in jou hand*?' [What do you hold in your hand?]. A transcript of this by Danie Mouton is found further down in this document.

Carl Louwrens also attended the facilitation session about the Handevat-document [Joining Hands] drawn up by the Free State Synod with Frederick Marias. The session was at Marken during the session of the presbytery of Piet Potgietersrus.

I had the opportunity to do a presentation at the session of the presbytery of Witbank —specifically about the context of small congregations.

The church council of Krielpark asked me to come and speak with them at a worship service and a church council meeting about subjects touched upon by our workshops.

I took the trouble of contacting the ministers of the small congregations. Where there was no minister, I sometimes spoke to the church office. The role of church office staff in a congregation is something that must not easily be overlooked, because the church office becomes the axis around which everything turns. Presbyteries will do well to invite these staff members—or other leaders in the congregation—to regular gathering of ministers.

I had a Zoom conversation with the presbyterial service council members of presbyteries that contain only small congregations. At this event the emphasis again fell on the important role our presbyteries have to play in ministering to our small congregations.

The road ahead?

The Synodal Service Council wants to walk closely with our small congregations. The task teams of the Synodal Service Council undertook to keep the uniqueness of our small congregations in view when planning is done.

Practical issues such as the best ministry structure for maintaining this focus, as well as the persons who are going to take the lead, is on the Synodal Service Council's table.

4. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON BEING A CONGREGATION

Any good strategic conversation begins with three questions: **Who are we? What are we doing here? How are we going to make a difference?** This remains true, whether one is running a butchery or is a leader of a congregation.

In the context of the church we, translate it as three strategic questions: Identity Question, Vocational Question, Ministry Question.

4.1 IDENTITY QUESTION

The conversations confirmed that identity is an essential issue for congregations. For some it was the first time that they seriously reflected on their congregation's unique identity. The conversations in smaller congregations are often overshadowed by finances, survival, and a feeling of despondency and inferiority.

Who is God?

We begin with a question about God. It is not self-evident that this is the congregation's point of departure. Often the congregation is so caught up in survival and despondency that the conversation about God is moved to the back burner. This is a mistake. This mistake seduces congregations into conversations that quite disregard the uniqueness of the church.

Therefore: He is the Creator. He begins everything. He also begins the relationship we have with him. This is a relationship filled with love, trust, worship, and care. We see it in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. He gives his Holy Spirit. At

Pentecost the Spirit of God is poured out so that simple fishermen can plant the church of Jesus Christ.

An important theological perspective is that the risen Jesus teaches his disciples that his Father sent him, and that he sends them in the same way. (John 20:21) His followers are sent ones. He gives his Spirit to the church so that they can go tell the whole wide world the Good News of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8). Their way of life has to prove it. And what a powerful testimony they give … The early Christians showed with their lives what it meant to be followers of Jesus. They cared for the sick whose families had left them outside the city to die. Why? Because that is what Jesus would do. They helped the poor, cared for the people on the fringes of the community and openly testified that Jesus is Lord—the Book of Acts tells these stories.

What does this mean for a small congregation? Ministers and congregants have to think much more and much deeper about the question about who God is. They should not leap towards all kinds of practical issues. A deep conviction about God must grow: his love, his dream for the world, his plan for the church … It is our relationship with God that must send us into the community to let the kingdom of God happen in the world around us.

God's dream for congregations is not that they should live merely for themselves. Congregations are sent ones! Probably our congregations have not yet thought enough about this. The conversation in congregations is too often one of 'we and our interests'.

This is just as true of our smaller congregations. There is no energy in a conversation about 'we and our place and our finances'. Energy comes from a calling that is bigger than we are, a dream that excites us, a vision about the role we can play in the broader community. The job site of small as well as large congregations is the kingdom of God!

Who are we?

The congregation is not an invention of man. Congregations are born in the heart of the Father. Ephesians 3:14 refers to God as 'the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name'. This truth of faith—we as congregation come from God—is probably the most powerful truth with which to inspire a small congregation. Now when we meet at Sunday's worship service, we look at one another

in a new way. We are now more than farmers and learners and teachers and grandmothers and grandfathers. We have received a new identity.

***Identity versus Self-image**: In our Ten-Synod Zoom conversations, Kobus Schoeman emphasised how important it is to distinguish between identity and self-image. Often our congregations think, speak, and live from their self-image. In a small or shrinking congregation these are usually negative conversations. We say things like 'when we were still big …' or 'we are not what we were…' or 'we cannot do what other congregations can do.' Thinking and speaking from the congregation's identity opens up possibilities, gives energy, and sees new opportunities in changing circumstances.*

4.2 VOCATIONAL QUESTION

Vocation is a powerful word. God calls people: Moses, Abraham, Jonah, disciples, Paul... Every time it is a faith experience for the one who is called. It is not simply a plan he thought up for himself.

To discern a congregation's calling or vocation, requires the deep discernment of faith. 1 Chronicles 12:32 refers to people from the tribe of Issachar, 'men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do'.

Discerning in faith requires a deeper look, a longer pause, to actually take in and internalise what we see and hear—it must pass through our hearts …

God gives us the insight when we open ourselves up toit: new perspective, new sensitivity, new opportunities, new possibilities…

We must do exegesis twice: first what the Word says to us—and then what the community tells us…

We busy ourselves with the Word. We look at the Lord's journey with the congregation up until now. What are the themes of the conversations that are regularly land on the table? What is the congregation's DNA? What has always been very important to the congregation in their ministry? Where is the need in the community of which the congregation is a part? What difference can the congregation make in people's lives?

A congregation tells of how one Saturday they walked up and down through their small community. They purposely exposed themselves to the realities of their environment. Their feedback contained uncomfortable words such as dirty, poverty, afraid, beggars,

broken, sewage, security fences, sidewalk sleepers, despondency—but also beautiful gardens, cars, laughing children, full shopping trolleys, ice cream, other churches, schools, businesses, CSC, old age home… Their reaction? 'For the first time we have a full picture of what our community really looks like.'

And then they began hearing the Lord's voice: sensitive to his Word, and sensitive to the environment and time in which he had put them.

If calling or vocation is simply about maintenance and focusing on ourselves, we can know that we have not yet properly listened to the Lord. We are sent ones, and his church is the bearer of the Gospel to the world. Our calling contains a strong component of going out …

Remember what is written at the beginning of this document: 'A ministry *by* congregants—not a ministry *to* congregants.'

How do we respond to our calling? The Hebrew word *'hineni'* plays a great role in Jewish faith language. Translated into English, it says, 'Here I am.' This is not about the place where I am but about a total commitment to the Lord, to be at the Lord's service, to be prepared to go out to serve.

We found that this term helps our congregants and congregational leaders to think anew about being a congregation. It is not about 'doing something for the church'. It is about being prepared to discern in faith what God's will for the congregation is.

Leaders of the congregation must not be too hasty to finish talking about this. This part of the process requires a thorough look at the question, 'How did the Lord in the past use us to make an impact on the community?'

In this process some issues come to the fore that touch the congregation's heart deeply. Over time, it becomes the calling of the congregation. It becomes the reason for the congregation's survival. 'Where we are, we can still make a difference in the kingdom of God.'

It is important to know that calling is not the same as discovering one's gifts. Moses had to go and speak, although he was uncomfortable with the idea. Jonah had to overcome an inner resistance to the Lord's mercy to sinners. The first Christians, following Jesus' example, went outside the city at great risk to themselves to care for

lepers. Perhaps we have to cross a border or two. Maybe we have to begin talking to people who differ radically from us.
Sometimes a vocation is uncomfortable. Calling challenges us to grow.

And then we answer with deep conviction, 'Here we are.'

4.3 MINISTRY QUESTION

Here we begin to give structure to our vocation: We preach and do Bible study about our vocation, we grow towards our calling, we find leaders, we communicate with the congregants, we budget, we determine how we are going to measure our output, and we create timelines.

The ministries must be directly aligned with the calling of the congregation. It becomes the congregation's continuous narrative. It determines the church council's agenda. It determines the roles of the minister and the other leaders in the congregation.

Vocation must constantly be sharpened. It is a living process. There may come a time when it changes. The environment changes, the congregants change. But it must never happen that we care for ourselves only and live inwardly.

Vocation always challenges us. As we can see in the life of Jesus, we are challenged to give the first step towards people. Who are these people? Perhaps simply everyone who is not part of our ordinary life? Perhaps people whom we know very well? Someone whose predicament and needs we can address? People who live without the Lord? A name on the congregation's intercession list? The old age home? The police station? The teachers?

It becomes the responsibility of the church council to take a clear lead regarding the ministry structure that is going to direct the congregation's calling. If the church council does not lead the way and visibly guide the congregation, the vocation will have no impact on and make no difference to the life of the community of which the congregation is a part.

The danger of nostalgia is that you bury yourself alive …

'Long ago the church was full …' is nostalgia. The facts are that the church was only full when there was holy communion ...

Celebrate the blessings of a bygone era, but it is past now. It is for instance a sad fact that many of our children live and work—and probably will never return.

Being a church in our small congregation will never look as it did long ago. Come, let us build something new. Perhaps small groups should become a more important part of our congregational life?

Frederick Marais

5. WORKSHOPS

5.1 STRUCTURE

The workshops at Ermelo and Dullstroom had the following structure:

TEXT OF THE DAY EPHESIANS 3:14 - 21

IDENTITY QUESTION—Who is God? Who are we?

- Ephesians 3:14 What does this text tell us about God?
- Who is God? Who are we? We share with one another the story of our congregations—where does God fit into the story?

VOCATIONAL QUESTION— What is our calling as a congregation?

How do we determine what God's for us is?

- What do our congregants, our environment, and the 'other' people look like?
- Where can our congregation make a difference as Jesus came to make a difference to his world?
- What would the chief focus of the congregation be?

MINISTRY QUESTION—How are we going to live our calling?

- What are we going to get excited about?

- What are our worship services going to look like? What do we need?
- How are we going to care for one another? Who is going to do it?
- How are we going to reach out to the community?
- With which dream are we going to inspire our congregation?
- How are we going to ensure financial stability?
- How is the presbytery part of this processes?

5.2 RESULT OF OUR WORKSHOPS

We began practising new language when talking about the congregation. We viewed the congregation from God's perspective.

We began building relationships with the leaders of our smaller congregations. We heard one another's hearts. Leaders began building bonds with leaders in other congregations.

The Presbyterial Service Council began talking to the congregations in the presbytery about the future of the congregations—and not on the level of 'you are actually a problem for us'.

These workshops became the platform for further contact between us.

The Synod can of course not take responsibility for what the leaders of the congregation do with this. Sometimes ministers and leaders in the congregations are entangled in the survival model. They find it difficult to begin speaking new language about God, about their community, about opportunities, and about the kingdom of God in their community. Here the role of presbyteries is once again extremely important.

The documents we handled at these workshops were sent to all the small congregations as well as to the Presbyterial Service Council of the relevant presbyteries.

6. FROM THE DIARY OF A SMALL CONGREGATION

Yes, our congregation has become small. The older generation tells us of the days when there were still many people, when congregants filled the pews, when the bazaar was big, when many young people were confirmed, and the church council was big and important. The minister? He (yes, there were only men) was a prominent figure in our community.

The reality is that our town and environment is being depopulated. Many families have moved—to the city. The schools have much fewer children. There is no work here for our children—they move to the cities.

The deterioration of infrastructure in the rural areas hurts us: schools, roads, water, electricity, safety, hospitals, old age homes.

Our congregation's church building is also an increasing challenge. The maintenance if too expensive. The congregant numbers have declined so much that the traditional church building is not necessarily the most efficient facility for the worship service.

We no longer use the organ—it is too expensive to maintain and there are no more organists in the countryside. We get by with technology.

We no longer have a minister. Just like other vacant congregations, we often struggle to get ministers to come and lead the worship service. The congregations who do have ministers are also under pressure because their ministers must from time to time go to a vacant congregation for a baptism or holy communion—or want to go on leave.

We often wrestle with the difficult pastoral things episodes: death, divorces, trauma as with farm attacks, young people who go off the rails... It is then that we wish there was someone to reach out to us… The ministers of the presbytery try, but they are far and also busy.

The catechesis is a challenge. There are too few children here for us to do it in the traditional way. We expect that catechesis will again become something done by parents at home—but then we must empower the parents to do it well. We actually see it as an opportunity for families to talk together about the Lord who loves us.

The workshops we attended opened our eyes to our calling in the broader community. As other small congregations have done, we also got entangled in conversations that

were only about how we were to survive. Our eyes were opened to new possibilities, alternative issues for the church council's agenda, and to a new appreciation for the role our small congregation can play in our community. Now we know: In God's kingdom 'small is not necessarily negligible'…'

So now we focus onour greater role in the whole community. We are not here for ourselves. We are here to help build God's kingdom by caring for people, by loving them unconditionally, by sharing the Lord's love with everybody, by making a difference there where we are, and to be hospitable to everyone who comes to us. We want to take hands with the new partners we have discovered: the social worker, the school, our local hospital, businesses, farmer's unions, and other churches in our community. We know that we have to cross a few borders—but we are not afraid. We are called to be God's light here and now.

7. ROLE OF THE DENOMINATION

7.1 ROLE OF THE CHURCH COUNCIL

The **leadership of the church council** is of critical importance. The church council members are the spiritual leaders of the congregation. Their role is not merely the management of properties and finances. They must be the spiritual guides.

The church council must guide congregants to think like **pioneers**. Pioneers make new roads. They think up new plans. They innovate, dare, and trust the Lord. The farmers in our communities teach us that 'the time of drought is the time to innovate'.

This asks of leaders by their words and actions to show throughout the heart of God to the congregation. **The leaders become the 'bearers' of the dream about a congregation who wants to make deep tracks in the community.**

The **minister's work** is quite clearly circumscribed: preaching, pastorate, catechesis, seniors, and also the vision-bearer of the congregation.

Ministers of small congregations must guide their congregations to see the congregation's ministry anew. Congregants must be taught about God's plan for his church. Congregants must be guided to grow towards a new vision for the place of the congregation in the community.

Over time we have gravely reduced the ministry of **church council members** to meetings and commissions. We should consider 'upgrading' the roles of elders and deacons. Probably things will not look the same as in the past—but congregations will have to take new initiatives to make church council members the *impact players in* the congregation.

Continuity in the spiritual ministry to and by the congregation must be high on the church council's agenda. The church council is managing a congregation—and in God's plan a congregation has a particular role at a specific time.

Where congregations make use of stand-in ministers there is little to no possibility of an **ongoing theme** in the sermons. Every minister chooses his/her own theme —and there is therefore no growth in the consciousness of, say, the congregation's missional calling. The church council can indeed try to ensure that a structured conversation in

the congregation arises around something like small-group material. Material can also be sent to congregants to address this ongoing theme. Colleagues in the presbytery can help to provide suitable material.

The **worship service** is the key moment of the week for a small congregation. Here congregants meet one another, here faith is shaped, here koinonia is experienced, and here energy in the congregation is created.

Much thought should therefore be given to the worship service—the liturgy, the singing and the music, how the space is decorated—everything works together to make this moment a precious asset for the congregation. Often the best way is no longer to gather a small number of congregants in a church building that can seat hundreds of people. Church councils will have to think about this—and make innovative decisions. A smaller venue where the congregants attending are nearer to one another, where it is easier to sing together, a place where they can almost function like a small group—this may just be what would make the event a very special one.

The **processes of discerning in faith** in this document can be followed by church council members—with a facilitator as guide—to determine what the calling of the congregation must now be. Bible studies or small groups are an important forum where the church council can guide a congregation to grow in an awareness of the identity and calling of the congregation.

Another important function of the church council is to **build relationships with partners**. In smaller communities the social relationships are stronger, and people know one another much better than, say, in the city. We know of the others' expertise and networks. The line to people and institutions with whom one can join hands is short and clear.

Examples of these partners in the community are the CSC, schools, the business sector, agricultural organisations, and medical practitioners.

If I could have my rural congregational ministry over again, I would take trouble to have very good and regular contact with the farmer's unions. They are passionate about agriculture, are directly concerned with the wellbeing of the community, and have established structures and networks—you can move mountains with them on your side.

An obvious partnership that we can easily overlook is that of **other churches in the community**. Remember that they are not our competition for congregants or money. We want to leave a deeper track in the kingdom of God—and together we can do it better. In the Hendrina congregation there are already beautiful stories about joint worship services and community projects. Congregations could also make mutual arrangements regarding pastoral work and youth ministry.

The **church office** is like the heart of the congregation. Here congregants get information, and here activities and worship services are organised. Often the church office is the 'face of the congregation'.

Church councils must take trouble with appointing and supporting the staff in the church office. Administrative skills, a pleasant personality, and a heart for the congregation—these are not negotiable. For the financial functions an able and qualified person is necessary. These days many responsibilities land on the financial officer's desk. Make certain that it is done well.

The Eastern Synod has an extensive support system for the staff of church offices. Feel free to contact the Synod House.

7.2 THE ROLE OF THE PRESBYTERY

The presbytery is the congregation's next of kin. The structure of the presbytery provides safety to a congregation in terms of support, relationships between colleagues, and also the necessary canonical connection with each other.

The reality of smaller congregations is that they sometimes disappear off the presbytery's radar—especially when there are still large and vibrant congregations in the presbytery. Then a small congregation feels itself to be the presbytery's problem child.

There are also presbyteries that chiefly consist of small congregations. The potential of support and help regarding the ministry then becomes less and less.

It is a fact that many small congregations can no longer afford a minister's post. About 50% of our small congregations are vacant, which means that there is neither a full-time or a part-time minister.

At this point the role of the presbytery becomes increasingly important. The church order requires of the presbytery to play a much bigger role than merely on a relationship level,

Now church council meetings, administering the sacraments, and conducting the worship services place great pressure on the presbytery.

Here the presbytery's service council has to buy in to the congregation's future. It is the presbytery's investment in the ministry to and of a particular congregation.

What is the **key question** the presbytery asks itself? **'How can we as the presbytery make sure that every congregation lets the kingdom of God come in its unique context?'**

This is a deep theological question that we should not hastily avoid. Rather, this conversation belongs in every meeting of the presbytery and to the leadership of the presbytery.

An unfortunate reality is that the current **model of leadership in our presbyteries** does not improve matters. It is an established culture that the leadership of a presbytery changes annually. The Eastern Synod will do well to reflect on a new approach to leadership in the Presbyterial Service Council. One possibility is the election of a Presbyterial Service Council for a term concurrent with the four-year term of the Synodal Service Council. This should give the presbytery the opportunity to journey with a congregation for a longer period, which can lead to a new discovery of identity, calling, and ministry.

7.3 ROLE OF THE EASTERN SYNOD

Our small congregations easily get lost in a synod with more than 80 congregations. However, the Eastern Synod's leadership has taken note of them, esteems them—and has chosen to support them.

The challenge of existing as a congregation remains the calling and responsibility of the local congregation. The synod cannot take over this function. It requires initiatives on the part of the small congregation, that leaders will come to the fore and that a new vision should surface. My contact with these congregations has given me a great

appreciation for the zeal of ordinary congregants who still care for the congregation. Hopefully a new dream will grow about the greater role that the congregation can play.

The Eastern Synod's task teams have a great responsibility to keep the small congregations in view throughout; projects, ventures, initiatives, and training opportunities must always keep the needs of our small congregations in mind.

The Eastern Synod's task teams that should probably be directly involved with small congregations are, Youth, Families, Care for Ministers, and Missionality.

Youth and Families: there is need for material to be used during catechesis, home catechesis, and the confession class, and to be presented by a non-minister. Missio Youth Focus (www.missio.org.za) does an immense job of making available material for all ages for use in catechesis, family devotions, home catechesis, and discussion groups with children and young people. The www.kixkinders.co.za site can also help with material for preschool and school groups.

Care for the Minister: This is probably the first responsibility of the presbytery but in practice, where far distances and lack of funds play a role, the task team should be actively involved with ministers who work alone with few resources and little contact with other colleagues. The task team would do well to support ministers by means of regular contact.

Missionality: It is a challenge to make small congregations aware of their calling and then also to put processes in place to help them with it. In this document there are tools and example programmes but these on their own are not enough. The conversation has to be taken to the congregations.

7.4 THE GENERAL SYNOD AND MINISTRY MODELS

The General Synod's Church Order helps congregations to deal well with the posts created in them. In the last years there has been a growing awareness that the church needs much more than the old traditional model of ministry by a highly qualified full-time minister.

More ministry models were therefore created. **Auxiliary ministers** are by now fairly well established in our church structures. **Elders and deacons with competency** to

lead worship services are still something new. With this, the Synod of the Northern Cape is definitely taking the lead. It has created a very good structure in which the congregants are trained for preaching, the pastorate, youth ministry and community outreaches. The training is provided by Hugenote College.

What follows below, are the regulations that can help church councils and presbyteries to reflects on alternative options. Study it thoroughly because it might just be what the congregation needs at this time.

Important: Church councils and presbyteries must contact the local synodal structure to get the necessary information and to make good decisions about what exactly they need. The documents that follow, come from the Church Order 2023

7.5 REGULATION 18

[Church Order 2023 p 115]

REGULATION FOR LOCAL AND AUXILIARY MINISTER POSITIONS

1. DEFINITION

1.1 A local minister is a person

1.1.1 who has completed the required church training, was licensed, ordained and inducted to deliver a specific service within the specific context for which he/she was trained and called; and

1.1.2 who has a specific ministry in a specific context, for example the Khoi-San, the Hearing Impaired and Portuguese speakers.

1.2 An auxiliary minister is a person:

1.2.1 who has completed the required church training, was licensed, ordained and inducted to deliver service with a specific mandate, according to the terrain(s) of training;

1.2.2 who delivers specific service in one or more of the following specialised fields, namely: pastorate, youth and family ministry, preaching, diaconate, faith formation, evangelism, church

planting, worship, ministry to the elderly, counselling, teaching, outreach ministry and missionality.

1.3 Auxiliary ministers and local ministers, like all other office bearers, stand under the supervision and discipline of the presbytery. (*Church Order Article 59 to 66 as well as Regulation 21 for Management of Employment Relations for Ministers at Disability and Incapacity and Regulation 22 for Discipline and Reprimand*.)

2. CREATION OF POSITION

2.1 If the congregation would like to create a position for a local or auxiliary minister, the church council will present a substantiated presentation to the presbytery or his proxy.

2.2 A congregation may only create a position for an auxiliary position if there is already a filled position for a minister in the congregation.

2.3 The presbytery or his proxy approves, taking into account the congregation's ministry needs and financial circumstances, the position for a local or auxiliary minister.

2.4 The presbytery or his proxy advises the church council in determining the conditions of the service agreement and ensures that execution is given to the relevant prescriptions of Article 8 of the *Church Order, Regulation 12 for Calling, Induction, Demission and Retirement of Ministers* and other applicable conditions in regulations and related decisions.

2.5 A local or auxiliary minister position may not be created to obtain or retain competency or to obtain seating in church assemblies.

2.6 The position of local and auxiliary minister has clearly described ministry duties, directly related to the training of the local or auxiliary minister position.

2.7 Following approval of the position and the proposed employment agreement by the presbytery or his proxy, the church council may proceed with calling.

2.8 Local or auxiliary minister positions may be filled part-time or full-time.

3. PENSION BENEFITS

3.1 A local or auxiliary minister position (longer than six months) is

3.1.1 pensionable, subject to the following conditions:

3.1.1.1 The pension contribution level of a local or auxiliary minister position is calculated according to the agreed contribution category,

3.1.1.2 the employer determines the employer contributions to the pension fund in accordance with the rules of the pension fund; and

3.1.1.3 the employer's contribution determines the corresponding contribution category of the employee;

3.1.2 non-pensionable, subject to the following condition:

3.1.2.1 when the person who was called, is already a member of another legally approved pension fund (this excludes voluntary annuity funds)

4. CALLING AND INDUCTION

At the calling and induction, execution is given to the prescriptions of Article 8 of the *Church Order* and *Regulation 13 for Calling, Induction, Demission and Retirement of Ministers.*

5. DELEGATION TO SUPERIOR MEETINGS

Local or auxiliary ministers are delegated to superior meetings.

6. EMPLOYMENT AGREEMENTS WITH THE OTHER EMPLOYER (S)

6.1 Local or auxiliary minsters who are employed in part-time positions may also be employed by other employers.

6.2 At the signing of the employment agreement with a local or auxiliary minister, the church council determines the condition(s) for service to the other employer(s).

6.3 Agreement to all future employment agreements with other employers must be approved by the church council in advance.

7. TERMINATION OF EMPLOYMENT

7.1 A local or auxiliary minister terminates employment with the congregation with acceptance of another calling or when reaching normal retirement age.

7.2 Termination of employment, other than calling or retirement, will take place according to the service agreement and in accordance with the applicable church orderly Regulations (compare Regulation 21 for Management of Employment Relations for Ministers at Disability and Incapacity

and Regulation 22 for Discipline and Reprimand).

7.3 With termination of employment/at retirement, the church assembly will notify the General Task Team Minister Affairs.

7.6 GUIDELINE 4

(GUIDELINES THAT SUPPLEMENT AND CLARIFY CHURCH ORDER ARTICLES AND REGULATIONS)

[Church Order 2023 p 194]

GUIDELINES FOR MINISTERS (ELDERS AND DEACONS WITH COMPETENCY)

4.1 When a need arises in a specific area of ministry due to local circumstances, which cannot/need not be filled by a trained minister, the presbytery decides on its merits. (A specific ministry area includes worship services, pastorate, ministry to the aged, youth and family, children's ministry, diaconate, instruction in the faith, church planting, worship, etc.)

4.2 If the presbytery approves the need, church councils nominate persons who have a calling to a specific ministry and possess the desired gifts.

4.3 The presbytery or its proxy interviews the nominated person and recommends him/her for the applicable training programme of the General Curatorium at Hugenote College.

4.4 Subsequent to the approval by the presbytery or its proxy, the church council enrols the nominated person to be trained and equipped in the approved training programme. The church council/presbytery should vouch for the applicant's training costs.

4.5 After the training has been successfully completed, the minister is elected to the church council of the local congregation.

4.6 The minister's tasks as well as area of ministry (which is limited to the presbyterial region) are clearly defined.

4.7 The presbytery or its proxy appoints a minister from its own ranks to supervise the aforementioned minister continually. The supervisor reports annually in writing to the presbytery regarding the minister's fitness for office.

4.8 The minister is employed as and where the need for ministry has been identified by the presbytery or the congregation.

4.9 The minister is accountable to the presbytery.

4.10 Minister posts are nor salaried. Only expenses can be reimbursed or honoraria given.

4.11 A minister retains competency for as long as he/she is in office and on condition that the presbytery approves it annually.

4.12 When the minister leaves the congregation/presbytery the competency is terminated.

4.13 It is expected of a serving minister to attend continuing training programmes.

8. APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

‘History as positive possibility…’

Appreciative Enquiry as aid in the strategic shift of a congregation

[This is an extract from, and theological packaging of, Francois Retief’s MBA-dissertation.]

8.1 BACKGROUND

In the 1980's David Cooperrider decided to study a struggling hospital from a positive perspective. He chose to ask, ‘What is working?’ When are the staff at their best? What are the unique strong points of the team? What do the positive stories of the institution sound like? What difference are they making already?

His background lies in Positive Psychology—a movement that arose when psychologists found that it does not work always to talk about mistakes and failures. A psychologist’s work up to that point was to look for a mistake—and then try to correct it. Psychologists were rather embarrassed to find that they did not even have the necessary mode of thought or the language to speak about what is positive in people’s lives.

It was the beginning of a model of change management that quickly gained status and acknowledgement. It is widely used in the corporate environment.

It is important to know that it was not developed as a theological model. It comes from the management sciences. Here we have a typical example of how theology can join hands with the management world. I am of the opinion that we can package this model theologically to aid us in our faith environment.

8.2 A FEW REMARKS

The most general model for strategic planning—which is also often used in the church— is the SWOT model: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

This model, too, comes from the management world. Over many years, whenever an organisation has been studied, it has been held up as the standard model.

The challenge in this model steps up when we come to the second phase where we start talking about weak points. The natural response is then to ask, ‘Whose fault would this be?’ or ‘Who isn’t doing their work?’ The result is that participants in the conversation begin to get edgy. They either begin attacking or defending, which is definitely not ideal in a process where we want to work positively with renewal and mind shifts.

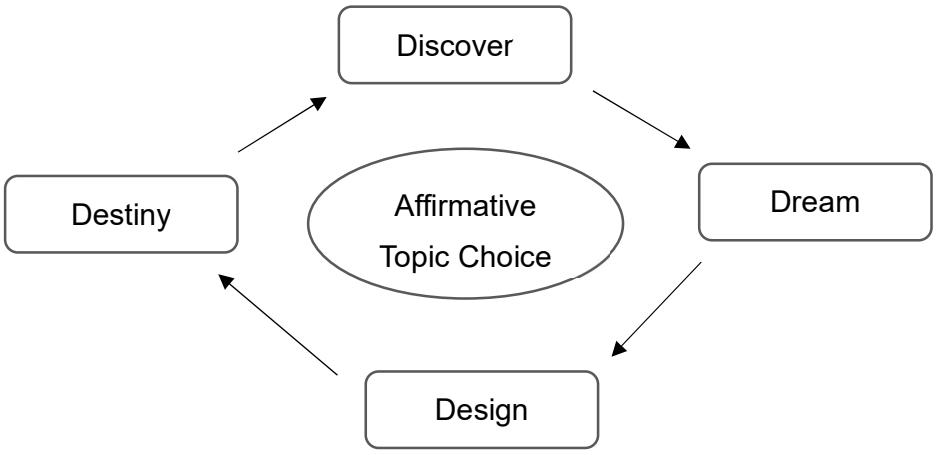
One limit in an Appreciative Enquiry is conflict. Appreciative Enquiry does not work well when people have begun opposing one another and digging in their heels. Conflict must be tackled and solved elsewhere—not in a strategic process.

A great challenge in a process where we ask people to shift, is the resistance against change. There are few people who accept change naturally. It is sometimes difficult to get all the participants to buy into the process.

In the context of the congregation the participants are the leadership and the congregants. Quite often any talk of change is opposed by phrases such as, ‘We have been doing this for years,’ or ‘We have tried that already,’ or ‘I can’t see why this is necessary …’ The question is, ‘How do we help our people to walk with us in this process?’ Actually, the better question is, ‘How do we help our people to become enthusiastic participants in the process? Our ideal is that all change should come from our deepest convictions about God’s plan for the congregation. How do we attain this ideal?

Appreciative Enquiry is already being used in the church. My feeling, though, is that it is often merely used to list a range of nice things about ourselves and the congregation—and then we do nothing further with the list. *Appreciative Enquiry* is a process with 4 steps: Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny. These steps build on one another. Only when we begin to walk through the whole process with a team do we begin to discover and mine its maximum worth for the congregation.

8.3 WHAT DOES THE PROCESS LOOK LIKE?



The Appreciative Enquiry Process

8.4 HOW CAN WE PACKAGE THE APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY THEOLOGICALLY?

It is not necessary for theology or ecclesial practice to invent the wheel for themselves. We here have a model that comes from the world of management—and yet we can package it theologically to aid us in the ecclesial environment.

The point of departure for Appreciative Enquiry is an organisation's uniqueness, strong points, positive stories from the past, possibilities, and successes. The starting point therefore does not focus on mistakes and problems.

Theologically we can put it like this:

As believers or congregations, we do not live out of our mistakes and shortcomings.

In our life and work we are backed by the Gospel. We live and work out of the knowledge that God, who loves the world, has also touched and renewed our lives (John 3:16). We live in the closest relationship with the risen Jesus Christ, the Lord. (Phil 2:11). We live and work with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

God himself comes to establish his church and through and by his congregation to open up a road in the world.

Every Appreciative Enquiry process should therefore begin with who God is and what he has done—and is still doing.

Ephesians 3:14-21 says it well:

- We owe our existence to the Father;
- Christ lives in us—and his love for us is wide and high and far and deep;
- the Spirit in us empowers us, and
- all glory is due to God, also in our ministry in the power of the Spirit,
- who can do more than we pray or think.

8.5 RUN-UP TO THE PROCESS

Any process in the congregation that has to lead to shifts, must be preceded by a deep engagement with the Word of the Lord: preaching, Bible study, small groups, and other programmes must prepare leaders and congregants for the process. An expectancy must arise—and it must strengthen the conviction that God is showing the way.

What then happens, is that **themes come to the fore** that clearly show that it is important for the congregation to reflect on this. Often, it is something about calling—and how it can find its footing practically in the world of the congregation and the community. Our conviction that we are a missional church puts this matter squarely on our table. **In our model is known as the 'Affirmative Topic'.**

This theme must challenge the congregation to grow and to become the people who can make the Lord's difference in the kingdom of God. Appreciative Enquiry suggests that it must be a positive theme that energises and enthuses the congregation into being the church.

Be careful not to talk about everything in one day. It becomes impossible to attend to everything. At the end of the day, one feels that one has talked much but managed nothing. Stick to one theme (affirmative topic) that you think will now make an essential difference to the congregation now.

Appreciative Enquiry is therefore not an instant -one-day event in a vacuum. It happens in the context of expectant faith. It is essentially nothing less than a process of discernment in faith.

8.6 ROLE PLAYERS

Identify the role players who are necessary to this part of the process. It will always include leaders. Further, it must be decided who can make important contributions to the process. Experience teaches that one needs people to visioneer. Those who want to pack everything into structures at once, struggle in a process like this.

Other participants in the process can include those who are involved directly in the outcome: interest groups such as farmers, seniors, young people, schools and the CSC, ministry leaders, small group leaders, and the church council.

8.7 THE PROCESS HAS 4 PHASES

For the purposes of this document the Affirmative Topic was '*Met God se lig na die gemeenskap*' [With God's Light to the Community']—the theme of the Appreciative Enquiry.

We further translate the 4 steps into the 4-W process:

WHO is God? WHO are we?
WHERETO as we called?
WHAT structures / ministries / processes are going to help us?
WOW! We celebrate the privilege to live with God's light in God's world as he currently lays it on our hearts.

It is a challenge to have strategic conversations in a new, appreciative way. We are very much cemented into negative perspectives and language. We must learn a new language. We therefore express ourselves differently:

How did we get to this point? Who are we? What makes us unique?

So, we see things differently. We speak differently: appreciatively and positively to be able to look back with appreciation at the road that the congregation has walked with the Affirmative Topic. It is a positive conversation. We write down everything. We listen to positive stories, experiences, and successes.

This is not the time to air problems. If there is a negative issue, we must try to express it positively. An example is, ‘The people do not know the minister because he does not do house visits.’ This is negative and can derail a conversation. Let us rather phrase it as, ‘For our congregation it is important to have good relationships with the minister.’ Now an essential issue has been noted down. The ‘how’ can be handled later.

8.8 WHY DOES APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY WORK?

The Appreciative Enquiry meets people where they are. It acknowledges each person’s uniqueness, story, and gifts.

It is a positive model. The questions are positive. The conversation should be positive. It gives energy. It helps congregants to buy in.

It overcomes peoples’ natural resistance to change and mind shifts. For the very reason that we begin with our own stories, participants in the process experience a continuity. We build on who we are. This is not threatening. It is challenging, yes, but we like it. My research has shown how people’s resistance against a shift in the congregation’s focus is overcome by Appreciative Enquiry up to a point where someone says, ‘We have done this before; so how do we go about doing it once again?

A further advantage of this model is that it lifts the discussion about change and shifts to a higher level. Initially people often remain stuck at ‘We don’t feel like it,’ or ‘We have tried that,’ or ‘Is it really necessary?’ But this process helps everyone to begin speaking the language of ‘What if …?’ —possibilities, challenges, opportunities—and this is the language of the Gospel!’

8.9 POSSIBLE PITFALLS

Participants in the conversation often simply want to repeat ‘the good old days’. The worship service, the missions committee, the relations with other churches, and the stature of the minister must all be shaped according to the old model. This is not the intention of Appreciative Enquiry. Appreciative Enquiry does not work with a duplication of the past. The stories from the past become the launching pad from where we want to live in a new way in a new life. Remember the slogan: ‘History as positive possibility’.

8.10 INTEGRATE APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY WITH THE DNA OF THE CONGREGATION

It becomes a new, positive way of talking. We think differently. We can appreciate the past—and the road up to here. And we can dream with God about the road ahead.

For further reading

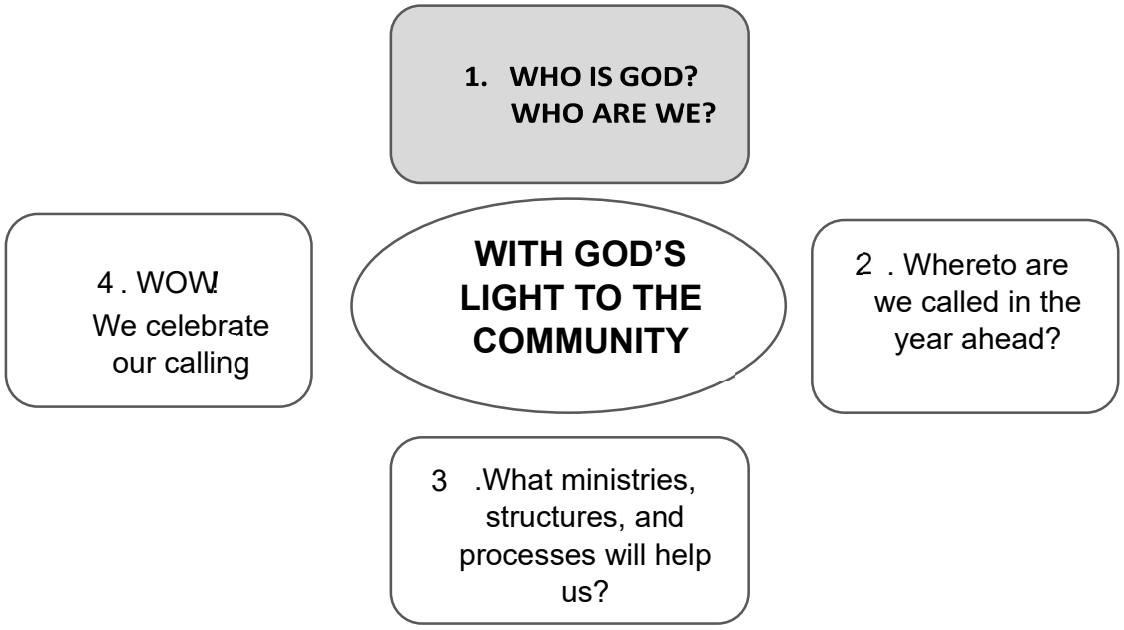
Retief, FJ 'The contribution of Appreciative Inquiry to the attitudes of congregants towards a change in strategic focus.' 2009. MBA Dissertation. Management College of Southern Africa.

Cooperrider, DL and Whitney, D 'Appreciative Inquiry—a positive revolution in change.' 2005.BK Publishers, San Francisco.

9. THE APPRECIATIVE ENQUIRY PROCESS

9.1 WHO IS GOD? WHO ARE WE?

These are the two identity questions we should ask—and also should have very clear answers to.



ABOUT GOD:

How does God make himself known to us?

In the Bible, by what names or descriptions do we learn to know God? Think of 'Father', and 'As the Father sent me, so do I send you'. What other names or descriptions do we find? What do they tell us about God?

ABOUT US AS HIS CONGREGATION:

How does God think about the congregation?

Where does the congregation as faith community come from? Ephesians 3:14-15 helps us with the answer. What does this say about the way we think and speak about 'our congregation'?

God gives his Son—and then he sends his disciples (John 3:16 and 20:21) What do we hear in this truth of faith? What does it tell us about how God thinks of his congregation?

OUR CONGREGATION'S STORY

Tell one another the stories of God's journey with this congregation.

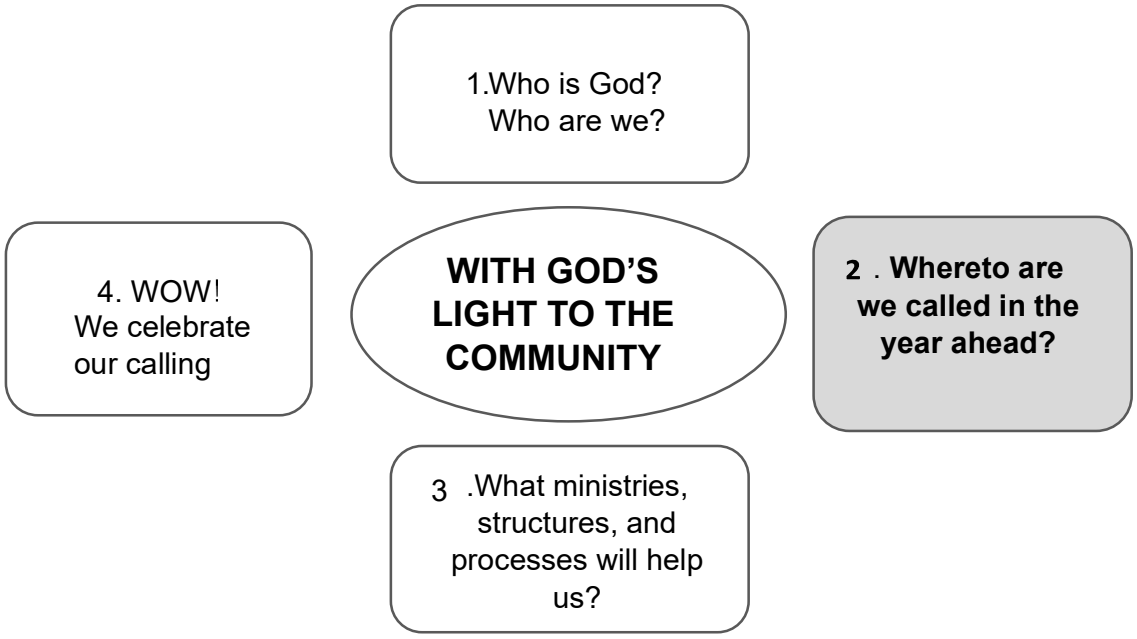
What deep convictions about God and the congregation lie in the DNA of our congregation?

What unique experiences and people and resources did the Lord give the congregation over the years?

With what facilities does the Lord trust the congregation?

We must also know this: God's dream for the congregation is much more than seeing the congregants happy with a worship service and a minister who tends them. A congregation does not exist for its own interests or advantage. A congregation becomes the light of and for the community. What questions do we ask to help us in this process?

9.2 WHERETO ARE WE CALLED IN THE YEAR AHEAD?



WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY, OF WHICH THIS CONGREGATION IS A PART, LOOK LIKE?

How are the people doing? Think about their daily existence, their relationships, their challenges, their vision of the future, the aged and the children, the businesses and schools. What in the broader community is the congregation known for?

GOD'S DREAM FOR THE CONGREGATION IN THE COMMUNITY

What dream would God have for the congregation's role in the community?

What can the congregation do that will make a meaningful difference in the community?

How would you begin to think about the Lord's call to this congregation?

Calling begins as a wide and vague conversation—but it must end in clarity and a deep conviction about God's plan for the congregation.

Write a first draft of your calling as congregation in the community of which you are a part.

9.3 WHAT MINISTRIES, STRUCTURES, AND PROCESSES WILL HELP US?

The dream must find its footing. We must package it.



CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Who is going to take the lead?

What ministries do we need to drive this focus?

How in the worship service can we communicate this calling to the congregation?

How are we going to use our small groups, the catechesis, and the church council to keep the conversation alive and relevant?

Who must we go ask to be our partners? CSC? Leaders in the community structures such as agriculture, schools, and the municipality? Churches? Businesspeople?

What do we budget for this?

How are we going to get the congregation to buy into it?

9.4 WOW! WE CELEBRATE OUR CALLING!



We live God's dream! We make a difference. We have new stories to tell. We share it in all possible kinds of ways. At the same time, it makes us small and grateful. We are privileged to let God's kingdom come in this way! This is something to be celebrated.

We celebrate Ephesians 3:20-21 'To him who through his power is working in us, and who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ever pray or think, to him be the honour, in the church, through our bind with Christ Jesus, through all generations and forever. Amen.'

10. HOPE AND VISION FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

Interview with Francois Retief on RSG *Binnekamer* ['Inner Room'] as edited by Danie Mouton—Eastern Cape

Introduction

Congregations in South Africa are shrinking, and so questions about their future are being asked.

This conversation is about an Eastern Synod initiative that other Synods of the Dutch Reformed Church have also been involved in. This initiative is very relevant to our situation and creates important signposts for presbyteries (who have a guiding function) and congregations of the Eastern Synod.

The Eastern Synod has taken important steps to support these congregations and to offer new hope and vision. Below is a summary of the challenges small congregations face and of the initiatives that have arisen as a response to them.

Current challenges for small congregations

Many small congregations find that their full-time minister's post is under heavy financial pressure. In many cases the post is still vacant, with big consequences for the functioning of the congregation.

Attendees at worship services are much fewer; sometimes only 15-20 people are present. This makes it difficult to present worship services in the same way as the past. The same goes for catechesis and youth ministry: There are places where there are only three children in the catechesis—each in a different grade. Congregations are therefore asking: How in such a context must teaching and guidance function?

There is also great uncertainty and even despondency. Congregations describe it as being in stormy waters, without clear direction. Church offices function under pressure, as smaller communities do not always have the necessary expertise, and this affects the administration and the management of the congregation.

Another problem is pastoral care. Congregations without a minister are asking: How do we manage peoples' need—especially when a matter is confidential or requires specialist support?

Many congregations also struggle with the maintenance of historic church buildings. The beautiful old towers and stone walls have become a heavy burden, as maintenance is no longer financially possible.

A new conversation

Against this background, the Eastern Synod decided to bring hope and vision by means of discussions with small congregations. Workshops are help with presbyteries, as presbyteries play an important role in the support of congregations.

The point of departure in such a discussion is God himself—the one who created, redeemed, and sent us. Congregations are invited to see themselves as people sent by God, also in a smaller context. This discussion helps congregations to think about their identity: Who are we? What does the Word say about who a congregation is?

An important part of the process is that of listening to stories—the memories from long ago, but also the experiences of today. Together people reflect on calling. As people in the Bible were often called to do difficult work, the congregations of today are called to tackle challenges and to develop new ways of doing and thinking.

Congregations and community

Small congregations are encouraged to think anew about their ministry. What does ministry in today's community look like? It requires a new knowledge of the community of which they are a part. One congregation, for instance, decided to walk through their town. They discovered again how great the poverty, unemployment, and dilapidation are—things they usually miss when the drive by in their cars.

Congregations are also invited to look for partnerships in the community—with partners such as the CSC, schools, old age homes, hospitals, the business community, and agricultural associations. In this way the church can join hands with other role players to serve the community together.

New energy and collaboration

These conversations lead to new possibilities and fresh energy in congregations. There is also a wider collaboration between synods—monthly Zoom discussions where experiences and ideas are shared.

In the DR Church there are already valuable initiatives such as auxiliary ministers and trained congregants who preach, provide pastoral care, and support youth ministry. These forms of service expand the possibilities for small congregations.

Inspiration from practice

Small congregations also share hopeful stories. In Badplaas, a small church organised worship services for teachers, and so colleagues got to know one another as fellow believers. In Blinkpan, congregants who themselves depend on social grants, provide food to other people daily. These stories testify to a deep vocation and a willingness to walk on new roads.

Closing comments

Small groups have a big place in the Lord's heart. Even though it is not easy, we believe that God can do more than we pray or think—and that he does it through his congregations. The Eastern Synod wants to join these congregations on their journey, trysting that their vocation and future are still in God's hands.

11. SERMON OUTLINE JOHN 21

Text: Johannes 21: 1 – 19

A small congregation can easily begin to believe that they are not able to do much. Then the language of the congregation becomes something like '"small" does after all mean weak, insignificant, and not as big as another congregation …' 226

This is not true. The congregations to which Paul writes in the New Testament were, in our language, all small congregations.

Size does not make a congregation.

The risen Jesus shows us a better way of thinking in John 21 —three pillars for being a congregation.

The story is that the confused disciples go to catch fish. They hear stories about Jesus who has risen, but they do not understand, and do not know …

They catch nothing. Early in the morning they see a man on the beach—and his words cause a miracle: the nets full of fish! And John looks at this immense catch—and at the man—and he calls out, 'It is the Lord!'

And in this confession, we find our first pillar for being a church in our day: Jesus Christ is the Lord!

This is the confession by which believers live!

Nothing—no standpoint—no perspective—may rob our hearts of this confession.

This is the confession with which the disciples go into the world—and therefore you and I, here at the southern end of Africa, can know the message of the Gospel today and can believe.

Do you share in this confession?

For our congregation, this is the foundation on which we build: Our confession regarding Jesus Christ! We say it loud and clear. We say it with deep gratitude and with deep conviction.

***A second pillar** : On the beach there is a fire with fish and bread on it. And Jesus invites them: 'Come and eat!' With that he invites them into his personal space. He regards them as his friends. He desires a close relationship with them*

'Come and eat' is still today Jesus's invitation to his church. Being a church is not the maintenance of an organisation. Being a congregation is not the maintenance of our own interests. On the contrary, it is a relationship with the living, risen Jesus Christ. It is a relationship of love and caring, of being obedient and being a follower. It is a relationship in which you can be safe—because he invites you—and he invites others to join you.

The congregation is therefore also an inviting community who welcomes and cares with open hearts.

This picture of Jesus and his disciples is God's picture for being a congregation—and we may do nothing and be nothing that endangers it. It is a pillar for our existence as congregation.

The third pillar *we find in Jesus' conversation with Peter. The last time when Jesus and Peter were together near a fire, Peter denied Jesus with, 'I do not know the man!' Three times. And now, three times, Jesus asks, 'Do you love me?'*

And what does Jesus do? He reinstates Peter's vocation. 'Feed my sheep. Take care of my sheep. Feed my lambs. Because, you see, in the Lord's plan with Peter—and with every believer after himthere is a calling, a ministry. Jesus says it like this, 'Follow me!' Do as you have seen me do. Speak as I spoke. Live with the caring heart that I showed you.'

What would our congregation's calling be? Our calling always lies in a specific context. The context of our congregation? What is happening here? What does this community look like? Who are the people of our place—and how are they? Are there people who need the love of God—and his Gospel? Are there people here who are despondent or lonely or hungry? Are there people here who live without Jesus?

What does this congregation talk about? What does this congregation pray for? What do the people give their thank-offerings for? What does this congregation dream about?
Ministry and calling require of us as congregation to look away from ourselves and our own needs, because we live with the calling of the Living Lord!

This third signpost takes us forward and further—and probably also out of our comfort zone—as with Peter. This is the one issue about which the congregation should have absolute clarity: 'Why are we here?' 'To be busy with what?' 'Where is the energy of this congregation going to be focused?'

It determines our conversations, our commitment, our involvement, our generosity, our service—our focus …'

We celebrate the privilege of a confession—Jesus is the Lord!

We celebrate the privilege of a relationship with the Living Lord!

We celebrate the privilege of a calling, a ministry.

Every step the congregation takes, from today forward, should reflect something of this.

Let us go and do it!

12. AIDS IN THE BROADER CHURCH CONTEXT

The Synod of the Northern Cape is developing a **DOCUMENT FOR RETIRED MINISTERS** who are serving in small congregations.

These ministers' responsibility is much more than leading worship services and doing pastoral work.

They are excellently positioned to guide congregations to discover their vocations. Small congregations must never get the idea that they are simply to be served. Ministers' responsibility is to get them to reflect on their vocation within the context of which they are part. This is how a missional congregation lets God's kingdom come.

The Northern Cape Synod's contact details are admin@noordkaapland.co.za

The **JOINING HANDS DOCUMENT** was developed by Dr Frederick Marais in collaboration with the Synod of the Free State .

The document's name says it well: How can congregations join hands to make a greater difference?

The document is available on the website of the Eastern Synod under Taakspanne - Gemeenteondersteuning [Task Teams—Support of Congregations]

LANDMARK CONGREGATIONS: REFLECTING ON CALLING AND FAITHFULNESS by Lourens Bosman, Marelize Maritz and Mias van Jaarsveld – available at CLF [Christian Literature Fund]

This book is the result of extensive research about congregations by the General Task Team Research of the DR Church. Some of the church's chief experts on congregations contribute to this work.

13. A CONGREGATION'S CONVERSATION ABOUT FINANCES

13.1 CONGREGATIONAL STATISTICS

Number of congregants according to the Yearbook statistics as calculated by the church office.

Number of congregants ‘on the ground’ as determined by census

Number of congregants who attend the worship service

Number of congregants who support congregational activities

Number of congregants who contribute financially above and beyond the worship offerings

The financial capability of the congregation is determined by (e)—these are the funds that keep the congregation’s functioning on track.

13.2 FUNDRAISING

Bazaar or similar projects such as hunting packages, golf days, and such

These projects should be an ‘extra’ because their success often depends on a few people, the weather, and other projects run by, e.g., schools.

13.3 THE CONVERSATION IN THE CHURCH BOARD ON FINANCES

Who are our congregants? —see above.

What is the financial capability of our congregants’?

Wealthy? Self-sustaining? Needy?

What ‘dream’ supplies the congregation with energy? What is the congregation excited about—so excited that they will contribute money to it? It is the task of the church council, led by the minister, to verbalise and live this dream. This dream is about much more than the maintenance of buildings and posts—people do not get excited about such things.

What impact does the congregation make on peoples’ lives?

What impact does the congregation make on the lives of people in the community?

Is the congregation seen as an institution that does not merely live inwardly—but also outwardly?

People like to contribute to something they believe in—something that excites them—something that makes them feel good about the impact of the congregation—inwardly and outwardly.

The church council draws up a budget that considers both the dream/vision of the congregation as well as the financial potential of the congregants.

The budget must challenge the congregation without being irresponsible.

The budget tells the dream of the church council for the coming financial year.

It is the church council's task constantly to communicate this dream.

Utilise the worship service, the preaching, the small groups, to help shape the congregants' thinking about the role of the congregation.

Give information – and feedback especially—about the congregation's impact. A photo on the screen at the worship service has a huge impact…

14. CLOSING WORD

The Bible knows of no congregations other than small ones. Everything written in the New Testament about being a congregation refers to small congregations.

The growth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not in the first place due to great preachers at rallies. The church grew as a result of the impact that Christians had on the community.

We have already referred to Christians crossing boundaries, when no-one else was prepared to do it, to care for dying people such as those suffering from leprosy. The followers of Jesus helped where there was poverty—while they themselves were very poor and had little.

Why did they do so? ‘That is what Jesus did…’

There is no reason why it cannot still be so. The impact of a small congregation in its community can be big. It can be a powerful testimony that makes Jesus visible in that community.

When residents walk or drive by a church building, they must be able to refer with appreciation to the impact of the congregants on the broader community. .

The prayer in Liedboek 488 [Songbook 488] then becomes the congregation’s prayer:

> ‘May your light, Lord, shine through us.
>
> May we sound your praise, o Lord.
>
> May you gladden hearts through us.
>
> May you bring hope, Lord, through us.
>
> Let your kingdom come, in and through us, everywhere!’


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