

The economic crisis : What do the churches in the Netherlands do? (15minutes)

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My name is Trinus Hoekstra. I'm working at Kerk in Actie , the diaconal work organization of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands . I'm also up to the end of this month co-director of DISK, the national office for industrial mission in the Netherlands. This office closes at the end of this month its doors because of decreasing financial resources.

In my brief introduction, the central question is: What do the churches in the Netherlands do in regard of the economic crisis?

When we talk about the impact of the economic crisis in unemployment and impoverishment, and what the churches do in regard of this impact, then we can see a broad and quantitatively large involvement from local churches in initiatives of help in distress , food banks and debt relief assistance. However at a time in which the government says it wants to make the transition from a welfare state to a participatory society this involvement provides questions and discussion in churches. The participatory society the government wants to create, starts more from the autonomy of the individual and the capabilities of civil society, including churches, to contribute to the realization of social security. In being involved in initiatives of help in distress, foodbanks and debt relief assistance is therefore from a religious angle referred to the involvement in this initiatives as to critical church participation. The churches have big questions about where their involvement is placed in a movement of the right to social security unto dependence on charity .

In quantitatively lesser extent there are initiatives related to the fight against unemployment. Several initiatives are to be mentioned, but the number of these initiatives is much lower than in help in distress, food banks and debt relief assistance. Churches are not in a position that they can create new jobs. However there are churches engaged in initiatives to guide people out of unemployment into work. There are church job boards which alternatively seek to establish links between employers and employees. There are also ecclesiastical crisis teams that offer unemployed a network in order to find their way to work; and ecclesiastical career buddy projects to guide and coach unemployed people in their search for work.

Because attention to unemployment is the troublesome side of ecclesiastical attention to the consequences of the economic crisis, I want to devote a little more attention to it, also because

for the years to come a high unemployment rate is expected to continue to be en to become an important consequence of the economic crisis for many people.

The relationship of the church to work and unemployment is essentially a multidimensional one. In this relationship can be discerned a pastoral, diaconal , liturgical, homiletic and educational dimension . But this multidimensional fenomenon also has a relation to something else, and it may be that 'other' that makes the relationship of the church to work and unemployment irritating and tough. That relationship is namely also a societal, or political one, and by 'political' I mean that it involves a particular view or belief regarding the organization of society. This relationship is also sometimes perceived as offensive . The offensiveness is that in the church we have to do with different attitudes to society, those attitudes are moving on a scale of adjustment to the existing society unto more or less radical change of society. And in particular the themes of work and unemployment also call the societal dimension of the Church.

In the history of church and theology this social dimension of the Church passes regularly. In the 19th century industrial society developed in the Netherlands and the social question presented itself, and thus the social and political awakening of the then largely Christian society regarding this issue took place. This awakening often took place in the form of Christian social organizations. The social question particularly had to do with the social safety and security of workers in employment and unemployment. In regard to the social question politics and society formed and developed in the course of the 20th century to the welfare state. Now, in 2014 we witness in the Netherlands, the transition from the welfare state into the participative society, a society in which the model of social participation in paid work appears to be dominant. However at the same time paid work is for many people unavailable and many seem in lack of paid work doomed to inadequate social participation .

In the course of the 20th century until now, the church has come to appreciate paid work in two ways. Work has been designated as important to people because they, besides that they earn their livelihood with it, find destination, fulfillment and gain sense in it in relation to society. At the same time, however, the recognition of the important role of work for people, in particular of paid work, has also been a reason for churches to see paid work in a relative perspective. The dominant meaning of paid work as the aim and content of social participation became in such a compelling way meaningful to human lives that questions arose. In the view of the churches paid work took the place of the activity that takes place in the longing for the reign of God. Paid work in our society is an essential and meaningful

human activity, but it is not meant to be the master of our lives. The dangerous reverse side of the dominant meaning of paid work is, that a situation of unemployment becomes a situation of uselessness, yet that is exactly what people in a situation of unemployment often experience.

Standing in this two-sided appreciation within churches of the meaning of paid work, and the provocative relationship of church and work and unemployment as a 'political' one, the potential multidimensional way that churches can relate to unemployment becomes to be put under stress. In the coherence of the different perspectives of pastoral, diaconal, liturgy, preaching and educational activities the whole person is at stake: personal and social, spiritual and material. An important observation for people involved in these different approaches is that these different approaches are not in competition with each other. One is not more important than another, but every angle or perspective does have its own specific character. In the coherence the peculiarities of the different perspectives reinforce each other. I let the different perspectives briefly pass in review:

In the pastoral perspective one is there to be a listening ear. For the people, the families, partners and children, who are affected by unemployment. It is crucial that people are seen and heard with their emotions. This attentive awareness and recognition offers people the opportunity not to get stuck in their emotions. Another focus for pastoral care in this time of economic crisis is the threat of job loss that people can suffer. That fear may be a shadow hanging over people, even if there is no clear threat of unemployment. The crisis is accompanied by reports of plant closures and layoffs. Those messages evoke an atmosphere of threat. People may start to wonder "when is it my turn?"

In the diaconal perspective one is there to recognize the social situation of people who are unemployed. Also of course, hereby it's important to be a listening ear, but also to be alert in regard to the question of whether impoverishment and indebtedness is the case. In that situation deacons can often act as a signpost to point to agencies such as special assistance, debt relief and food bank. Even after referral to agencies keeping in contact can have an important supportive meaning.

Advocacy by and for the unemployed is also a diaconal possibility. It may for example take place as a consultation during which is thought along with the unemployed person from his or her interest. To enable such a consultation a working group is required in which cooperation with local organizations, trade unions and social work is the case.

Another possibility is the creation of an interdenominational employment fund. In a regional context parishes can create a fund, from which people without jobs who want to start their own businesses can receive financial support. A possibility is that such a fund may function as a guarantor in order to make it easier for unemployed people to get a loan for a business-initiative from banks.

Retraining may sometimes be necessary for people to have a better chance at employment. Parishes could decide to pay retraining. A possibility that well may be related to the previous options are the aforementioned practices of church job boards who alternatively seek to establish links between employers and employees; ecclesiastical crisis teams that offer unemployed a network in order to find their way to work; and ecclesiastical career buddy projects that guide and coach unemployed people in their search for work.

Another diaconal approach is that of commitment to the social and political attention and debate related to the current unemployment problem. How does the local government, political parties, trade unions and other civil society organizations deal with this problem? How do they perceive the problem and what do they propose as measures that should be taken? Can and does the church want to be an ally or teammate in measures and do they want to play a role in the debate? At the moment, for example, the issue in the Netherlands and I think in a lot of European countries is, that in several years to come employment won't be available to a lot of people, yet by example the Dutch government urges people increasingly to find employment in a situation where no jobs are available. The result is that people get frustrated and feel themselves useless and experience themselves regarding their livelihood in a situation of dependence of an unemployment or social benefit. How do you relate to this situation as churches? Trying to guide people to jobs within the policy frameworks set out by the government is one thing to do, another is to make the call for a redistribution of the available work, so the pain of the economic crisis in unemployment is more fairly distributed. This latter issue is socially and politically at the moment a sensitive one. The government aims on economic growth and shortages on the labourmarket, yet a lot of economists and labourmarket experts say both won't be the case for several years to come. A high unemploymentrate is perhaps a good thing for the wages, as they result in lower wages and thereby good for the position of the Netherlands on the worldmarket, but it's a result that's obtained on the costs of the masses in a situation of unemployment and impoverishing. Anyway it may be a topic at which the churches at least can ask politicians to give their arguments for the present policy and for their silence about the subject of redistribution of the available work.

In the perspective of liturgy, preaching and prayers the attention given to the economic crisis and unemployment can be put on a more symbolic, spiritual and emotional level. In addition to integrated attention in church services to the subject of the economic crisis and unemployment as a 'common' subject, this attention may also involve more thematic services. Services that should be prepared together with people who are facing the economic crisis and the situation of unemployment and employment under the threat of unemployment in different ways. Important hereby is to involve in those preparations also employers, entrepreneurs and tradesmen in different situations of independency. Such a broad committee of preparation makes it possible to give a lot of different social positions and experiences a voice in the service.

Finally, an opportunity to give attention to the background and causes of the economic crisis is the dimension of educational activities in churches, educational also in the meaning of a debate in which we relate from the different social positions and experiences regarding the economic crisis and the situation of unemployment. Those educational and talking sessions could start with the exchange of experiences in situations of employment and unemployment. Reflecting on the background of the economic crisis and situation of unemployment could be a further step. The current economic crisis has its roots in a credit crunch . A speculative use of money, making debts to make profits has put the global economic system at risk. From DISK, the bureau for industrial mission and the Council of Churches in the Netherlands a lot of material is created for educational and talking sessions. Not in the last place in view of the question how we actually ourselves as believers and churches deal with our financial resources? This booklet 'Faith and Economics: Perspective on the Economic Crisis' is an example of this educational material. In order to produce it the Consultation group for social questions of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands organized a number of round table-conversations with economists, philosophers and theologians to talk about the financial crisis and its backgrounds. Based on these round table conversations we produced the booklet which intention is to enable reflection and discussion in churches and in society on the financial crisis and its effects on society.

Thank you for listening (t.hoekstra@kerkinactie.nl)