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Digging for treasure in your own backyard

Reflections on missional experiments
in the Netherlands

Jackie Wyse



Series editor
James R. Krabill

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Digging for treasure in your own backyard

Reflections on missional experiments
in the Netherlands

Jackie Wyse

As I write this story, I am a woman uprooted. I have left the Netherlands behind me, the lights of IJmuiden's port twinkling on the horizon. I am a passenger on the *PZM Isolda*, a Polish freighter hauling coils of steel to Cleveland, Milwaukee and Burns Harbor, Ind. I am returning to the United States after five years serving as a mission worker in Almere, the Netherlands.

It seems somehow appropriate that my transition back begins at sea. A Dutch proverb says, "God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands." That only makes sense, of course, to those who have water in mind. About 40 percent of Dutch land is under sea level. For hundreds of years, not only have the Dutch fortified their borders against the infiltration of the waters surrounding them, but they also have built dikes large and strong enough to enable them to reclaim land already submerged. The current city of Almere was founded as a village on just such a piece of land (called a *polder*) in 1976. Just over 30 years later, the population has surpassed 180,000, making Almere the country's eighth largest city.

The whole world, including the Netherlands, has become a mission field

Until the 1980s, the lion's share of projects supported by the Dutch Mennonite Mission Board (*Doopsgezinde Zendingsraad*, or DZR) were international in nature. In the past, Dutch mission has been especially active in former colonies such as Indonesia. More recent projects include medical work in Tanzania and the development of theological curriculum together with partners in Zambia.

However, as Europe's religious landscape is changing, approaches to mission are changing as well, for churches have come to realize that their own backyards are rich in missional opportunities. In the Netherlands, one's religious affiliation (or lack thereof) used to be at the core of one's life: Catholics attended not only Catholic churches and schools, but had Catholic doctors, read Catholic newspapers, watched Catholic television, and participated in Catholic sports leagues and musical groups. The same was true for Protestants and Socialists, as well as those who chose to affiliate with intentionally nonreligious ("public") schools, clubs and organizations.

This carefully crafted system – called the *verzuiling* – broke down in the 1960s, as religious identity diminished in importance. Today, many Europeans view the church as a largely historical institution that is no longer relevant to daily life.

In Almere and Amsterdam, an estimated 2-4 percent of the cities' residents are active in churches, though in rural areas, the percentage is significantly higher. Most traditional churches in the Netherlands, including the Mennonite churches, have experienced a drop in attendance in the past decades, corresponding to society's increased secularization. The insufficiency of the old missionary model, in which Western missionaries are sent to non-Western lands, is apparent. The whole world is now a mission field! Furthermore, mission can no longer be considered an activity that one group "does" among another group; rather, it is a movement initiated by God in which all peoples are invited to participate.

The idea of a drop-in center is born

With these larger cultural trends in mind, the Dutch Mennonite Mission Board chose in the 1980s to begin a missionary project on its own soil. As an organization whose endeavors had been exclusively

oriented toward foreign lands, this was a substantial theological decision motivated by an awareness of the changing Dutch context.

The DZR chose the city of Almere as the setting in which they wished to work: a new city, established on a polder, whose spiritual autobiography was still being written. The DZR hoped to pen its own chapter by establishing a house of hospitality in and for the neighborhood of *Stedenwijk*, located close to Almere's developing city center. The first workers named the house *Inloophuis de Ruimte* (Inloophuis [IN-lope-house] means "drop-in center" and de Ruimte means "space"). This drop-in center would aim to have an open door and a low threshold: It was to be a place where people could easily and genuinely meet with one another, a space where the concerns, questions, hopes and joys of all who entered were to be taken seriously.

The DZR intentionally chose to open a drop-in center rather than to pursue more traditional missionary methods, such as church planting. Western Europe is full of church buildings; people have ample opportunities to attend worship services, but most are not choosing to do so. In the face of this fact, one frequently employed missionary strategy is to plant new kinds of churches. And some of these are, in fact, effective.

The DZR, however, decided instead to initiate a different kind of ministry that would fulfill a different calling. Instead of founding a church – which would appeal primarily to those for whom the word "church" still seemed relevant – the DZR founded a drop-in center, a place whose goal was to provide a context in which neighborhood residents could freely get to know one another.

It may sound simplistic, but in a new city like Almere – where everyone is a relatively recent "immigrant" – getting to know one's neighbors is no simple task. At Inloophuis de Ruimte, these ordinary moments of meeting together are honored as something holy, something through which the Spirit can and does work.



The DZR didn't invent this form of mission. Often called "the ministry of presence," this counter-cultural strategy challenges values idolized in the West: efficiency, productivity, and the idea that bigger is always better. Instead, a ministry based on presence is committed to listening before speaking and to observing before taking action. A ministry of presence asks that we toss our to-do lists over our shoulders, throw the door open ... and wait.

Accepting the invitation to attend God's party

The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to let go, trusting that the Spirit can work without our help. We fear that if we do hold back, then we will come to the disturbing realization that nothing is going to happen without our taking the initiative. But don't such fears betray a faith in our own industriousness rather than a faith in God's active presence within our world? If we truly believe that God's Spirit is already on the move, inspiring creativity and hope among our neighbors, then we will be able to let go of our own missional delusions of grandeur. We aren't *needed* to bring God to our communities: God is already there. However, the good news is that we are invited to participate in the work which God's Spirit has already begun all around us.

To use another image, many approach mission work as if they are chairing a committee, complete with to-do lists and 10-year plans. But perhaps a better image for mission is a party God is throwing, a party to which we have been invited as guests. If we can humbly and joyfully accept this invitation, which indicates our modest place in God's missional plan, then we will discover at the party an abundance of opportunities for receiving the gifts of others who have accepted God's invitation, and for sharing our own gifts, too.

In this spirit, Inloophuis de Ruimte opened its doors in 1989 to the Stedenwijk neighborhood and to Almere as a whole. The drop-in center's first staff worker was Jaap de Graaff and his first priority was to get to know the neighborhood. He took walks through Stedenwijk, with nothing up his sleeve other than an openness to all that was "out there" waiting to be encountered. This practice of presence is called "exposure" in Dutch literature: As a mission worker, you are asked to open yourself up to the neighborhood and, while doing so, to observe what is happening within and around you. In this way, the worker attempts to see the neighborhood for what it truly is, rather than for what they hope or fear it will be.

Exploring ministry options to see what fits

Jaap's "exposure" in Stedenwijk yielded much that was of interest for the development of the drop-in-center and also served to give him roots in the neighborhood. He got to know people and they got to know him. These initial encounters led Jaap to believe that "brokenness" was a theme dealt with by many in the neighborhood. The pioneering individuals who first settled in Almere came for many reasons, but for a surprising number of the people Jaap met, those reasons had to do with the desire for a clean slate and a new start. This confirmed the wisdom behind a project like the drop-in center, a place where all were welcome regardless of their background or the particularities of their struggle.

Too much occurred during the drop-in center's first years to record here fully. Suffice it to say that it wasn't long before news of the center spread and there were visitors waiting at the door most mornings when it opened. Soon, Jaap went looking for volunteers with whom to share the work of hospitality, welcoming visitors with steaming cups of coffee, a spot at the table, and a listening ear.

Those first years were filled with experiments. Visitors and volunteers alike would approach Jaap with ideas for activities the inloophuis could initiate. It was important for the center to foster a willingness to try many different forms of ministry on a trial basis. Some projects, such as the bimonthly community meals, were good fits, and these continue even today. Other projects, like the kids' club, worked for a while, but eventually this idea was laid to rest for a number of years, later to be resurrected when the time seemed ripe. Still other projects didn't fit the context at all and were "retired" and chalked up without regret as learning experiences.

After a few years, Gerrit Jan Romeijn, who had been involved in the planning of the inloophuis since its inception, moved to Almere and joined Jaap as a mission outreach worker. He began experimenting with projects oriented specifically toward Stedenwijk – projects

It wasn't long before news of the drop-in center spread and there were visitors waiting at the door most mornings when it opened.

that included a course on mediation, a neighborhood plant exchange, and intercultural meals prepared by neighborhood residents.

At the same time, the Mennonite presence in Almere was growing. A small group of Mennonites had been meeting informally in Almere for Bible study and conversation for years. In the early 1990s, they began worshipping together as well. This group would eventually become the Almere Mennonite Church (*Doopsgezinde Gemeente Almere*). Although the inloophuis and the congregation have separate stories of origin, today their ministries are intertwined.

As the inloophuis began moving toward its 10th anniversary, questions arose about the project's future. Things were going well, but the workers didn't want to be complacent about that. So they asked one another, "Where does the inloophuis hope to be in another ten years? Should we continue to develop the same sort of ministry in the future, or would it be better to pursue other initiatives?"

It was while discussing these questions that the inloophuis staff and the DZR began tossing around the idea of inviting a cross-cultural worker to join them for a few years. Each culture has its own unique blind spots – things about itself that its inhabitants take for granted – and sometimes the freshness of an outside perspective can help a culture get in touch with both the gifts and liabilities inherent in its worldview.

And so it was that, together with Mennonite Mission Network, the DZR issued a call for such a worker to come to the Netherlands. To make a long story short, several years into their search process, I applied for the position and to my great joy, was invited by the DZR and the Mission Network to go to the Netherlands upon my graduation from seminary in 2002. This was an historic moment – the first time ever that the Dutch and North American mission organizations had cooperated in the recruiting and sending of a mission worker.

The cookbook project: getting the "flavor" of the neighborhood

As is true for most mission workers, a hallmark of my first year in the Netherlands was language learning. My new Dutch colleagues at the drop-in center – including Gerrit Jan Romeijn and Marjan Kip, Jaap's successor – facilitated this process by speaking Dutch with me

immediately, as did members of the budding congregation. A part of this “sink-or-swim” philosophy involved attending meetings for which my language proficiency was too poor to really understand what was happening. Some of the first such meetings were gatherings of a group preparing to spearhead a community cookbook project for Stedenwijk.

The members of this cookbook group assembled for the first time in the fall of 2002. Some were staff workers and volunteers at the drop-in center. Others were representatives of local churches or neighborhood residents. The idea for a cookbook emerged from conversations about ways to increase a sense of community within the neighborhood. The project’s deeper goals had little to do with the book itself and much to do with what the Dutch call “social cohesion” – the foundation of which is the simple act of learning to know your neighbors.

In a neighborhood as diverse as Stedenwijk, in which nearly 40 percent of the residents have non-Dutch backgrounds, it can be easier to focus on what separates people than on what they share. A cookbook could function as a simple way to bring people together, since one basic thing all people have in common is the fact that they all cook and they all eat.

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In the spring of 2003, we launched our first public relations campaign, hanging up posters in the local shops and distributing flyers to every household in the neighborhood. Once everyone had received a flier, we sat back and waited, confident that our work was done. Weeks passed. A couple dozen recipes trickled in and we received them gratefully. However, in the end, we had collected far fewer submissions than the 150 we were hoping for.

At that point, we could have called a halt to the cookbook: If the neighborhood was not interested, was there any use in pursuing this project further? However, perhaps the problem lay not in a lack of interest but in our methods of “spreading the word.” Before throwing in the towel, we decided to take a more active approach. For one Saturday each in October, November and December of

2003, the members of our group walked the streets two-by-two, knocking on doors and inviting residents to submit recipes of their favorite dishes.

Most of the people we met were welcoming, and even the most cautious usually warmed up once they understood our intentions. Unlike door-to-door evangelists or salespeople who knock on doors hoping to leave something behind, our excursions had the opposite goal: We were hoping the residents would give *us* something to take

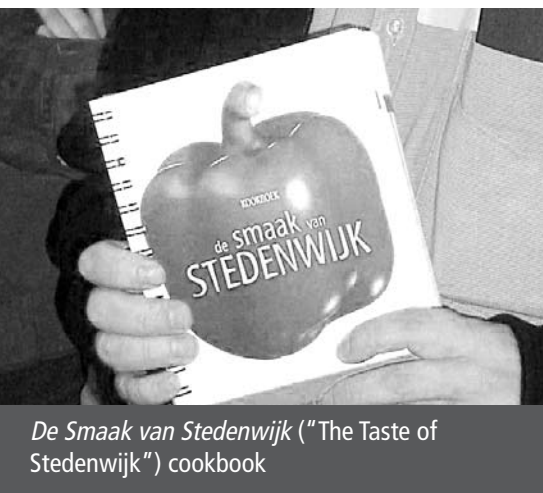
with us! We absolutely needed their contributions in order for the project to be a success.

And the response? In September 2003, only about 25 recipes had been submitted. By December, that number had quadrupled. The cookbook committee took this as a green light and began making plans for publication. A title had already been chosen: *De Smaak van Stedenwijk* (“The Taste of Stedenwijk”).

Now that we had received enough recipes to create a cookbook, our next task was to interview those who had submitted them. During the

interviews, we asked, “Where does your recipe come from?” “Do you make it for special occasions?” “Who does most of the cooking in your household?” When the cookbook was published, each recipe was paired with a photo of the person who submitted it and a small article explaining the recipe’s significance. In this way, *De Smaak van Stedenwijk* functioned as a “group photo” of our neighborhood.

We decided to enrich the book by asking a few of Stedenwijk’s “key figures” (e.g., shop owners, local politicians, police officers, social workers, etc.) to submit their favorite recipes as well. We launched *De Smaak van Stedenwijk* in October 2004 at a neighborhood party during which the first official copy was presented to Almere’s mayor. The gathering was well-attended, especially by those who had submitted recipes. The party food featured a cookie, named the *Stedenwijkertje* (after the neighborhood), created by a local home-economics teacher.



De Smaak van Stedenwijk (“The Taste of Stedenwijk”) cookbook

I look back with fondness on this project for a number of reasons:

1. When I was a newcomer in the neighborhood, the cookbook provided a natural way to strike up conversations with my new neighbors. (“Have you heard that there’s a neighborhood cookbook in the works? Have you submitted a recipe?”)

2. As a mission worker who was hired to do research in the neighborhood, I was delighted that the cookbook helped me establish contacts with many of Stedenwijk’s long-term residents and community leaders.

3. I was intrigued by the fact that something as simple as a cookbook could offer such surprising opportunities for both a neighborhood and its churches.

I believe that churches have much to offer their neighborhoods. I also believe that neighborhoods have much to offer their churches. Indeed, one of the church’s missionary tasks is to participate in the movements of the Spirit that are already active in their neighborhoods – movements of peace, justice, reconciliation and love.

But how can we participate in the work of God in our local communities if we don’t spend some time there? How can we “love our neighbors” if we don’t really know them?

Our community cookbook gave the residents of Stedenwijk a chance to get to know one another a little better. While in the Netherlands, I found this to be an unspeakably valuable gift, a foundation upon which the inloophuis, the churches of Stedenwijk, and the neighborhood itself have built in the intervening years.

We came away from the cookbook project having learned several lessons about community work:

1. The concept behind this project was simple, and it consisted of equally simple, reachable goals. This appealed to neighborhood residents. When they signed up to help, they knew exactly what they were getting in to.

I believe that churches have much to offer their neighborhoods. I also believe that neighborhoods have much to offer their churches.

2. The best public relations happens by way of face-to-face contact. Fliers don't engage someone in the same way a conversation does.

3. The gifts and talents of neighborhood residents are a more effective base for community work than is the idea that the church is there to "meet people's needs."

This last lesson was perhaps the most valuable of all. It was an idea with which I was already familiar from my previous experience in urban mission in the United States, and it was a concept upon which much of my research for the inloophuis came to be based.

Conducting missional research

The role of the "outsider." When I first came to the Netherlands, a number of my Dutch coworkers expressed their desire to glean something of my fresh perspective as both an outsider and a newcomer. I must admit that their eagerness to ask for my opinions ("What do you perceive as the differences between the Netherlands and the United States?" "What do you think of the methods and strategy of Inloophuis de Ruimte?") caught me a bit off guard. As a stranger in a strange land, I just wanted to learn how to fit in, and yet as soon as I arrived, I was being asked to reflect upon the ways in which I and my culture were different. I found this challenging but not off-putting. Looking back, I see now that it prepared me for the tasks of the years to come, especially those related to the following research projects.

After a year of being in the Netherlands, conversations with coworkers led to the conclusion that my time in the Netherlands could best be put to use by researching possibilities for the inloophuis' present and future ministry. Center staff had long wanted to devote time to one or more research projects concerning the missional possibilities in the neighborhood and beyond. There simply were not enough workers, however, for such an undertaking ... until I joined the staff as a new arrival with a great deal of time on her hands!

One of the most attractive things I had to offer such a project was my identity as someone who was not Dutch. A characteristic of the Dutch is their interest in other cultures, which perhaps stems from the fact that the Netherlands is a small country (half the size of Indiana with three times the state's population) in a big world. The Dutch knew that my curiosity about their culture would serve me well in the course of my research. So, encouraged by my colleagues,

I began discovering for myself – by bike, bus and train – the dual worlds of the inloophuis, first by exploring the immediate world of the Stedenwijk neighborhood, and later by exploring the larger world of urban mission in the Netherlands.

Stage 1: Interviewing, collecting recipes, and getting the pulse of the Stedenwijk neighborhood.

The goal of the first neighborhood-oriented project was to discover anew the gifts and talents of the people who lived there. Before moving to the Netherlands, I spent a semester studying in Chicago via the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (www.scupe.com).

While there, I heard various professors and urban ministry practitioners emphasize the fact that the assets of a neighborhood, rather than its needs, are the best and most fruitful starting points for urban mission. Such an approach, called asset-based community development, takes seriously the theological claim that every person is gifted by God and, thus, has something to offer the community in which they find themselves.

But how does one go about “discovering anew” the giftedness of one’s own neighborhood? Interestingly enough, the cookbook project helped us find a place to start. The members of our cookbook committee solicited recipes from both general residents and “key figures” in the neighborhood – these were individuals who worked in Stedenwijk, like police officers, shop owners, social workers, local politicians, and the mail carrier.

This is where my neighborhood research project interfaced with the work of the cookbook group, as my interviews with Stedenwijk’s key figures did double duty. My exchange with the interviewees had two purposes – I was able to pick their brains about the assets,



Chatting outside the inloophuis with Bassam Konda and Hazha Kol, our neighbors who until recently owned the neighborhood shop across the street

Intrigue at the Inloophuis: Award causes royal confusion

Thursday, July 19, 2007

(Mennonite Mission Network) – On April 27, Gerrit Jan Romeijn arrived at the Almere City Hall thinking that he was there to brief municipal officials on a multicultural women's group that gathers at Inloophuis de Ruimte, the neighborhood drop-in center where he has been volunteering for 20 years.

He had been deceived. Fifteen minutes into the meeting, an official stood up and told Romeijn that she wanted to introduce him to someone. Confused, he followed.

A crowd of people, including family, friends, coworkers – and the mayor of Almere – congratulated him as he stepped into the assembly room. Romeijn had been named a member of the "Order of Orange Nassau," an award affiliated with the Dutch royal family. Romeijn was one of 10 Almere residents to receive the annual award.

Marjan Kip, coordinator of the Inloophuis, arranged the fake meeting as a cover. Kip, along with Marijke Laane, chair of the board of the Almere Mennonite Church, and Jaap de Graaff, had nominated Romeijn for the royal distinction, an award given out by Dutch mayors to honor individuals or organizations in their cities who have made an extraordinary contribution to society by volunteering for at least 15 years.

Romeijn received the distinction for the work he has done on a voluntary basis for Inloophuis de Ruimte during the past 20 years, including his involvement with "De Smaak van Stedenwijk" (The Taste of Stedenwijk), a community cookbook project; "De Arme Kant van Almere" (The Poor Side of Almere), a group involved in issues of poverty within the city; and "Schatgraven in Eigen Achtertuin: Missionaire Mogelijkheden voor Kerkelijke Gemeenten" (Digging for Treasure in Your Own Backyard: Missional Possibilities for Congregations).



Gerrit Jan Romeijn at the inloophuis,
at a party thrown in his honor

Romeijn developed the Digging for Treasure course materials for Dutch Mennonite congregations together with Jackie Wyse of Mennonite Mission Network. Romeijn and Jaap de Graaff of the Dutch Mennonite Conference have taught the course in three different Mennonite congregations and plan to continue this work.

"You can talk about demographics and God's mission, but people need to experience the reality of their own neighborhoods," Romeijn said. "[Through these course materials] people have been made aware of the things they see every day and take for granted. They see that they really are treasures."

Commissioned by the Dutch Mennonite Mission Board, Wyse worked from 2003-2005 on the research projects and from 2005-2006 on the curriculum. During her research, Wyse interviewed people at six Dutch urban mission centers using the Asset-Based Community Development method that identifies and builds on the strengths already present in a community.

"If you can let go and see what God is already doing [in a neighborhood], then you can see that as an invitation from God to come along and join in the work," Wyse said.

Wyse completed her time at the Inloophuis in July 2007 and plans to begin doctoral studies in Hebrew Bible at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga.

Both Romeijn and Wyse participated in creating the community cookbook featuring neighborhood residents' favorite recipes. Tastes from Indonesia to Iraq to South Africa delighted palates at the cookbook's release celebration, where community members enjoyed an opportunity to learn to know each other better.

"We hope that our cookbook will help people in the neighborhood become more visible to one another," Romeijn said. "I am drawn to a vision of our neighborhood as a place where people greet one another by name, a place where people are truly happy to live."

The drop-in center provides a place where this vision can be realized. Besides coordinating neighborhood initiatives such as the cookbook project, it is a safe space for people to connect with each other.

According to Kip, the center's three objectives are to spread the gospel, heal society, and give people a place to search for God.

Adapted version of article by Mennonite Mission Network staff with reporting by Marijke Laane

gifts, talents and challenges of Stedenwijk, while at the same time inviting them to participate in our cookbook project by submitting a recipe.

In order to obtain a balanced vision of the neighborhood, I also surveyed “people on the street” – literally, people who happened to be walking in and about the neighborhood. When all was said and done, I had interviewed 28 key figures and 31 people on the street about Stedenwijk’s assets and challenges.

Stage 2: Learning from other urban mission projects. The second stage of my research consisted of a focused exploration of urban mission work in the Netherlands as a whole. I chose five urban mission projects, all affiliated with churches or groups of churches, in five different Dutch cities and towns. I visited each of them twice, hoping to gain a fresh view of the greater context of urban mission in the Netherlands and to explore what learnings might be gleaned for our initiative underway in Almere.

My first visits to these ministries were done *incognito* – I walked in without revealing my identity as a researcher, simply to sample the atmosphere and to get a feel for what any given day at these centers might be like. On my second visit, I came in full-researcher-mode with surveys in my backpack and invited everyone present to let their voice be heard. Our own inloophuis in Stedenwijk also participated in this two-step process. We invited a Mennonite minister to visit our drop-in center incognito and then share his impressions. The surveys that I distributed at the other urban mission projects were likewise distributed in Almere.

Stage 3: Compiling reflections and formulating recommendations. At this point, I turned to my computer and began writing. The result was a report entitled “More than an Inloophuis.” The first chapter focused on what I learned from the neighborhood figures and residents; the second, on what I learned from visiting the other urban mission projects; and the third tied these learnings together, offering conclusions and recommendations for the current and future work of Inloophuis de Ruimte.

A number of these recommendations explored ways in which our drop-in center could develop its ministry in order to connect more

fully with the giftedness of our own neighborhood as well as with the wider Mennonite community in the Netherlands. To be clear, I did not recommend that Inloophuis de Ruimte stop being a drop-in center. On the contrary, I recommended that the inloophuis keep the drop-in function at the core of its identity, all the while remaining open to developing into something more than it currently was.

One highlight of the research process was a “study day” hosted by the inloophuis. On a Friday in January of 2005, approximately 15 workers from other drop-in centers and urban mission projects gathered in Almere to discuss a few of the interviews I had done with Stedenwijk residents. This day of conversation and mutual learning was both fruitful and challenging.

As staff workers, we found it useful and inspiring to invite the critique of “outsiders,” many of whom did not share our particular confessional background. However, opening oneself up for critique like this is not for the faint of heart! Taking an honest look at where you have been and where you are going can be painful, as you may be confronted with unexamined assumptions or asked to let go of programs or ideas you have held onto for largely sentimental reasons. The results, however, can revitalize your ministry.



Developing a missional curriculum for Dutch congregations

Stage 4: Reflecting on lessons learned. The research projects I conducted confirmed for the inloophuis team how crucial context is for mission. The cookbook project was a success not because of the cookbook itself, but rather because we stumbled upon a method that offered our community members an opportunity to share their gifts. In the same way, an inloophuis is not the answer to all missional questions, but rather, it is a form that speaks to our particular neighborhood and our particular city.

The key for any congregation or group wishing to engage their communities cannot be found in any one project or plan. Congregations often think that it is better to do *something* than to do *nothing*. I disagree. In the initial stages of getting to know your context, it is often better to “do” nothing. Instead, take the time to “be” where you are. Look around. Listen to your neighbors. Take a walk. Use your five senses, and pay attention to what happens within and around you. This is the basis for taking your context seriously, which is in turn the basis for a missional approach that takes seriously the people around you, all of whom are created in God’s image.

On a related note, using the asset-based community development (ABCD) method for my research led to the interesting discovery that the inloophuis’ most successful projects in the past were those in which this method had been utilized, even though the inloophuis workers had not been formally introduced to the method at the time. For example, the intercultural meals – for which neighborhood residents with diverse cultural backgrounds had been asked to prepare food from their culture for inloophuis visitors – were a legendary success. The plant exchange, in which residents gathered at the drop-in center with cuttings of plants to exchange, was a big hit, too.

In the experience of center staff, when neighborhood residents suspected that the purpose of the inloophuis was to help “people in need,” they were not quick to darken its doors, as no one was eager to admit that they fit the bill. However, when the inloophuis invited people to share their gifts and, in doing so, to be of service to others, they were quick to participate.

***Digging for Treasure* — Developing a missional curriculum for Dutch congregations**

My coworkers and I were so enthusiastic about the ABCD method that we devised a way to share it with Dutch congregations. It had long been a goal of the inloophuis to strengthen its relationship with Mennonite congregations throughout the Netherlands. The drop-in center was set up, in part, as a laboratory where missional experiments could be carried out. The original intention was

then to share the results of these experiments with congregations. Unfortunately, the urgency of everyday matters often precluded such sustained communication.

During my fourth year in the Netherlands, my coworker Gerrit Jan Romeijn and I tried to bridge this gap by developing a curriculum for congregations interested in local mission and in getting to know their communities, neighborhoods, towns or cities in fresh ways. The curriculum, called *Digging for Treasure in Your Own Backyard: Missional Possibilities for Congregations*, aims to help such congregations discern ways of investing their energy in projects that strengthen their commitment to and connection with their local communities.

Digging for Treasure is a flexible course based upon the following modules of learning. The initial course introduction consists of an intake interview with the pastor and church board. The congregation's interests and expectations are assessed, and specific plans are made for introducing the curriculum to the congregation.

- *Module 1* introduces participants to one another and to the curriculum itself.
- In *Module 2*, theological and biblical foundations are laid. The most important themes that are explored include *imago Dei* (the image of God that is present in all human beings) and *missio Dei* (the mission of God, referring especially to the priority of God's missional activity in the world and the secondary nature of our missional endeavors).
- In *Module 3*, practical strategies are presented. The ABCD method is introduced to participants, as is the ministry of presence.
- Participants begin to explore their surroundings in *Modules 4* and *5*. Homework assignments are completed in which group members are asked to take walks through their city, town, village or neighborhood and to take note of the talents and gifts around them. Participants also interview residents regarding how they view the neighborhood. As a group, we use poster board and markers to "map" the assets of the local context.
- In *Module 6*, participants create an inventory of the assets and gifts present within their own congregation. Together, they try

to imagine how these assets might be cross-fertilized with those of the local context.

- Finally, in *Module 7*, the group reflects on what they have learned about the community's assets and their own gifts, and discusses the next missional steps they might like to take.

The Haarlemmermeer Mennonite Church in the city of Hoofddorp participated in the curriculum's pilot project in 2006, thus becoming the first congregation to experience the course in its entirety. Nine enthusiastic participants "dug for treasure" in Haarlemmermeer's neighborhoods and in the congregation itself. Later, we put aside our shovels and reflected upon our finds. We asked questions like: Which treasures (talents, gifts, assets) are drawn upon in congregational and neighborhood life, and which have been largely ignored or forgotten? In what ways is the congregation already implementing its own giftedness in service to the neighborhood? Have we unearthed new treasures, and if so, what do they have to say to us as a congregation? In 2006-2007, the curriculum was also used by the Mennonite congregations in Broek-op-Langedijk and on the island of Texel.

Gerrit Jan, Jaap and I visited these congregations as teachers, but in the end, we learned more than we taught. Two such learnings include the following:

1. Congregations, especially small ones, can easily feel "burned out" by too much activity. A curriculum like this can create hurdles, such as the fear that it will lure participants into adding a whole batch of new programs to their already impossible schedules. As teachers, we found it necessary to emphasize that the aim of this curriculum was not to initiate yet another new project or activity. Rather, each congregation was challenged to recognize elements of their current missional approach that were already working well and to prioritize and develop these in the future.

2. When teaching a course such as this, it is essential to maintain an appropriate balance between theory and practice. In our experience, a little theory went a long way. The course really began to come alive for participants when they were given the opportunity to put theory into practice (see Modules 4 and 5).

A few things I've learned from the Dutch

The Dutch Mennonites invited me to join them in their Kingdom work because they believed they could learn something from my presence among them. I went believing I would learn a great deal from them, and I was not disappointed.

As North American Christians, we can be quick to stereotype our sisters and brothers in other lands, either by idealizing their faith as lively and Spirit-filled or by criticizing their faith as tradition-bound and dying. In my experience, North Americans are especially hard on European churches.

If there is one thing my five Dutch years have taught me above all else, it is that the stereotype of the hollow, empty European church is untrue. The Dutch congregations with whom I have come into contact are mostly, though not always, small in number. But even so, these churches are populated by vital, fiery and creative Christians, serious about their faith and about their responsibilities to their neighbors.

The Dutch Christians I have met work for peace in practical ways. They are open to creative manners of thinking and living. In a postmodern, secular context, they are working to unite as Christians, even – perhaps especially – when they disagree. The relatively small number of active churchgoers in Dutch society brings together those who do attend in ways that are, in my experience, unprecedented in North America.

There are many other lessons we can learn from the Dutch, some of which have already been highlighted in the previous stories:

Think globally, act locally. The inloophuis staff is committed to one particular neighborhood in Almere, but at the same time, they recruited an international worker to join their efforts. The communities in which many of us live today are full of “global citizens” – immigrants from “foreign” countries or other people with international experience. These individuals have a broad perspective that could be an asset to our local projects if we would only invite their participation.

The glass half full. The Dutch church is facing numerous challenges, including declining membership. However, I have met many

Dutch people who refuse to be discouraged by this. They view their glass as half full rather than half empty. This enables them to focus on the many gifts Dutch Mennonite congregations have to offer their communities. These gifts are an invaluable asset for mission and community involvement.

The curse of busyness, the gift of presence. Like North America, the Netherlands is full of people who lead busy lives and are ruled by their appointment books. Projects like the *inloophuis* speak prophetically in this culture, calling people to slow down and truly take time for one another. This is a warning North American congregations would do well to heed, if we want our missional endeavors to be more than mere filler for our to-do lists.

Let your context judge your ministry's effectiveness. It is my impression that most North American churches tend to evaluate their programs and activities based on the reactions of their own membership. It makes more sense to me, however, to let one's community or neighborhood be the judge of a ministry's effectiveness. At the *inloophuis*, it is the visitors, in conversation with the staff, who determine what sort of activities will be offered each year. Would it be possible for congregations to allow their neighborhoods to have a say in the programs and activities they offer? Are we brave enough to let our context shape and judge our ministry?

Now, back on dry ground ...

A drop-in center, a cookbook, a curriculum – none of these are “the answer” for every congregation’s missional questions. Frederick Buechner wrote that God calls you to the place where your “deep gladness” meets the world’s “deep hunger.” I like to put it this way: God calls you to the place where your gifts meet the gifts of your neighbor and out of that, something new emerges – something of mutuality, of acknowledging the image of God in one another and the creativity of the Spirit in your common work. It was my privilege to experience this among my coworkers in Almere, and it is in this spirit that the work of *Inloophuis de Ruimte* goes on.

Now back on dry ground, I come away from my time in the Netherlands with a new appreciation for the power of water. Like

the ebb and flow of the water levels in the thousands of Dutch canals that keep the country dry, the communities surrounding our churches are also in flux. We may feel stable and land-bound, but in truth, our contexts are constantly undergoing change. Congregations that wish to engage their surroundings in ways that are both timely and significant must be willing to get to know their communities afresh.

What is a good missional strategy for your congregation? I don't have the answer. But look around you. The possibilities are there, ready to be revealed as you explore the many talents that your city, town, village, neighborhood and congregation have to offer each other. So, start digging! Remarkable treasures are assuredly hidden just below the surface.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1 How does the story recounted in this booklet of the challenges faced by the church in the Netherlands compare with or contrast to what you experience in your own congregation or faith community?

2 The author claims that today “many Europeans view the church as a largely historical institution that is no longer relevant to daily life” (p. 2). Do you think this is also the case for many or even most North Americans? If not, what do you sense might be some of the differences between European and North American religious understandings and practices?

3 Which of the stories or outreach initiatives described in these pages – cookbook project, drop-in center, neighborhood interviews, urban ministry research, curriculum development, etc. – did you find the most creative and intriguing? Which offer the best possibility for adaptation in your own context of ministry?

4 What new, untested ideas came to mind as “missional experiments” you might like to develop or explore in your home community?

5 Wyse summarizes her learnings from Dutch Christians in four points (pp. 19-20). Which of her observations have you found most helpful in your own congregational life and ministries?

- ◆ Think globally, act locally.
- ◆ The glass half-full.
- ◆ The curse of busyness, the gift of presence.
- ◆ Let your context judge your ministry’s effectiveness.

6 According to the author: “God calls you to the place where your gifts meet the gifts of your neighbor, and out of that, something new emerges – something of mutuality, of acknowledging the image of God in one another and the creativity of the Spirit in your common work” (p. 20). Have you found this to be true in your own experience? What stories can you tell that illustrate and confirm this central affirmation?

For further reading

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- ◆ SNOW, Luther K., *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on its Gifts* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 2004).
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- ◆ For more Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) resources, see www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html.

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- No. 15 Jackie Wyse, *Digging for Treasure in Your Own Backyard: Reflections on Missional Experiments in the Netherlands* (2007).*

*Available in Spanish.

Digging for treasure in your own backyard

Reflections on missional experiments in the Netherlands

Jackie Wyse

“Many Europeans,” writes Jackie Wyse, “view the church as a largely historical institution that is no longer relevant to daily life.” Nearly all of the traditional churches in the Netherlands, where Wyse has lived and worked for the past five years, have seen an erosion of church attendance, corresponding to society’s increased secularization. In cities like Almere and Amsterdam, reports Wyse, only 2-4 percent of the residents are active in churches.

The challenge of Christian presence and witness in such a context calls for fresh thinking, creativity and imagination. And that’s what the story recounted here is all about.

What do community cookbooks, drop-in centers, and neighborhood interviews have to do with sharing the good news of Jesus? You will find out in this delightful account of how one faith community took sharing their faith seriously, and in the process, discovered precious treasures hidden “in their own backyard.”

Jackie Wyse served in the Netherlands with Mennonite Mission Network and the Doopsgezinde Zending (Dutch Mennonite Mission) from 2002-2007. She worked in the city of Almere at Inloophuis de Ruimte, a neighborhood drop-in center with a Mennonite affiliation. Jackie is currently a doctoral student in Hebrew Bible at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga.



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