CULTA *Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders*

From complaint to strength:
An effective method in poor neighbourhoods
Description and experiences of 'Living Together, Being Together'
(Kooij, 2011)

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In the current political culture social problems are more and more being transferred to the so-called 'civil society'. The civil society is the community that is made by citizens themselves, by being active in an association, informal networks and doing volunteer work. Because of cuts in professional organizations more and more tasks come to lie in voluntary organizations. In poor neighbourhoods there are often complex problems, like poverty, unemployment, debts, domestic violence, social isolation, learning disadvantage, crime and psychological problems. Such problems reinforce each other and cause a negative spiral of problems. For the very reason that many residents in poor neighbourhoods are immigrants, they often don't know how to get help for their problems in Dutch society. They don't know how to reach, or have bad experiences with government and professional health care institutions. They get stuck in bureaucracy, get on a waiting list or they encounter incomprehension.

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The Dutch foundation 'Living Together, Being Together' (Samenwonen-Samenleven, SW-SL) is a small social foundation that has developed an own method to help in such problems: *Health new style in the civil society.* Existing strengths, like confidential advisors, voluntary organizations can be mapped, supported and strengthened. With this method, where the informal network plays a crucial role, problems in poor neighbourhood can be addressed constructively. This foundation was created in response to the assassination of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. Different religious communities came together in response to this critical incident to talk about cohabitation and corporation with the Muslim-part of the population. Thanks to this meeting SW-SL is developed and expanded in Amsterdam. SW-SL began there bringing estranged neighbours in contact with each other, organized joint activities and thereby connect and build bridges.

Wietske Verkuyl has been active in Amsterdam for SW-SL. Here she was mainly involved with the migrants who have come to live in Amsterdam. Getting a connection with healthcare institutions is difficult for these migrants, because they are from a different culture. She tells how many immigrant woman experience that people have a negative picture of them, and how difficult it is to explain, for example, the doctor what the problem is. On the labour market they have little opportunities.

SW-SL makes first of all contact with existing self-organizations of migrants. Volunteers within the network of migrants occupy a key position in contact with the target group. These key figures have like no other access to the residents of the problem neighbourhood. By working together with existing self-organizations a bridge can be formed with the target group. In this way Wietske did a project in with Morrocan men were informed about addiction. By working together with existing self-organizations of Moroccan men she was able to inform about 100 people. Such self-organisations often operate in scarcity. They are often not well-organized, are overloaded and don't have enough

knowledge and financial resources. However, they play a vital role because they are part of the problem areas and do have a good view on the problems, so they can fulfil a warning function.

The government recognizes many of the problems and is therefore willing to give money, but it is very difficult for the government and professional healthcare institutions to grip with the problems and the impact of many investments is often small or short-lived. Most of the available money is provided to individual projects. Often professional project organisations are performing (usually temporary) funded projects. However, these organizations reach the target group to a limited extent and usually stop when the money stops, even though this is not a logical consequence to the participants. This temporality is harmful to vulnerable migrants: then they fall back into hopelessness. The different care and welfare institutions hardly work together, all focusing on the same problems and target groups.

For the existing self-organizations that are non-temporary and, by contrast, are able to reach the target group, it is difficult to intervene and make use of subsidies. Submitting an application is difficult and time consuming. Self-organisations tend to be less well organized and are known to be unreliable in taking financial responsibility. They often have a difficult relationship with professional organizations and local governments prefer not to work together with them. Wietske notes that when organizations must provide their own funds, much time and energy goes into this fundraising. This may result in a kind of competition between the different organizations. In Amsterdam the parish of the protestant church finances different projects for several years. After this period, the project has to become privatized as a foundation. Fundraising is necessary to continue its activities. This takes a lot of time and effort, while it is still often not possible to receive the amount required.

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SW-SL doesn't want to be just another competitive initiative in the problem area, but would like to add something substantial. SW-SL wants to establish connections between, and support the existing 'informal immigrant care networks' and voluntary organizations. SW-SL will thus promote the various existing relationships of active citizens. The aim is a more constructive, lasting improvement of the welfare of people. The employees of SW-SL make themselves available for the key figures: they talk with key figures and self-organizations, listen to them and help them to realise their plans. This is based on the principle of 'bonding and bridging', where both the individual activities and the cooperation is encouraged. Due to this help a vital, energetic volunteer network can be created, a network that is able to catch the problems. The SW-SL-program can offer existing volunteers concrete expertise and contacts. Also, these people can be guided in their contacts with the 'Dutch system' of big professional healthcare institutions.

Making contact with persons and organizations is a continuous process, especially in a multicultural context. In such a context contacts are less easily formed, so they must be thoroughly maintained and nourished. The methodology SW-SL has developed to establish such contacts is a 'activating-presence method'. According to this method one is initially present in the environment where the self-organizations are working, looking for what people do already. For this is it necessary to be in close contact with the different self-organizations and key figures. Thereafter can be looked at what works well in existing activities and what could be improved.

In a next phase SW-SL is working to improve relations between the self-organisations and key figures themselves. Often people do not know about each other or they see each other as competitors. In addition, the relationship between the organizations and the local government can also be improved by, for example, giving help in financial administration. Thirdly, the relationship with professional healthcare institutions could be improved. When

this is a good relationship, information can be better exchanged between formal and informal care: the professional institutions can share useful knowledge, while the self-organizations can tell more about the context and environment. A fourth step is improving the relationship with the different project organizations. Often the project organizations do have sufficient financial resources, which causes dissatisfaction with the self-organizations. SW-SL can help organizations to become more self-confident towards the temporary projects and, for example, encourages them to claim a financial reward for the delivery of participants.

Because the self-organizations have to deal with scarcity, many good ideas are not feasible due to a lack of money or contacts. Writing a project plan that is eligible for subsidy is often impossible for these volunteers. SW-SL therefore offers these volunteers the course *From Idea to Project (VIP)*. In this course, participants are assisted in a number of meetings in converting an idea into a viable and realistic project. Various tips are given to communicate with potential financiers. Using this course volunteers are able to make suitable fund request by themselves.

This course is mainly developed for enthusiastic volunteers who have ideas and want to achieve something positive in their neighbourhood. Often the ambitions of the volunteers at the start of the course are very high and unattainable. However, volunteers could be demotivated by the many setbacks they have encountered. In general, they have no experience in the use of subsidies. By the VIP-course, the volunteers are able to accomplish different things. They are, for example, able to develop a useful analysis of the target group, to make a workable and realistic project plan, they can explore the possibilities for financial support for their plan and they also get a view on the possibilities of cooperation with other voluntary organizations. All this has a positive influence on the motivation and self-esteem of the volunteers.

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The main objective of SW-SL is to improve the relationship between different parties which al have the same goal: helping the people at the bottom of society. The SW-SL-employee herein plays different roles. One is the role of explorer, mapping different talents and skills. Another role is supporting people who support others. In a third role the different organizations can be helped in the field of administration, communication and juridical issues. Another role is that of an innovator, who develops different innovative initiatives.

However, the main function of SW-SL is establishing connections. The model that underlies this principle is the 'bond ladder'. In this model five different steps are taken to improve relations in a constructive way. To obtain this, effectively and intensively networking is very important. Besides that it is very important to be present in the environment, because only then trust can be built and maintained. The SW-SL-employee should also be able to manage the projects he should have an impartial, independent position between the different parties.

The first step of the bond ladder is inspiring confidence. This is important, immigrants and self-organizations probably have a lot of mistrust, because of many different temporary project that have been there. Trust is also a necessary basis for more joint activities. It is important to take in account different culture-specific communication behaviour. To be able to develop this confidence, it is necessary to listen without judgment. Wietske tells how people initially only show the 'shop-window', what they want to show. When a certain trust is created, you get a glimpse into the 'kitchen' where more personal details are shared. Only when there is a large mutual trust, little by little information from the 'basement' is told. This information concerns the larger problematic issues, such as domestic violence, communication problems and loneliness. To discover the real problems it is essential to dig much deeper than happens at ordinary meeting activities.

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A second step is to strengthen the different self-organisations. A long-term relationship has to be built op. The self-organisations often have to deal with various difficulties. Often they need a better location, there is a lack of volunteers and there is a financial deficit. There could also be a need for administrative support, a better relationship with the government, etc. The SW-SL-employee can bring organizations in connection with the assistance available in the vicinity. It is not the intention that the organisations problems are resolved by the SW-SL-employee. It is more constructive to encourage the self-reliance of organizations and help with that.

The third step in the bond ladder is making an inventory of the binding factors between the different organizations. When the different organizations are working together, they are better able to achieve their common goals and they are stronger in their contacts with government and professional institutions. The SW-SL-employee must therefore know the different organizations very well, and arrange a joint meeting. Based on shared interests, which have become clear in this meeting, the fourth step can be taken: organizing a one-time collaboration.

The fifth and last step of the bond ladder is building op a sustainable, long-term cooperation. Therefore it is important that projects are well managed and properly evaluated. It is also essential that there is someone who clearly takes the lead, inspires others and keeps it going. When those conditions are not met, it is likely that the project stagnates or fail.

Within the network of various voluntary organizations, confidential advisors play a vital role. Persons who have the trust of the immigrants are able to close the gap that exists between those in need and regular healthcare institutions. They play a connecting role and therefore have a key position. For one thing they are able to detect various problems timely, for another experienced confidential advisors are also better at giving the right information

to the health care institutions. SW-SL offers these confidential advisors a course, making them more able to perform their task. They are equipped in this personally, but are also becoming part of a network of different confidential advisors. Through this network, the various confidential advisors are able to learn from each other and consultation is possible.

The confidential advisors have many different functions. They can act as a sounding board, because people can talk about their problems to them. In addition, the confidential advisor can help with organizing the story by asking specific questions. By doing so, with help of the confidential advisor a definite request for help may be formulated. Because the confidential advisor also has a large network and more knowledge of the various options, the confidential advisor is able to deliver good advice and to refer properly. Also, the confidential advisor is able to recognize problems early, as a result of which problems need not escalate before help is actually enlisted. Furthermore, the confidential advisor has a supporting role, because he can continue being involved both during and after the assistance. In addition, the confidential advisor also can help connect a person with several other informal networks. By this the ability to cope can be promoted. Because confidential advisors have knowledge of social, cultural, religious and social factors, they are able to form a vital link between problem areas and healthcare institutions in an effective manner.

Because the different functions of the confidential advisors are very essential, it is important that they are properly equipped in their heavy task. The responsibility for the serious problem cases, which cannot be reached by professional institutions, is great. Often this is beyond the capacity of various individual volunteers. SW-SL is working on building a network between all these different confidential advisors. The course program *Confidential Network* consists of three different parts: the basic course, a series of training courses on specific topics and a series of coaching and peer review meetings. In many cases, e.g. addiction problems, domestic violence and psychiatric symptoms, the confidential advisor

have to ask for professional help to prevent worse. The volunteers cannot solve such problems on their own. However, relations with professional healthcare institutions are often bad. The professional worker, once he is introduced in a particular community, can make problems discussable which are difficult to raise by the confidential advisor. For example, a situation of domestic violence may be hard to talk about, because this person is in a position of trust. Therefore, the VIP-course also emphasizes on cooperation between 'informal' an 'formal' networks. Local active professionals in the field of health and welfare are invited to the meetings. There the professionals can share their specific expertise, and they learn how to operate demand-oriented and make contact with the confidential advisors.

In daily practice, there are several problems and pitfalls the confidential advisors could come across. It can, for example, be difficult to give a properly indication of the boundaries of trust in the relationship. The confidential advisor can get too much involved, leaving to little distance. Then the confidential advisor takes the role of professional helper in itself an could become overloaded. Another risk is too little knowledge of the professional possibilities, so they cannot effectively respond on time, or in an effective way. Too little knowledge of the specific problems could also be an obstacle to identify problems. When confidential advisors are not aware of the different conversation techniques, they cannot effectively respond to questions or hidden questions. The confidential advisors always have to search for the question behind the question. It may also be that the confidential advisors have problems themselves. Often 'helpers' are driven to help other people because of their own problems. Another problem is the lack of knowledge to use their expertise in an effective way. The policy of the organization can also be a problem, if this policy is not effective. A lack of contact with the mainstream institutions, and too little recognition of health care professionals could be problematic. Because SW-SL stimulates network building

between the confidential advisors, available skills and networks are mutually exchanged and shared. Thus, any confidential advisor who participates in the network could use the available knowledge and expertise within the network.

The basic course is intended for volunteers, members of a volunteer organization, church or mosque, who are interested in fulfilling a role as a confidential advisor. These are the organizations that operate in the informal care networks. In seven meetings different components, such as the professional care possibilities, conversation techniques and identifying complaints and problems are treated. Then, as a continuation of the basic course, a series of skills trainings are offered. These trainings primarily focus on four interrelated themes. First, it focuses on the identification of problems in the environment, and address these problems before they escalate. In addition, the training focuses on strengthening of own power and self-reliance of the confidential advisors. Thirdly, it makes them familiar with the system of facilities for care and welfare. The fourth theme on which the training focuses is the availability of the workers during the treatment period and giving aftercare to prevent relapse.

A Confidential Network can be developed this way. An existing network can continue to provide courses, training and networking meetings of informal organizations and associated volunteers and confidential workers. There could also be a constant coaching and intervision from the existing network. Also, the network can play a role in connecting institutions and informal networks, and in the policy development in the cooperation between the local government, professional institutions and informal care.

Wietske talks about Fatima, the initiator of the organization Nisa4Nisa, women for women. Fatima is 'hands-on' expert, receives women herself and knows people where they can call on. For example, immigrant women who have been trapped between four walls since their marriage come to Nisa4Nisa. Often these women are very lonely and hardly have

any contact. These women can go to Fatima, she can be their confidential advisor. At the same time Fatima is in touch with the police, local government, healthcare institutions, etc. Together with Fatima, Wietske has set up a project in which different companions are brought into contact. For example, people who care for a psychotic or addicted family member can come into contact with each other through Fatima's project. Good advice and support can be given to them. For instance, during this meetings lonely Moroccon women have been told how women are encouraged to read and learn in the Quran. They were encouraged and strengthened by the role models that are described in the Quran. This worked very empowering for them. Besides, various women could share life stories with each other at Nisa4Nisa in small groups. Nisa4Nisa lends an ear to women, helps them with registrations and various other problems. SW-SL searches for confidential advisors just like Fatima and helps them improve and expand their work.

Wietske will now continue as a church pastor. In this profession, she can use the knowledge she has gained from her SW-SL-experience. She hopes that her church community is able to establish deep contacts, in which the stories from the 'basement' are discussed. That way peer contacts can be created from the church, and problems can be addressed. Wietske expects the church could occur as 'broker' between healthcare institutions, who are looking for customers and people with problems. The church can perform the tasks of SW-SL and plays a crucial role in the informal care network. The church can collaborate with the various self-organizations and with the care and welfare institutions, can link with professional help from outside and can create confidential networks. A religious community is, compared with other associations, such as a sports club, much better in creating a substantive relationship, because the substantive aspects play a much more important role in a church. By means of this relationship the religious community is more connected to the real problems and can better organize an effective

confidential network. The church can also, with its diaconal role, fight more effectively against poverty.

Wietske notes that the government leaves more and more to the informal care network, while this network often is very small in these problem areas. Wietske sees this as a unique opportunity for the church, that can organize informal care very well. "The church of the first centuries was popular because of the outreach to the sick and poor. The church is able to have a deep conversation with the neighbourhood, in which they can provide effective support: that's what a neighbourhood needs." Wietske thinks that the method of SW-SL is also very well applicable to the religious communities. The different communities can cooperate in the social field. Evers (2008) describes in *Trends and Developments in Interreligious Dialogue:* "Another area of interreligious cooperation is in the social field in working for the improvement of life in urban and rural settings by pooling the resources and skills of different religious and cultural traditions."

A major underlying cause of the problems that SW-SL tries to combat, is to be found in the area of social cohesion, concerning migrants. Social science research has been done on various forms of solidarity at neighbourhood level. Especially the relations between neighbours is important for shaping policy and tackling problems, according to research from Komter, Burgers and Engbersen (2000). In many scientific literature it is assumed that in many deprived areas is a lack of social cohesion, social capital and social networks (Van Stokkom, Toenders, 2010). However, there is no clear and consistent definition of the concepts of 'social cohesion' or 'social capital'. According to Komter et al. (2000), there can be spoken of many different forms of solidarity and cohesion. In addition, there is a risk in seeing the development of solidarity and cohesion as something positive alone. However, the development of cohesion and solidarity and is also an 'double-edged sword', in which certain people are included in within circles, but others thus are excluded. This should be

taken into account by effort to improve cohesion and solidarity. Van Stokkom and Toenders mention that several popular ideas have emerged on how neighbourhoods could be improved best. In their research they present a different perspective on those ideas.

In many cities it has long be the policy to give a disadvantaged neighbourhood a more mixed population. Many municipalities brought the number of rented houses back, and replaced them with houses for sale. When highly-educated citizens buy that houses, this would have an beneficial and stabilizing effect on the neighbourhood. Although this idea is not quite unfounded, Van Stokkom and Toenders show that this beneficial effect is often overestimated. As the worlds of the groups are so different, they do not live together and their dissimilarity is just stressed. Because the new, highly-educated citizens easy change of residence, they do not contribute to an lasting solution to the neighbourhood.

In 2007, the Dutch government presented their plan *Krachtwijken*. This plan intended to bring different neighbourhoods in ten years various improvements. Various studies show that the situation in many neighbourhoods hardly changed. By providing different houses for sale, indeed a middle class came to live in the neighbourhood, but this class interferes little with the problems in the neighbourhood (SCP, 2011; 2013).

Yet it is precisely a sustainable approach which can prove the problem areas a constructive solution. The problems are often structurally, and arose in decades. Stokkom and Toenders show that the idea to solve this problems with short-term projects is wrong. Problem areas become a victim of a 'project-carousel', where different approach methods succeed each other. However, for a constructive improvement serious commitment of a professional is necessary for several years.

In the Netherlands, the improvement of social cohesion, the mixing of the population and working with short-term projects is a popular method. Van Stokkom and Toenders criticize these methods. They wonder why scientists and policymakers attach much

importance to this ideas. Probably this has to do with the tendency to think that our own attitudes, values and norms are valid for the whole society. An important point leaving overlooked is that the culture and environment migrants can be fundamentally different. Often these differences are underestimated. For example, a long time policymakers thought that Dutch ideas about openness, tolerance and equality between man and women, would be accepted by migrants, after the right education, but it does not work that way. From this perspective, it is more realistic to treat different neighbourhoods as an environment in which the residents follow their own thinking and cultures. Scientists and policymakers do have the task to do justice to the uniqueness of the environment as much as possible, and try to understand what is important for the residents. They should give less attentions to the deficits, and become more aware of what already happens.

Within de different neighbourhoods several citizens actually are active. This is usually a small group of residents who want to tackle the problems. These residents do have a close relationship with their neighbourhood and they often participate in the neighbourhood-meetings and organizations. Van Stokkom and Toenders conclude that the willingness to take action is actually present, but that their effect mainly depends on their assertive attitude, whether they know the way to the local bureaucracy and whether they can work with different professionals. These factors seems to be more important than strengthening the social capital or social cohesion, which is, in generally, not lacking in migrant-cultures. The professionals must therefore primarily support existing activities of the residents.

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