

Does it make sense to participate?

A new practical-theological research method ('Compass of Meaning') and the first research results on the experiences of participants in six pioneering faith communities in The Netherlands.

ABSTRACT

In a practical-theological research project called 'Does it make sense to participate?' a new research model has been developed with the name 'Compass of Meaning'. This model is designed to map, compare, and qualify the experiences of participants in new faith communities, in order to find new ways for contextualizing the Gospel in a secular society. The research model is based on modern perspectives on sensemaking in social sciences and spiritual healthcare and a holistic interpretation of salvation, and combines a qualitative and quantitative research method. In this paper the authors introduce the model, the first research results about participants in six pioneering communities in The Netherlands, and questions for theological reflection.

AUTHORS

Dr. Bert Roor is lecturer and researcher of the Christian University of Applied Sciences (CHE-Ede) in The Netherlands. Evelien van Duffelen MA is lecturer at the CHE and preparing for a PhD-candidacy for the Theological University Kampen-Utrecht. Contact: aroor@che.nl or wvduffelen01@che.nl

RESEARCH CONTEXT

From 2018-2023, the theological research group of the Christian University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands has focused on the topic 'sensemaking in new faith communities', through investigating theologies of salvation and processes of sensemaking in existing and emerging faith communities. The research: 'Does it make sense to participate?'¹ is one of the projects of this research group.

WHERE TO START IF YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN THE GOSPEL IN A SECULAR CULTURE?

According to practical theologian Pete Ward, practical theology "need[s] to be fully rooted in the everyday practice of the Christian faith in the church and in the world".² For the practical-theological research 'Does it make sense to participate?' - a research with a missional intention - we integrated the perspectives of *church* and *world* by developing a theological research method based on 'secular' insights. Based on the outcomes of our research, we have come to the conclusion that mundane factors are an essential starting point for participating in new faith communities, and therefore also a major entrypoint for communicating the Gospel in a secular society.

In this paper we will (1) explain why we chose this approach, (2) how we built our research method, (3) what the results are of the first research within six pioneering faith communities, (4) our main conclusions and lessons, and (5) the challenging questions that remain. During the Ecclesiology & Ethnography Conference 2023 we would like to discuss the usefulness of our research method, as well as the the usefulness of the lessons we have formulated based on the outcomes. Also, we are

¹ Original Dutch title: 'Heeft meedoen zin?'

² Ward, Pete. *Introducing Practical Theology. Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 2017), 2.

interested to find out if other researchers are interested in working with this research model (e.g. in youth ministry, traditional churches or other pioneering communities).

1. THE IMPETUS: SENSEMAKING IN A SECULAR CULTURE

Due to cultural shifts of the last five decades churches “no longer provide a cultural framework in which dimensions of meaning provide collective support”.³ Recent surveys about religiosity in the Netherlands indicate that “the church and Christianity are gradually disappearing from Dutch collective awareness (...) [and] three quarters of the respondents say they feel that churches are not able to answer the most important spiritual questions of the day”.⁴ In addition, contemporary missiological literature addresses the religious ‘speechlessness’ that people, both inside and outside the church, run into.⁵

As theologians we have therefore decided to turn our gaze: for the design of our research method we looked at insights that are offered in our secular society (the ‘world’) for dealing with questions of meaning. Our purpose was to examine whether these secular insights could be connected with or applied to meaning people find through participating in faith communities (the ‘church’), and whether this could provide ‘new language’ to communicate the Gospel in a post-Christian society.

This idea resonated with various experiences within our own professional expertise. Bert Roor wrote his PhD on ‘salvific presence’ and the salutary dimension of diaconal practices.⁶ Evelien van Duffelen works as a volunteer in a hospice and noticed how within health care the spiritual dimension of well-being is much stronger emphasized than in earlier times.⁷ Increasingly, so-called ‘holistic’ approaches emerge, in which both the material, mental, physical, social, and spiritual are considered as entry-points for or dimensions of meaning. At the same time, in the Protestant theological tradition, an increasing awareness emerges with respect to the importance of forms of ‘embodiment’, offering a corrective to a traditional strong focus on intellectual knowledge and truth claims.⁸

2. LOOKING FOR FRESH EXPRESSIONS: A NEW PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHOD

Based on these developments and a desire to look for fresh and creative ways to communicate the gospel, we designed a new research methodology: the ‘Compass of Meaning’. In this paragraph, we will first introduce and visualize the research model and the vision behind it (2.1). Second, we will share our research question and the design of our ‘Compass of Meaning’ (2.2). At the end of this paragraph we will provide background information on the respondents and the six faith communities where we conducted our first research with our research method (2.3).

³ Carlo Leget, *Van levenskunst tot stervenskunst. Over spiritualiteit in de palliatieve zorg* (Tiel: Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2016), 25.

⁴ Joep de Hart, Pepijn van Houwelingen, en Willem Huijnk, *Religie in een pluriforme samenleving. Diversiteit en verandering in beeld. Deel 3: Buiten kerk en moskee* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2022), 153.

⁵ Cf. Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests. Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 12.

⁶ Bert Roor, *Heilzame presentie. Diaconale betrokkenheid als leeromgeving voor protestantse kerken* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum Academic, 2018).

⁷ E.g. Lynette Wijgergangs, Thirza Ras, en Wendy Reijmerink, *De mens centraal. ZonMw Signalement Zingeving in de zorg* (Den Haag: ZonMw, 2016).

⁸ This development was a central theme in the masterthesis of Evelien van Duffelen: *A Twist to Apologetics. An explorative and systematic study on ‘embodied knowing’ as a complementary approach to apologetics in a secular society*. Masterthesis (Kampen, Theological University Kampen | Utrecht, December 2022).

2.1 Vision: world and church

In our research method - through which we aim to provide insight into what it means to participate in a faith community - we have sought to align with contemporary approaches to meaning, in order to advance the conversation about Christian mission. In doing so, we also aim to connect with contemporary experiential culture: people want to know what truth claims work out in practice.⁹ In this paragraph we illustrate how we combined modern perspectives on sensemaking with a holistic interpretation of salvation.

Modern perspectives on sensemaking: perspective of the 'world'

For this perspective, we investigated scientific models of human flourishing and sensemaking that would help us develop a systematic model for mapping human experiences in missional practices. This approach enabled us to look at how modern perspectives on meaning and human needs are conceptualized in our secular society, and at what type of 'language' is used in our post-Christian society for categories of sensemaking.

We selected and analyzed four models from social sciences, (spiritual) health care and religious studies. We started with the *Basic Needs Theory* of Abraham Maslow¹⁰ and the *Positive Health Model* of Machteld Huber¹¹. Together these gave us a holistic perspective on health and human wellbeing. Subsequently, we integrated two theories about meaning and belonging: the *Diamant Model* of Carlo Leget¹², which is used for processes of sensemaking in palliative spiritual care, and the *Modalities of Belonging* of Joantine Berghuijs¹³, a theory about different ways in which individuals relate to faith and religious meaning. We created a list of all topics that follow from these four theories, which were then clustered through an iterative design process.

Holistic interpretation of salvation: perspective of the 'church'

Additionally, in our search for a helpful tool to evaluate the experiences of participants, we worked from a broad understanding of salvation. We defined salvation and adherent salvific practices as:

everything that furthers or restores the physical, mental, spiritual, social and/or societal wellbeing of people and offers them a hopeful perspective for the here and now and/or in the hereafter.

From a Christian perspective, we believe that *human wellbeing* (in good and bad circumstances), and a *hopeful perspective* (for the here and now and/or the afterlife) are both expressed and revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel addresses the perspective of God as creator and sustainer of all life, as well as salvation as the restoration of life in all its dimensions through the redeeming acts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus' goal was to bring life in all its fulness, through faith in Him (John 10,10; cf. other passages about 'life' in the gospel of John). Through God's grace we can already have a foretaste of that salvation, not only in a spiritual way, but also in our ordinary, daily life; our

⁹ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 399.

¹⁰ Abraham Maslow, *Theory of Human Motivation* (New York: Start Publishing LLC, 2012).

¹¹ Machteld Huber, *Towards a new, dynamic concept of Health. Its operationalisation and use in public health and healthcare, and in evaluating health effects of food*. Dissertation (Maastricht: Universiteit Maastricht, 2014).

¹² Carlo Leget, *Van levenskunst tot stervenskunst. Over spiritualiteit in de palliatieve zorg* (Tielt: Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2016).

¹³ Joantine Berghuijs, "Multiple Religious Belonging in the Netherlands: An Empirical Approach to Hybrid Religiosity", <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/opth.2017.3.issue-1/opth-2017-0003/opth-2017-0003.xml> De Gruyter, Open Theology, 2016.

physical, mental, social and societal wellbeing. We trust we can still see the goodness and grace of God in his creation and in day-to-day experiences, without denying the reality and consequences of sin and the continuous need for redemption and reconciliation. Therefore, although a distinction is often made between either a creation-centered or a redemption-centered approach¹⁴, we have strived to combine both perspectives in a holistic theological orientation for our research approach.

Correlating the perspectives of sensemaking and salvation

To the list of topics we constructed based on the models on meaning and sensemaking we added topics that followed from our interpretation of salvation (see above), again through an iterative design process. This process resulted in eight core aspects of meaning (see table 1) that may well be experienced by participants in (new and existing) faith communities.

Physical Well-being	PW	This community helps me to live a healthier life or to take better care of my own physical life.
Functioning in Daily Life	DL	For me, this community contributes to function better in daily life.
Safetiness & Trust	TS	I feel safe in this community. Since I participate, I have more trust in people.
Security in society	SS	Since I participate in this community, I experience more financial or social security.
Social Contacts	SC	Through participating in this community, I have new or better social relationships.
Recognition & Appreciation	RA	Since I participate in this community, I feel more recognition and appreciation.
Personal development & meaning	DM	This community stimulates my personal development and sense of meaning.
Faith & Spirituality	FS	Participating in this community stimulates and enables me to grow in Christian faith and spirituality.

Table 1 – Eight Aspects of Meaning

As a next step, these categories were integrated in a broader research method with qualitative and quantitative components which we have called: the 'Compass of Meaning' (see 2.2). For this method, we created eight cards (that each contained one of the eight aspects of meaning, two pictograms and a short description of aspect concerned). Also, we created a Likert-style questionnaire, with six sub questions for each of the eight aspects of meaning (48 propositions in total).

The questionnaire facilitates measuring the difference (or: impact) the respondent may experience as a consequence of participation in a faith community (e.g. 'I now experience more inner peace and tranquility or can better accept my path of life'). Also, it enables creating comparative charts of the outcomes of the total of all questionnaires, as well as comparing these outcomes with the inductive results, thus serving as a 'control mechanism' within the research method.

We have visualized our research approach in a figure which we have called: the 'Restoration of Life-model' (see next page, figure 1). In this figure, we combine the eight aspects of meaning with the theological vision about God's ongoing care for and presence in his creation, as well as the centrality of the cross as God's redeeming act. The double arrows underline that every human need can be a way to either discover, or to communicate the good news of Gods salvation.

¹⁴ Cf. Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology. Revised and Expanded Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 2002).

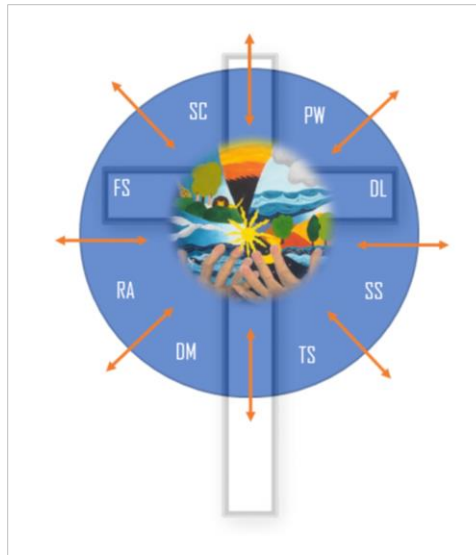


Figure 1 - Restoration of Life-model
(see Table 1 for abbreviations)

2.2 'Compass of Meaning': research question and research process:

The main question of our research was:

In what ways is participating in pioneering faith communities meaningful for the participants, what do they bring forward as determining factors for this perceived meaning, and what lessons can be learned from their experiences in terms of a context-sensitive communication of the gospel within the Dutch society?

Based on the abovementioned perspectives, we designed a research method that relates the experiences of participants in faith communities to the concepts of sensemaking and salvation and enables us to map the answers of participants both qualitatively and quantitatively (triangulation). The full research process consists of four steps. The first step is inductive and consists of conducting an open, unstructured interview; the second, third and fourth step are - in an increasing degree - of a deductive nature, based on the eight aspects of meaning:

- **Step 1** – Open interview, based on the question: 'How did you become involved and what does this place mean to you?'
- **Step 2** – The respondent is asked to illustrate this meaning with an image (e.g. 'If you would make a photo, painting, work of art, what would we see?'). If this is too complex, respondents can choose one or more pictures from a selection of 32 photocards.
- **Step 3** – Here we bring in the eight categories in three phases. First, we give respondents the cards we created based on the eight categories (see above). We ask them to divide these cards in two groups: with or without meaning. Then we ask them to substantiate their choice with personal examples. Thirdly, we ask for a 'top-3' of meaning. We conclude with the question if respondents want to add something they have missed in the interview.
- **Step 4** - after the interview we proceed to step 4, which consists of filling out the Likert-style questionnaire.

2.3 Respondents and their faith communities

To select a representative variety of pioneering communities we defined two criteria. The first criterium concerned the *spiritual approach*: either 1) more evangelistic and confessional, with an emphasis on personal faith development, or 2) more open, with an emphasis on a personal quest for meaning in life. The other criterium was *commitment to community*: either 1) focusing on active participating in the faith community, or 2) creating an open community without obligations. The faith communities we approached for our research were asked (during a preliminary interview) to score their initiatives on these two scales, so that we could verify if the communities represented the variety we pursued. Additionally, we chose a geographical and denominational variety (see figure 2).



Figure 2 – Geographical location of the faith communities

Short description of the six faith communities we selected:

- **Hiernaast | Kunst van Ontmoeting** is a community in an old working-class neighbourhood in an industrial city in the East of the Netherlands. It is part of the Urban Expression network, has an evangelical identity and started in 2011 out of a dream of a couple with a Reformed background. It provides an atelier for painting and a living room that serves as community centre.
- **Sjoelplaats** was founded in 2014 and is a small ‘home-based’ community. The name is dialect for ‘refuge’. The founder’s has a Protestant background, and a desire to reach the Catholic population in the southern province Limburg with the gospel. The Sjoelplaats offers small-scale celebrations and a variety of courses on the Christian faith.
- **Klink Veenendaal** is a small post-evangelical community in the centre of The Netherlands and part of the so-called ‘Biblebelt’ area.¹⁵ Klink emerged from an evangelical Baptist church in 2014 and focuses on being an open, innovative and creative community, with focus on relevance for everyday life in the Sunday services.
- **Abdij van Egmond** offers lay persons since 1937 the opportunity to become an ‘oblate’; a person who lives according to the rhythm and spirituality of the monastery in the ‘secular’ daily live. This form of involvement attracts increasing numbers of newcomers. In Egmond, near the West coast, the community of oblates almost doubled in size with 33 new members between 2012 and 2020.
- **ZuidRijk** is a community centre in Rotterdam, the second-largest city of the Netherlands. It is a co-operation of a Reformed and Protestant church, with a desire to serve the neighborhood and show God's love in word and deed, in an area where many people experience loneliness.

¹⁵ The ‘biblebelt’ is a strip of land in the Netherlands with the highest concentration of orthodox Reformed Protestants.

- **Nijkleaster** is a pioneering community of the Protestant Church with a monastic character, active since 2012. It is located in the agricultural landscape of Friesland, a northern Dutch province with its own Frisian language. Nijkleaster focuses on weekly meetings on Wednesday morning with a short meditation, followed by a meditative walk in the surroundings fields, and a potluck lunch.

With respect to *commitment to community*, Klink and the Abdij van Egmond have a high focus on commitment, ZuidRijk, Sjoelplaats and Hiernaast a middle position (a wish for commitment, but freedom for anyone to participate) and Nijkleaster is the most open to non-binding participation. With respect to the *spiritual approach*, ZuidRijk, Sjoelplaats and Hiernaast strongly focus on sharing the gospel and salvation through Jesus Christ, Klink and the Abdij van Egmond have a middle position with explicit focus on being a seeker and Nijkleaster is the most open and inclusive community.

Respondents and their backgrounds

All interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021. In each community six participants were selected, mirroring as much as possible the diversity of each initiative. Of the respondents (n=37¹⁶) 13 were male and 24 female. Table 2 indicates the age range of the respondents:

Age of Respondents	#	%
20-29	1	2,7
30-39	4	10,8
40-49	5	13,5
50-59	8	21,6
60-69	7	18,9
70-79	8	21,6
80-89	1	2,7
Unknown	3	8,1
Total number	37	100%

Table 2 - Age range of respondents (n=37)

In total, 16 out of 37 respondents were not actively involved in Christian churches when they started participating in the new communities: six of the respondents with a Catholic background did not attend church for a very long time, three respondents only attended church or religious classes during their childhood, two had no Christian background at all, two had a Jewish background, two combined Christianity with Buddhism and one combined Christianity with regular visits to a medium.

¹⁶ In one of the communities, a respondent who came to the Netherlands as a refugee, unexpectedly brought a friend and asked to be interviewed together, which makes the total number of respondents 37.

(Religious) backgrounds of Respondents	#	%
Presbyterian (in Dutch: Gereformeerd)	3	8,1
Reformed (in Dutch: Hervormd)	3	8,1
Evangelical	1	2,7
Mix of reformed/evangelical/ecumenical ¹⁷	6	16,2
Only Christian education during youth and/or Sunday school ¹⁸	3	8,1
Roman Catholic ¹⁹	11	29,7
Mix of Christianity/Buddhism	2	5,4
Mix of Christianity/visits to medium	1	2,7
Jewish	2	5,4
Only religious education at high school	2	5,4
No Christian background	2	5,4
Unknown	1	2,7
TOTAL	37	100%

Table 3 – (Religious) backgrounds of respondents (n=37)

3. SUMMARY OF MAIN RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

Our presupposition was that every faith community would have a unique score on these aspects, reflecting its missiological intentions and practices. In this paragraph we will give insight in the main outcomes of the interviews and the questionnaire. We start by giving a general overview based on the overall outcomes of the top-3s during the interviews (3.1), and the questionnaires after the interviews (3.2 and 3.3). Then we will give insight in the main outcomes for each community.

3.1 Overall top-3 at interviews

In our research report we provide the separate top-3 scores for each faith community. In this paper, we suffice with mentioning the overall scores. Based on only the top-1 position, *Faith & Spirituality* (FS) comes at the 1st place as the most meaningful, followed by *Personal Development and Meaning* (DM) and *Social Contact* at a shared 2nd position, and *Trust and Safetiness* on a 3rd position.

Based on the addition of all top-3 scores the outcomes remain the same (see table 4), with a minor difference (1 point) between *Personal Development and Meaning* and *Social Contact*:

TOTALS	PW	DL	TS	SS	SC	RA	DM	FS
	1	9	16	0	19	10	20	27

Table 4 - Top-3 categories of meaning (step 3 in the research process).

PW = Physical Well-being
DL = Functioning in Daily Life
TS = Safetiness & Trust
SS = Security in society
SC = Social Contacts
RA = Recognition & Appreciation
DM = Personal development & meaning
FS = Faith & Spirituality

3.2 Overall outcome questionnaire

Based on the outcomes of the questionnaire after the interviews, the positions shift a little bit compared to the top-3 outcomes. In this paper, we limit ourselves to the overall outcomes. In our research report, we include the full results for each faith community as well as more detailed charts for each aspect of meaning.

As we want to measure the ‘impact’ of participating with this survey, we have chosen to include only the scores from the questionnaire that indicate that participating brought about a

¹⁷ Some respondents had previously been a member at three or four other denominations.

¹⁸ One participant went to church only until the age of 10, one sometimes went to church with grandparents.

¹⁹ Six of these respondents had a Roman Catholic background but did not attend church for a very long time.

positive change (score 3: yes, to a limited extent and score 4: yes, to a strong extent).²⁰ As figure 4 illustrates, with respect to positive impact in a strong degree, the category *Social Contact* comes first (SC, 34.5%), immediately followed by *Faith and Spirituality* (FS, 32.1%). *Personal Development and Meaning* (DM, 27.8%) and *Recognition and Appreciation* (RA, 28.1%) follow third, in almost equal measure. With regard to the positive impact to a limited extent: *Recognition and Appreciation* comes first (RA, 40.1%), immediately followed by *Personal Development and Meaning* (OZ, 37.6%), and *Safetiness and Trust* (TS, 32.5%) and *Social Contact* (SC, 32.3%) in almost equal measure.

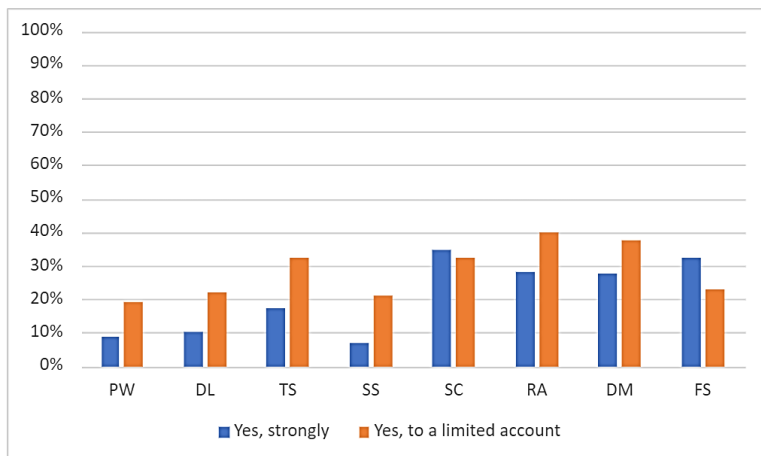


Figure 4 – Total scores per category combined for all faith communities

3.3 Outcomes questionnaire per aspect

The following radar diagrams give insight in how the impact differs per aspect within each community (figure 5, see next page). In these diagrams the impact-scores ‘to a strong degree’ and ‘to a limited extent’ are taken together, in order to give an overall impression. In our final research report, we give detailed insight into all separate scores. The diagrams enable an initial comparison between the faith communities. The diagram *Functioning in Daily Life*, for example, illustrates this aspect is mentioned by respondents of the Abdijs van Egmond, ZuidRijk and Hiernaast, but not by the other communities.

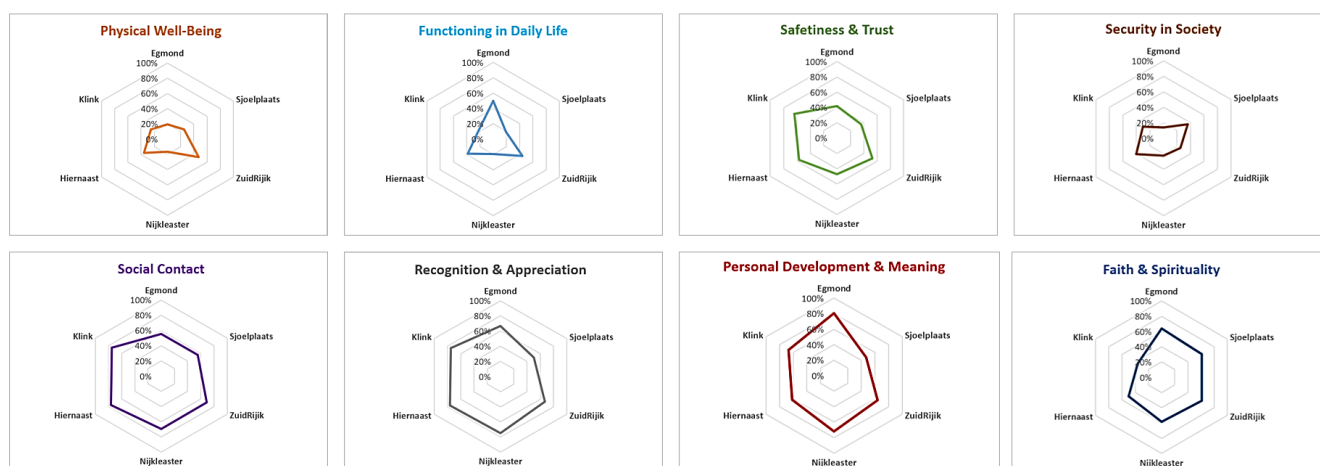


Figure 5 – Scores per aspect of all faith communities

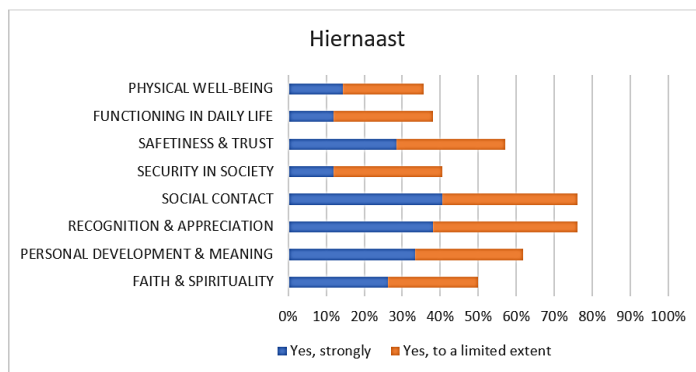
²⁰ The negative scores hardly occurred, and were related to unique situations (e.g. refugee problems).

3.4 Outcomes per faith community

Hiernaast - During the interviews, most respondents indicate they started to participate because of a need for social contacts. Also, they brought forward that they felt welcome and appreciated.

At the top-3 during the interview *Social Contact* and *Safetiness & Trust* came on a 1st position, followed by *Faith & Spirituality* and *Recognition & Appreciation* on 2nd position and *Personal Development & Meaningfulness* and *Impact on Daily Functioning* in 3rd position.

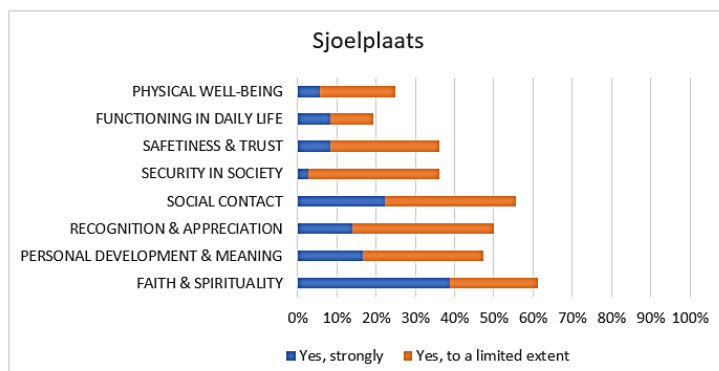
The questionnaire after the interview shows a slightly different picture. Here *Social Contact* scores highest, closely followed by *Recognition & Appreciation*. Apparently, there is a close relationship between experiencing recognition and appreciation and safety and trust. Both of these in turn provide a safe place to engage in faith and meaning together.



Sjoelplaats - Social contact was a trigger to get involved, as well as the initial location (in a small, white church), and the personality, personal involvement and honesty of the initiator about questions of faith a trigger to stay.

In the top-3, *Faith & Spirituality* and *Social Contact* score highest, followed by *Safetiness & Trust*. Respondents indicate that they receive a lot of knowledge and new insights about God and the Bible.

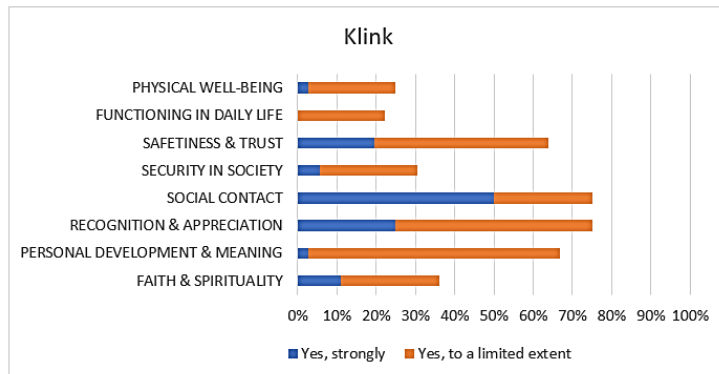
In the questionnaire, *Faith & Spirituality* is also clearly the most important, followed by *Social Contact*. In the questionnaire, the *Recognition & Appreciation* category scores slightly higher than *Safetiness & Trust*.



Klink - During the interviews, the main reason given for participation, was the desire to find a safe place where difficult questions (e.g. regarding church traditions or identity) are welcomed.

At the top-3, *Safetiness & Trust* and *Personal Development & Meaning* come at 1st position, directly followed by *Social Contact* at 2nd and *Faith & Spirituality* at 3rd position. Some respondents emphasized that exploring questions of sensemaking is more important than faith formation.

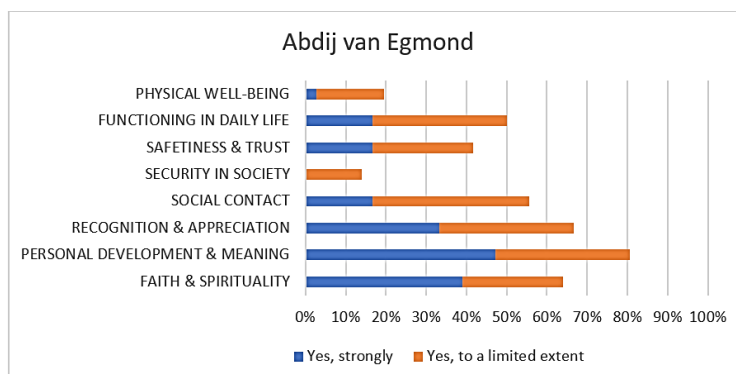
In the questionnaire, *Social Contact* has the highest score, followed by *Recognition & Appreciation* and *Safetiness & Trust*.



Abdij van Egmond - At the interviews, sensemaking was mentioned by all as a major factor for becoming involved. For many, this resonated with the importance of integrating faith and spirituality in their ordinary, daily life.

In the top-3, *Personal Development & Meaning* and *Faith & Spirituality* stand out clearly and most respondents indicate these categories cannot be separated. Additionally, *Safetiness & Trust* and *Functioning in Daily Life* were chosen. The latter has to do with following the 'rhythm' of the monastery at home: this gives structure as well as perspective in life.

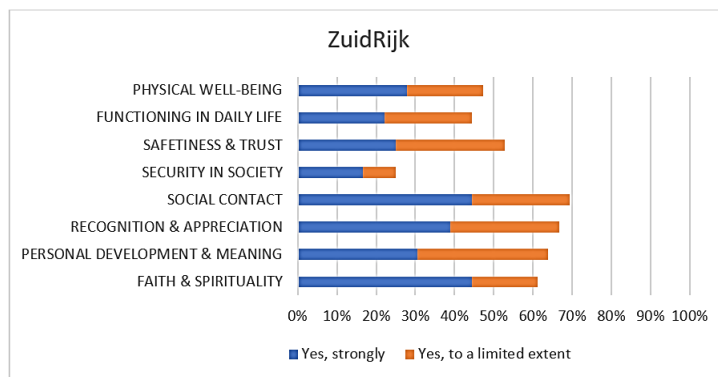
In the questionnaire, *Personal Development & Meaning* has the highest score, followed by *Faith & Spirituality*. *Recognition & Appreciation* comes in 3rd place.



ZuidRijk – At this place, social contacts also were an initial trigger to come, for some to care for the neighbourhood, for others to receive care and to have a place to go for a coffee or a meal, or the celebrations on Sunday.

At the top-3, *Social Contacts* and *Faith & Spirituality* get exact equal scores, both at at 1st position, followed at quite a distance by *Recognition & Appreciation*.

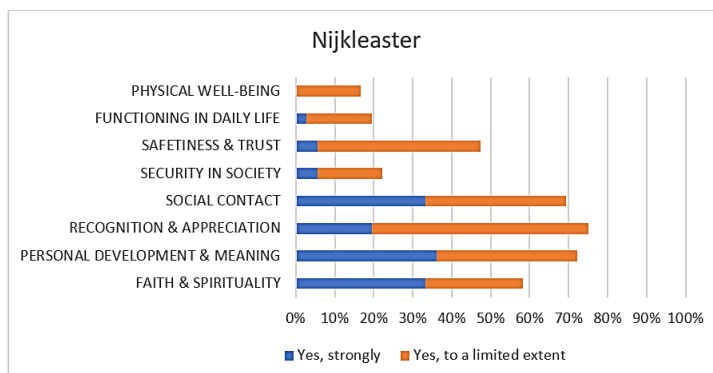
In the questionnaire *Social Contacts* scores just a little higher than *Faith & Spirituality*, followed by *Recognition & Appreciation* at a 3rd place.



Nijkleaster – During the interviews, the gatherings and walks on Wednesdays are given as the main motivation to come, combined with the warm personal welcome, openness for anyone with interest in religion, quietness and simplicity of the liturgy ('down-to-earth' approach), and experiencing spirituality outside in the Frisian landscape

In the top three, *Faith & Spirituality* comes at 1st position, followed at some distance by *Personal Development & Meaning* and *Safetiness & Trust*.

In the questionnaire, *Personal Development & Meaning* ranks 1st, followed by *Social Contact* and *Faith & Spirituality* and *Recognition & Appreciation*.



4. MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR MISSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Our main question is broken down into three sub-questions (see above, paragraph 2C). We will now provide our conclusions for each sub question:

In what ways is participating in Christian pioneering initiatives meaningful for the participants?

In general, participation makes sense for participants when a faith community touches on their daily existence in a meaningful way, and when they experience the salvific effect of this in their lives. If this is not or insufficiently the case, people will not join or drop out. The following results stand out:

- The value of (new) social contacts.** Participating in all places and for almost all participants makes sense because it leads to new or better social contacts. For some participants, this is the reason to join, for other it is more a consequence of participating.
- The interconnectedness of spirituality and personal development.** The high score on *Social Contacts* is always accompanied by a relatively high score on *Faith & Spirituality* or *Personal Development & Meaning*, or a combination of both. The latter applies in particular to the Abdij van Egmond, Nijkleaster and Klink. At the monastic places, the respondents additionally look for integration of the body, the senses (silence, nature) and daily life (being 'grounded', rhythm). At Klink, respondents find a refuge from exclusion or dogmatic approaches.

- c. **Recognition and appreciation as ingredients for positive testimony and faith formation.** The perceived recognition and appreciation are high, leading to a sense of security where relationships can flourish and respondent's trust in fellow human beings is enhanced. In a society that struggles with individualization and loneliness, or even polarization and social exclusion, this makes these places socially relevant. From a faith perspective, important Christian values become visible and tangible, providing a positive testimony, as well as a condition for faith formation.
- d. **Influence on daily functioning.** A minority of participants indicate that participation makes sense, because it improves daily functioning by providing structure, by generating peace and stability in an uncertain world, by building self-confidence and confidence in fellow human beings, and by submitting your questions and concerns to God.
- e. **The paradox of combining a social-diaconal and missional focus.** Some places intentionally have a social-diaconal and missional focus. Although certain places (e.g. Hiernaast, ZuidRijk), started from missionary motives, they do not necessarily score highest on their significance for *Faith & Spirituality*. As they combine mission with social goals, participation in faith activities is often a follow-up on the social activities. However, not all visitors make this next step to faith activities.
- f. **Helping others, or being helped, adds meaning to life.** According to the respondents, the places have little or no significance for their *Physical Well-being* or *Security in Society*, and if so, only supplementary. However, an aspect that stands out is that both 'helping' or 'being helped' makes people feel more a part of society and thus adds meaning.
- g. **Faith makes a difference.** The meaning respondents find through participation, sometimes exceeds their expectation: they receive more or something else than they expected (e.g. loving affirmation, new faith, inner healing, restoration of relationships, learning to read the Bible or pray) or change from someone seeking help to providing help. When this happens, participating becomes salvific and a blessing for them in a special way and the perceived significance rises above that of secular initiatives such as community centers and associations.

What do participants bring forward as determining factors for this perceived meaning?

In our research report we include detailed overviews related to each of the eight aspects of meaning, stating: 1) characteristic factors of the respondent's personal situation that led them to participate (e.g. "struggle with homosexuality"), 2) determining factors in the faith community that respondents declare to affect them positively (e.g. "unconditional welcome"), and 3) tangible effects (e.g. "sense of security"). In more general terms, we come to the following conclusions:

- a. **Beneficial mix of elements and factors.** A mix of factors recur regularly: participating makes sense if you are unconditionally welcome, receive personal attention, make new contacts, are welcomed to share your story, when the community is 'small scale' and knows who you are, and when you receive recognition and appreciation for who you are and what you can contribute. Also, weekly celebrations or daily prayers can give rest, structure, and direction to life. These factors are deepened in a spiritual sense when participants taste the reality of the Christian faith in celebrations and in the lives of the missionary workers.
- b. **Attitude and personal approach of the missionary workers.** In our research we came across many stories about missionary workers that confirm Andries Baart's 'theory of presence'²¹ and its salvific significance, such as: a warm, loving attitude, openness, hospitality, honesty, and receptivity – often emanating from a personal trust in God. Faithfulness and perseverance are an

²¹ Andries Baart, *Een theorie van de presentie* (Utrecht: Lemma, 2001).

important factor for missionary practices that want to be meaningful in people's lives. If you offer something, you must live up to it. If not, participants will drop out sooner or later.

- c. **God's salvific presence.** Participants indicate as an additional factor of meaning that they sometimes experience something of God's presence, mentioning that the Spirit of God is at work and breathes through human practices, even though these places are imperfect.
- d. **Significance at the intersections of supply, initiators, and demand.** Whether participating makes sense depends on the range of activities on offer, but also on the capacities of participants, and on the initiator's ability to recognize their development and/or needs. Where these aspects sufficiently reinforce each other and the practices align with people's needs, meaning arises (e.g. as defined in the Compass of Meaning). We heard many stories of participants who first 'received' care, but then became 'donors' in a variety of ways.

What lessons can be learned for context-sensitive communication of the gospel?

- a. **The impossibility of being everything to everyone.** Our research illustrates that the more specific the offer, the smaller the group that can be served, yet providing great value for this specific group. Traditional churches often work from the tacit idea they should be able to be everything to everyone. Based on our research, we hope to encourage churches to use their specific strengths (or talents) to reach out to specific groups and their needs. The one faith can be experienced and professed in many different and mutually complementing ways.
- b. **The importance of inclusion.** Participating only makes sense, when people are truly included and valued in a group or faith community. It is not agreement on beliefs that comes first, but love and receptiveness. For participants, immersion in religious communal practices serves as a formative process to grasp the full richness of the faith.
- c. **Salvation touches all of life.** Salvation is manifested and discovered in various ways, and relating to the earthly context and basic human needs is of utmost importance for missionary initiatives. The immanent and the transcendent interact and cannot be separated. The participant's stories illustrate how - through immanent, mundane factors (e.g. safety, being seen, heard, and helped) - they gain receptivity for the transcendent (spirituality, faith).
- d. **Usefulness of Compass of Meaning for traditional churches.** In traditional churches, as far as we can tell, the question is not easily asked in what ways participation is salvific and meaningful for members and visitors. The methodology we developed may help to gain (new) understanding on the meaning of certain activities, which facilitates conversation and reflection (e.g. on youth work, small groups, education, or diaconal and missionary work).
- e. **Usefulness of Compass of Meaning for theological education.** The developed theory and methodology can help students to develop a broad(er) vision of the significance of faith practices in a post-Christian society, and to consciously reflect on this.
- f. **Usefulness of Compass of Meaning for society.** We hope that the outcomes of this research help to make the riches of the Christian faith understandable and accessible again, by using the often mundane, ordinary factors our respondents have brought as a 'new' language for churches to explain themselves to a largely secular public. To bridge the gap, this language may well need to precede using the language of the credentials of a faith tradition, that secular people are no longer familiar with.

5. CHALLENGING QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

With this research we have searched for new language to provide insight into the meaning of participating in a new faith community. This final paragraph provides a selection of our (theological and methodological) evaluation and questions for ongoing reflection and follow-up research.

- a. **Who will be reached?** More than a third of the respondents in this research was at a great distance from the Christian faith. At the same time, this means that two-third of the respondents were already familiar with the Christian faith to a greater or lesser extent. This can lead to criticism: do pioneering places succeed sufficiently in reaching the target group they have in mind? We hope this research will help to look *beyond* this question to deeper issues about how the Christian faith is experienced in our secular culture. Could this research be a step toward offering positive and 'stimulating' articulations, by showing a different side of the Christian faith through the stories of people who do participate (again)? Could it serve as an antidote against well-known negative, cynical or hindering (historical, cultural) factors that repels people from the Christian faith in various ways?

In our research, we unintendedly mainly reached respondents in the age category 40-80 years and primarily people with a Western background. Follow-up research is needed to gain more insight into specific factors or questions on meaning among, for example, young people or people with another cultural background.

- b. **Salvation in an 'immanent frame'?** Our research illustrates the importance for faith communities to connect to basic human needs. Several of our respondents testify how they rejected faith and church because of dogmatic (top-down) ideas that were handed down to them. Do 'bottom-up' views of salvation run the risk of becoming too 'horizontal', to a degree detrimental to safeguarding the uniqueness of redemption through Christ? Or is the horizontal dimension a much-needed entrance for (re)discovering the richness of a life with Christ? Whichever 'take' you prefer, an exciting follow-up question is how to bring the results of practice-oriented theological research into a reflective dialogue with systematic and biblical theology (and vice versa). We therefore call for follow-up research on the question of what we can say theologically about the effect of the salvation of God in human lives, in society, or in creation.

Additionally, further theological substantiation of the eight categories of the Compass of Meaning would give the methodology more depth and trustworthiness and might provide better insight in how the aspects relate to each other. Questions that arise are for example: is it negative if certain aspects score low? Are there any aspects that we have overlooked? Or: what happens if we use the methodology to investigate the meaning of participating in a sports club?

- c. **Reliability and validity.** We used a Likert-scale questionnaire, mainly for the purpose of triangulation within our qualitative-based research. We converted the data into frequency tables to calculate percentages for presenting the data through bar graphs and radar graphs. However, we are aware of the limited scope of this study, and - with respect to generalization and representativity - the subsequent risk of fluctuation in the responses. Additionally, the difference between 'yes, to a large extent' and 'yes, to a limited extent' remains unclear. Therefore, better standardization and a more reliable ordinal scale is needed and will be realized in the future.