**Virtual access helps to deepen religieus feelings**

I am a grandfather with grandchildren. These grandchildren come and play with us every now and then. As soon as they can walk, they go to the television in our living room and make a swiping move. They seek access to cartoons and music. They don't realize that we still have an old-fashioned television with a remote control. They can only imagine that you have to swipe to conjure images. That's how it works on a smartphone.

The example shows what I mean by 'virtual access'. My grandkids are focusing on virtual access. Virtual access is the entrance to another reality. A conceptual world of films, comics, music, meaning fullness. As a human being you need skills to participate in the virtual world.

That has always been the case, even before there was a smartphone. When we dream, we are also in a virtual world. Yes, even when I step out of the door here to go to a toilet, there is first an idea that there might be a toilet in the hallway. The virtual imagination motivates practical choices.

And yet this area is different from centuries in the past. What is new in our time is that the digital world evokes a completely new virtual world which can be reached by simply pushing a few buttons. And what is new is that you are not only a customer of the information, but you can also create information.

I would like to investigate with you how these digital possibilities are changing the work from us being pastors.

**Corona crisis**

It is mainly since the corona crisis that we have switched to digital communication. Corona has given the work in the church a different face. We went from a physical church to a hybrid church; and we did that in only two years. The hybrid church combines the physical church community with the online congregation. The church has the looks of a cock in the tower of the church building, and it has a digital logo on the website.

The number of visitors to church services digitally was even bigger than the number of visitors to physical church services. The compound of the congregation differed. A quarter of faithful physical churchgoers did not look at the screen. On the other hand, a quarter of new viewers did take a look. They liked the ease accessible service.

The structure of a virtual church service differs from that in a physical church service. It requires a different direction, a different liturgy, different music. People didn’t hear the songs sung by the congregation, they heard artful music from a sound box. They didn’t listen to the analytic approach of the sermon, they were triggered by the facial expression of the preacher.

It's a different experience. Just like watching a football match on television is different from going to a football stadium.

What applies to the church service, also applies to pastoral care and diaconate. These ecclesiastical work types also took on a different meaning during the corona crisis. People in a whatsapp group showed their mutual interest in each other. Preachers using Twitter could send short messages. And you could put your feelings in a blog on Facebook, starting a virtual dialogue. Deacons interviewed people so that the pictures could be broadcast in the service prior to the intercessions.

**Theology**

Maybe you think: this is only an intermezzo. We use a new technique. And after a while everything can stay the same and return to the good-old-religion. That seems like a mistake to me. The gospel may be timeless, but words like ‘grace’ and ‘reconciliation’ are concepts that should be updated in every new generation. The entrance to the concepts changes; and so the concepts themselves acquire attention, so that the recipients are sensitive for the actual meaning.

We can see this looking at the concept of 'virtual images'. Take the crucification of Christ. One of our pastors, dr. Bert van Veluw, has recently written a book about the metaphors used for the crucifixion. He comes to 48 images. Some of these are biblical. Some of it are new. The image is biblical, for example, of a slave market, where someone redeems a slave. That is very clarifying in antiquity. But in our time you get further with, for example, an image of a mine shaft in which you are locked, and from which you can only get out if there is help from outside.

By changing the medium of communication, the entrance to the gospel changes. Marshal McLuhan has summed it up with the slogan 'the medium is the message/massage'. When you slaughter a lamb in front of an altar and let the blood drain, you appeal to different feelings than when you write a text about reconciliation. The first example, the altar, gives an impression; the second example, a text, gives an analytic interpretation.

I believe that we can distinguish at least five periods in which communication has changed the emphasis in theology. We first went from the temple culture to the scripture culture. Then it went from the writings to the printing press culture. It moved from the printing press to the public media of radio and television. And now a final revolution: that of digital changes.

Let me explain my thoughts. Initially, the Jews, as a community, followed a temple cult. Priests maintained the relationship with God by performing all kinds of rituals and sacrifices. The faithful brought their animals and watched the priest perform the ritual. The first major change in culture started when the temple was destroyed in the sixth century before Christ and the upper echelons of the population were taken into exile. In Babel people couldn’t fulfill the temple services. They simply came together and said: ‘We only have the stories. Let’s write them down. And let’s come together to read the texts’. So the synagogue was born. Ezekiel 11:16 talks about this "little sanctuary" which developed. The synagogue produces a different kind of theologian. The old situation with priests is like caterpillars that pupate and that live on like butterflies, being scribes. The ritual stop. The codification of Jewish tradition takes its place.

Another revolution is taking place in the developing of the printing press in the fifteenth century. The monasteries in the Middle Ages had a kind of patent on the production of books. The books were in Latin and facilitated contact with God. The printing press broke through that patent. By printing with a press, many more books could be made. Texts were translated into the vernacular. The Christian heritage democratized. The art of printing went hand in hand with translating the script into one's own language. The patent of the scribes was further broken. The people could entrust themselves to their own concept formation. It was no longer the entrances of the privileged people who had learned; every person could make his or her own virtual image. People got more 'access towards their own religious feelings'. The lyrics had less power in themselves. The believer took the initiative to walk on the path to concept formation.

The rise of the public media is another revolution. Television contributes to the socialization of the gospel and to re-questioning the relevance of the gospel. Concepts such as "reconciliation", "happiness", "hate", "love", "humanity", words initially sparked from religious sources, continue to be democratized. They appear in every soap program. They secularize. It becomes the task of the clergyman to show how these concepts have their origin in the realization of a personal God. Where the theologian in the printing press concentrates on opening up the scriptures, the theologian now shows how religious concepts give depth to life. You watch a television movie about love; and from the Christian faith you know that God is the source of that love. The priest dr. Louis ter Steeg wrote about this in 'While the viewer is enjoying himself'.

**Believers**

The digital revolution forces us to take a further step towards emancipation. The recipient is not only reading religious sources. The believer will also carry out messages himself. And because everyone else is doing that, an avalanche of messages develops. It increases the theologian's task to help distinguish between truth and fake.

A new poverty is emerging: the persons who do not have access to digital information. Those are the ones who are unable to navigate on the internet. Ten percent in the Netherlands live below the poverty line. This has nothing to do with a lack of social services. More than half of this is due to the inability to access the information needed to receive funding.

The digital revolution also opens up the barriers between generations. Nowadays, a generation is growing up that is familiar with social media. Generation Z (born after 1995) has digital technology as the standard. Information is always available. These people can multitask. Implicitly, they are less able to concentrate. They don't watch the news on television, but collect their own truth on social media. They use a lot of WhatsApp. 15-19 year olds spend an average of 143 minutes a day on social media; 20-39 year olds 114 minutes. They choose flexibility over loyalty; they choose for entrepreneurship over fidelity; for responding to change over institutions.

These Z-generation makes up only eight percent of the population of our church PKN. So there is developing a gap between the generations. There is crisis in handing over tradition from one generation to another. The younger generation is less active in the traditional framework of the church. The framework consists of people aged 50 years and older. Over the next seven years, 40 percent of the executives in my area will retire. They have never been taught the use of social media in a way the younger generation is using it.

For the young people, the question is not whether they are members of a church, but whether they have 'access' to information. So it is wise to develop with them a sense of ‘participation’ and of ‘the church at the center of our town is also a place I can go to on the key periods in my life’. Churches can even adopt special short running programs for them in order to develop that feelings of ‘knowing the way to find real feelings for nourishing my soul’. You reach an important goal if you are connected with this generation answering the question: 'We do I find access to sources of meaningfulness'.

A desire for a revival of the classical church comparable to the revival in the nineteenth century makes little sense; although you can see that tendency in some niche groups. After all, the mainline lies in taking people's empowerment seriously and tapping into real desires for meaning and depth, not framed by moralism or retro-symbolism.

We see a further emancipation of faith and theology in these developments. It provides input to secularization. We should not fear for secularization. We can respond to it. By using social media people are given new opportunity to make their own choices, to show their own involvement, to find new ways to save their souls, to figure out the unique meaning of Christ for their own biography.

**Pastors**

If the church members change, the pastors will also have to change. Virtual changes require different skills from the pastor. He/she becomes less liturgical, as in the Catholic tradition. He/she is less of a scribe, as in the Protestant tradition. He/she is above all a guide, coach, director, someone who opens up access to religious reality.

That requires seducion, marketing, public relations, anticipating and responding to developments. A pastor knows how to bring people to the relevant sources for their lives. This is less the case with the liturgist: he/she must know the codes. That is less the case with the scribe: he/she must be able to analyze. But a trailblazer reads map, reads images, provides access.

A new balance in different parts of our work develops. Emotion takes over the position of dogmatics. You search with people for what touches them. This also requires different focus points from theological courses. People organize themselves differently: 'access to' is more important than 'to have' and 'to be'. The central question is not whether we will continue the existence of the sermons on Sunday in a church, but whether we as theologians are able to continue to place religion on the public agenda in a way people recognize the relevance. So in addition to technical skills, it requires the ability of us as a church to take on an agenda-setting function.

We develop other forms of community. Other words pop up; such as developing networks, seeking contacts with political, medial key figures and other opinion leaders.

It requires theology, but also sociology and political science. We learn to weave faith into patterns of the society. We will not use the term 'network' as a word inviting us to wait and see what happens; it is a word that challenges us to develop a network. You don't go to receptions to have a drink, you talk to people who are important for the development of the network and you exchange business cards. Because access has to do with relevance for the user. Mystagogy and beauty still matter; but the road to reach it is by using cars of authenticity and visibility. It requires a permanent missionary, open attitude.

Pete Ward, professor of practical theology at Durham, writes: “We need to shift from seeing church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time – that is, a congregation – to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications. This image implies something like a network or a web rather than an assembly of people'.

Isn't that the relationship that Jesus desired when he sent his disciples out two-by-two and told them not to take extra clothes with them and not even bread. If you don't take bread with you, you know that after several miles you will get hungry and have to ask someone else for something to eat. Perhaps that was the intention of Jesus. He wanted them to make contact with people they didn’t know yet (Luke 10 and many other places in the gospel).

In terms of the work of professionals, it asks for people who have skills in communication. You do not have to analyze the faith intellectually yourself, you have to recognize the faith types and be able to open them up to people, so that everyone can take what he or she needs. It is the believer who puts together the own package of religion and it is the theologian who points the way in the market of offers.

Perhaps that is also what the evangelist John shows. He describes the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus, and shows how the talk has its own dynamics, which are quite different from the dynamics we see in the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, at the well. Jesus chooses the wordings useful in their own context (John 3 and John 4). By the way, Paul does the same on the Areopagus (Acts 17).

**Strategy**

The communication strategy has to change, because of the development of social media. The changes imply that you develop concepts in a different way. You have a concept for the digital visitor, and a concept for the physical encounter.

It also has consequences for the financing of the church. Some people pay for a lifetime. Just like they do with roadside assistance. But countless people pay for a project, in which we as pastors give them a hand.

This also has consequences for the building. The church building will get an identity as a meeting place in the middle of a community. The building might be in its best performance the soul as a village, the spirit of a neighborhood. People will go there for all kinds of services. And by getting used to the place as a good place to be, the respect for the life-giving services might develop as well. The familiarity may even start on social media, growing further when they visit the building for some practical reason.

We will approach people differently. It is traditional to address people as 'potential core members'. With a hybrid church you work more from seducion and you approach people based on their personal needs. You address the people who want to participate in the spiritual nature walk differently than the people who want to participate in the prayer group. The people who attend a celebration digitally at home have a different attitude than the people who are in the church building. It requires a reorganization of language and forms of address. By helping people along the virtual highway, you help them deepen their own religious feelings.

**Faith**

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) defines ‘faith’ as: 'a sure knowledge'. The Doorn Catechism (2010), a contemporary confession of faith, describes faith as 'being at home’; and home is the place, where ‘I am carried and protected in the midst of the insecurity of the world and not being salvaged'. Faith is dealing with this vulnerability. We as pastors learn to translate human vulnerability into suitable questions. And we accompany people with these questions on the market of meaning fullness to find personal answers. For us the salvation of Christ is one of our basic attitudes for life. And we’ll help others to discover the relevance of Christ for their lives as well. Some of these answers can be found in the building, some you will discover by yourself on social media.