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## Lecture: How does innovation work nevertheless? - Central findings from the "Space for Grace" programme

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### Content

1 Introduction [Peter] .....	1
From idea to network: the story of Space for Grace [Pieter]. .....	2
3 Space for Grace concrete: A short visit to 3 projects [Daniel]. .....	3
3.1 The KirchenRaum Troisdorf: Plenty of space for new people and ideas [Daniel]. .....	4
3.2 The St. Michiels Movement. Our church closes - we move on [Pieter]. .....	5
3.3 The Osnabrück Crossroads: Church Gets a Face [Peter]. .....	6
4 What do we take with us? Six theses for imitators .....	7
4.1 Dare to go out in public! Show outside what you believe inside. [Daniel]. .....	7
4.2 Don't forget the "Why": Know and live your spiritual roots - but unobtrusively [Daniel]. .....	7
4.3 The eye eats with you: Look for quality and professionalism [Peter]. .....	8
4.4 Cooperation Makes Successful: Dare to Participate! [Peter] .....	8
4.5 Use the internet and new media - but do it right! [Pieter]. .....	10
4.6 You are not alone: Networks and evaluation give you a tailwind [Pieter]. .....	11
5. what happens next? [Peter]. .....	12

### 1. introduction [Peter]

Do you know the shortest definition of religion? -> **Interruption**, says the theologian Johann Baptist Metz!

With this in mind, I will first interrupt our talk for a spiritual word. This fits well because you have just been thinking in the small groups about the "why" of a commitment to the church. And before we get to the "how" of church work, I will take you to the Sea of Tiberias, where the risen Jesus gives the fishermen a recipe. Here are a few thoughts from Julian Heese and Matthias Micheel:

#### Net History

But he said to you: Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find something. They cast the net and could not haul it in again, so full of fish was it. (John 21:6)

The disciples have returned to everyday life. They are back to work. The risen Lord has met them and given them the Holy Spirit, but only a few days after his resurrection everything seems to be back to the way it was. Frustration spreads in the face of the empty nets.

Early in the morning, in the light of the rising sun, the Risen Lord stands on the shore. He encourages the disciples not to give up, but to keep going, no matter how futile it may seem. Failures and defeats are part of life, even our nets are sometimes empty.

But if we recognise Jesus on the shore of our lives and follow his advice, then we can be sure that all our efforts and endeavours will not be in vain. Whoever trusts in him and does not resign, will one day bring in full nets.

We pray:

**Lord Jesus Christ, on** the shore of the lake of Tiberias you revealed yourself once more to the disciples and kept time with them. Make yourself known to us when resignation envelops our lives, and let the joy of your resurrection continue in us. **Amen**

It is in this spirit that we would now like to set out with you.

In the next 45 minutes we will give them

- Present our funding programme Space for Grace
- 3 interesting projects from this context present
- and explain key learning experiences from the programme in 6 theses.

## 2. from idea to network: the story of Space for Grace [Pieter].

Space for Grace was born two thousand seventeen at a meeting where Porticus colleagues from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands discussed their church partners and projects.

It quickly became clear that the situation is very similar in all three countries: all colleagues reported about shrinking churches. But at the same time, everyone around the table enthusiastically told of local awakenings in parishes and Christian communities that did not want to accept this decline. They had all met Christians who were concretely breaking new ground locally or reviving old ways in a new spirit.

From this realisation it was only a short way to the idea of "Space for Grace": We agreed to specifically look for such innovators in all three countries and to systematically support them.

Since the start in early two thousand and eighteen, we have found and promoted more than one hundred and twenty local awakenings in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

Space for Grace's vision is to revitalise the church from below: We hope that the success of our innovative projects will infect others. And we hope that the spirit of innovation and experimentation will also reach the executive floors of the churches - and be supported by them. In foundation jargon, we speak here of "systemic change".

In our search for innovative projects, we are guided by two premises:

- Firstly, faith communities can become more vibrant when they systematically try out new ways. This also changes the attitude of those involved - from lethargy and a sense of decline to a sense of new beginnings, at least locally.
- Secondly, this requires that the local pioneers reflect critically and systematically on their practices. To ensure this, we have put together an elaborate evaluation package under the coordination of the Centre for Applied Pastoral Research (zap) in Bochum.

To ensure that our pioneers do not just stew in their own juices, we invite the funded partners in each of the three participating countries to national network meetings. These "centres of excellence":

- contribute to a common learning and innovation cycle;
- provide space for reflection and inspiration for the actors involved and
- become part of a broader, transnational movement of renewal and vitality.

In order to systematise this, all partners involved complete a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the funding period. Some projects are evaluated in more depth. At the end, each project team receives an individualised report. In it, their own project is evaluated according to certain criteria and compared with the group as a whole. Individual strengths and suggestions for improvement are also outlined. You can find out more about this tomorrow from Prof. Matthias Sellmann and Dr. Miriam Zimmer.

In our work, I like to quote Pope Francis, who inspired me two thousand thirteen with "Evangelii Gaudium":

Quote: *"Pastoral care from a missionary point of view requires abandoning the comfortable pastoral criterion of "it has always been done this way". I invite everyone to be daring and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and evangelising methods of their own congregations." End quote*

Also with Space for Grace, we want to overcome the comfortable attitude of *"it's always been done this way"*. We challenge local faith communities to boldly and creatively rethink and renew their activities, goals, structures and style. The programme challenges people to step out of their pastoral and personal comfort zones.

That includes ourselves. Speaking in front of more than five hundred people in German is way outside my comfort zone. So you see: Space for Grace is a fascinating and enriching adventure. But be warned: it is not always comfortable!

### 3 Space for Grace concrete: A short visit to 3 projects [Daniel].

At this point, I would like to compliment the hundreds of committed people in our projects: Everyone we have to deal with is on fire for their projects. We expected that.

But beyond that, they all willingly filled out the questionnaires of the accompanying research and sent us final reports that prove a high level of self-reflection. We felt a high motivation to question their own actions and to learn from the evaluation. We had not necessarily expected that.

My colleagues and I were always fascinated by these "diamonds in the rough". We sifted through them, sorted them thematically and learned a lot from them:

- What makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful projects?
- What can others learn and imitate?
- What mistakes should they avoid?

Together with our accompanying researchers, we have summarised the key findings of our programme in a book, which we would like to give you as a gift for the journey home this evening. As an appetiser, here are three concrete examples from it:

### 3.1 The KirchenRaum Troisdorf: Lots of space for new people and ideas [Daniel].

I would like to tell you the story of the "KirchenRaum" project in Troisdorf, south of Cologne. There, in the middle of the pedestrian zone, stands the church of St. Hippolytus. A beautiful church from the 60s, large and spacious, yet rarely visited. One has the impression that the threshold is too high for many people, even though the new, modern parish centre is right next door.

The people in charge decide that this has to change. The church space must finally become what it should be: A place where people come into contact with God, whether they belong to the congregation or not. A place where they express their search for meaning. A place where the diversity of faith paths also becomes visible in the Catholic milieu.

They decide to remove the church furniture completely. The pews are put into storage. In the middle of St. Hippolytus, a huge open space suddenly emerges that makes the enormous dimensions of the church tangible for the first time. Where before there was a feeling of order, but also of narrowness, now vastness and freedom become perceptible.

The change does not miss its effect: the church room has taken on a completely different face, a different atmosphere. "I feel like I'm in a dance hall," a parishioner marvels, impressed.

But there are also critical voices: Is this still a church at all? And if so, is it still *my* church? "I no longer feel at home here," some believers say.

But the project continues. Station services are created that allow the sacred places in the church space to be experienced for the first time. In a children's service, a parachute is spread out on the floor. An agape meal with confirmands can take place in the middle of a large table in the church hall.

You notice that this also has an effect on the people in the congregation: they feel encouraged to contribute their own ideas. Creativity and faith, individuality and being a church are no longer opposites. And more and more people are finding their way to St Hippolytus who had actually long since closed their minds to the church.

What remains of the "KirchenRaum" project? The parish has decided to leave the largest part of St. Hippolytus free even after the project period. A variety of church services, events and activities will continue to take place there in the future. There is room for new ideas.

But those in charge have also learned from their mistakes: major changes in the community must be communicated early and widely. Any surprises must be avoided. And even beforehand, one must consider how things can continue after a successful start.

The history of "KirchenRaum" in Troisdorf is a story with light and shadow. And yet, in the end, the conviction remains: The courage to experiment has paid off.

### 3.2 The St. Michiels Movement. Our church closes - we move on [Pieter].

I have the privilege of supervising Space for Grace in Flanders and the Netherlands. There are also good links with the Ecclesialab of Prof. Arnaud Join-Lambert and his colleagues who are pursuing many church renewal projects in the French-speaking world.

The example I would like to tell is about the St. Michiel's movement. This is an ecclesial renewal movement that is mainly aimed at young people and wants to accompany them in their faith growth. The movement is committed to people in need, evangelisation and deepening of faith.

In one of their locations, the church where the movement gathered was closed. Church closures: a complex and sensitive issue, but that is not the point now. The St. Michael Movement decided to make a virtue out of necessity and enter into a partnership with a nursing home for the elderly in the parish. Thus an intergenerational pastoral project was born. This combines the charism of the St. Michael Movement and that of the care facility, which places great value on the Church ideal of charity.

New paths were opened and many unexpected obstacles appeared. I don't know how things are going at the moment. Nevertheless, for me this is a good example of a successful Space for Grace project. Why?

- Firstly, it is entrepreneurial. Instead of falling into the negative spiral of church closures, the St Michael movement has seized the opportunity of Space for Grace to shape the future.
- Secondly, it is a project,
  - that wants to anchor itself where people are
  - Would like to create connections
  - Connections between generations
  - between convinced and seeking Christians and people of other faiths
  - between volunteers of a religious community and professionals of a care facility.
- Thirdly: The project group, with our support from an external innovation coach, has let itself be challenged and left its comfort zone. Uncertainty and fear of the unknown have been

replaced by openness and trust. This triggered enthusiasm and brought creativity into the movement.

The people of the Sint Michiels movement have themselves become enthusiastic "ambassadors" of the ideas we want to realise with the programme: Openness to innovation and evaluation are important tools for revitalising a religious community.

### 3.3 The Durchkreuzer Osnabrück: Church Gets a Face [Peter]

And another unusual church space - this time a mobile one. More than 1,000 people have already visited the Durchkreuzer, a converted van that provides a church presence at folk festivals, concerts and other large events. It is simply there, without a specific programme - people come on their own. Some visitors only stay for a minute, others for hours. Some come as a group, sometimes it is unclear who is listening closely or just waiting for their friends.

Many people seek conversation at the durchkreuzer. The topics range from the current situation of the Church to divorce, death, sexual abuse and working in the Church. Committed Catholics, those who have left and those who want to leave, as well as people who have nothing to do with the Church come.

In the project report, the pastoral assistant Natalie Jelen, whom you see here in the photo, reports a lot of positive things:

- "Church has gained a face in some places where it did not have it before" Go-To Culture in Other Places.
- The festival organisers were surprised that people also wanted to talk about life issues there => real added value
- Local parishioners came out of curiosity because they had heard about the project on social media. One pastor just wanted to drop by and stayed for 1.5 hours, wondering about deep exchanges, and topic breadth.
- In quiet phases there are discussions with the teams of the neighbouring stands
- Much gratitude from the visitors
- In the meantime, there are even regular customers who follow the Durchkreuzer from event to event.

Success factors

- Showing presence beyond the comfort zone *Intentionless, but with burning interest, appreciation, open and interested*
- Perseverance
- Courage to stand in other places
- Aesthetically pleasing, professional design of the vehicle
- due to the depth of the topics, at least one person trained in pastoral care must be at the stand. And the team must know its mission in order to be able to provide information.

But I don't want to hide the problems either:

- There was turnover in the team and it was difficult to find volunteers. This resulted in long assignments for the main volunteers - with a lot of self-exploitation.
- There is also still room for improvement in the support provided by the diocese.
- And there was a birth defect in the naming: the "wrong" working title "Mobile Church" got stuck in many people's heads, which confused potential users and helpers.

Above all, the positive irritation remained: This is church? Cool!

## 4 What do we take with us? Six theses for imitators

In the past three years, we have been able to get to know many great projects. Most of the actors in these projects are committed and passionate about trying out new ways. And they are committed to sharing their experiences and learning from each other. At the network meetings, we sense a positive energy and messages around the church that inspire hope, arouse enthusiasm. In all this, we have noticed interesting patterns, typical problems and good ideas. From these we have formulated 6 theses for you:

### 4.1 Dare to go out in public! Show outside what you believe inside.

[Daniel]

Many positive experiences have been made with projects that consciously leave the church space and go out into the public. This can be realised with mobile offers - we have just heard about the "Durchkreuzer" - as well as with events and actions of various kinds. Interestingly, these include not only charity and social work, but also church services, pastoral care or even Bible sharing.

Our partners actively seek to meet people. This in itself is nothing new, but today it is more important than ever. Only in this way can a genuine encounter between believers and non-believers take place. The church gets a face where it had none before. The social environment and political decision-makers are usually much more open to this than one might think at first.

Surprisingly often, the encounters in public go into depth. Of course, it sometimes remains with a "hello" and a noncommittal cup of coffee, but again and again people bring up their life issues: existential crises, life decisions or even criticism of the church. It sometimes seems as if pastoral care really comes into its own where the church enters the public sphere.

In order for this encounter to succeed, we Christians should listen to our counterparts, show interest and refrain from immediately telling them about the Gospel. Such an attitude of non-intentionality leads to open conversations and surprises on both sides, which are perceived as enriching.

### 4.2 Don't forget the "Why": Know and live your spiritual roots - but unobtrusively [Daniel].

This thesis is closely related to the first: When I go outside and seek encounters there, on what basis do I actually act? What is my motivation, my guideline, my "why"?

It has been shown that a strong spiritual foundation is helpful for our partners. This does not necessarily mean that the project group has to pray daily or celebrate mass weekly. It is more about everyone agreeing on the spiritual roots that sustain the project.

An example: Many of our partners refer to a specific biblical passage for their activities. They say: With us, people should experience exactly what is revealed in the pericope of Lazarus and his sisters: the transition from death to life and from mourning to joy. Others place a particular icon at the centre of their actions or cultivate the ritual of the spiritual daily review.

The exciting thing is that these spiritual roots are lived very unobtrusively - in such a way that even non-believers can connect to them: In devotions, reflections and simple prayers. Christian spirituality is much more connectable than one might think at first.

Incidentally, such a spiritual imprint does not contradict the openness we called for in the first thesis. On the contrary, it lends depth and authenticity to the conversations and helps to fire the imagination in the mutual encounter.

Some projects are linked to places with a special character: These can be old monasteries from whose walls the spirit of God cannot be expelled. Or places that are characterised by people from the margins of society. In such places, projects can be enormously effective if they pick up on the respective needs and potentials - for example, the attraction of old walls for tourists.

### 4.3 The eye eats with you: Look for quality and professionalism [Peter].

Through the funding requests, we have learned how important it is to have a good basic set of core resources - staff, musicians, technology, decoration, rooms - where this is missing, success becomes troublesome. In this context, one-off project funding can make all the difference - especially when it comes to music equipment, video technology, market stalls or props that can continue to be used after the project ends - and maybe even shared with the neighbouring community.

It is important to have a professionally made and visually appealing presentation with a suitable aesthetic.

This also includes the question of recognisability: How visibly do we display Christian symbols at the stands? Especially in public spaces, many of our partners do without church logos and other signs of recognisability in order to facilitate encounters. The crucifix just presented has no cross, but arouses curiosity with verbs: ask, speak, love, hope, wonder, seek! There is more than one right answer here - but the question should be clarified in the team.

### 4.4 Cooperation Makes Successful: Dare to Participate! [Peter]



About half of our projects are involved in parishes. This leads to complex relationships and tensions: "What most people don't want is change," writes one of our project partners! And Thomas Schlegel from the trial rooms of the Protestant church in Erfurt describes a "stiffened church in a liquid environment".

If things are to run smoothly in the parish, there needs to be good cooperation between full-time and voluntary staff: Ideally, full-time staff are the organisational backbone for the parish. Things that have to continue constantly. Volunteers can take over parts, for example in the communion or confirmation catechesis, but the basic organisation needs a reliable - enforceable - main office.

However, it should also apply that self-exploitation is not a Christian virtue. Experience teaches, however, that care and self-care are often neglected by people in church ministry.

Risk in the interfaces:

- Appointment coordination: During working hours (main office) - Evening weekend: Volunteers
- Danger of main staff holding discussion at too high/abstract/theological level

It makes sense to hand over projects that lay people are passionate about. However, volunteers in traditional church communities are often afraid to do something that might be controversial or "forbidden". If they do cross traditional boundaries - wherever they are - this can lead to conflicts within the community.

This brings us to the question of what volunteers need:

- Trust and resources - little things make a big difference here: Who gets the key to the parish centre? Will the parish hall also be heated if I don't order it beforehand?
- Co-determination also in financial planning. The volunteer of tomorrow will have a say or leave!
- Empowerment: If volunteers are involved in a new project from the beginning, have a say and learn something new, there is a good chance that the activity will continue after the pioneering phase is over!

It sounds self-evident, but it is not: at the Lazarus Project in Stralsund, 90 volunteers accompany people in bereavement situations and old people. Many of them have to hear that they do not have a Christian background - even though they provide an important service in pastoral care, help people in difficult life situations and show a different face of the church. In any case, in this very secularised region, the services are also in demand from many people who do not go to church.

A recipe for success in Stralsund is to use the helpers in a charism-oriented way and to "commit" them initially for only two years.

A project can also only be successful if the respective church leadership goes along with it: The door-opening services of a southern German parish were "so wonderfully un-liturgical" for some, but unbearable for others. There were unnecessary conflicts with the sacristan, the leading pastor was hesitant.

The group let it escalate, threatened the church administration to look for a new home => clear vote from above ends disruptive fire.

To avoid such a thing, people with new ideas should inform all relevant stakeholders and bodies about their plans as early as possible and get them on board. The zap's accompanying research shows that changing the mindset of priests and bishops is a long-term process that requires staying power. The research also shows positive results, indicating that certain groups in the church are already interested in revitalisation and open to new ways of being church.

It all starts with people, with inspired men and women who take the lead. Many of our projects are unspectacular at first glance. However, Prof. Sellmann emphasises that they arise where actors have overcome their frustration with the situation of the church. So they set out to make a difference on the ground with their possibilities.

Many of our partners have had good experiences in cooperations with evangelical, non-Christian or political actors. The resistance is surprisingly low. Thus, the church experiences itself as effective in community with other players.

Many partners face the challenge of staff changes and lack of ownership: some project teams lose the main pillars of their activities during the project and have to change completely. Others are formally distributed over many shoulders, but are de facto only really supported by one or two people. How to deal with this? In any case, for the sake of sustainability, it should be avoided that one charismatic leader dominates everything - and takes the project to its grave in the end.

## 4.5 Use the internet and new media - but do it right! [Pieter]

De Binnenkamer is an online prayer community: people from all over the Netherlands who organise daily morning and evening prayers online. Anyone who wants to join can do so. The community wants to look for a contemporary form of monastic life, which is why it has also set up a 'rule': Pray and love.

During the lockdown two thousand twenty-one, they developed a "monastery in the cloud". A website and an app provide the community with an "online home" It's not a big group, but it doesn't have to be.

One of the most important insights: It's not just about praying together online. That is why they have started to organise retreats and talks. And that's why there are always online discussion groups after the events to exchange ideas. Over time, the desire arose to meet in real life as well, and in the meantime the online prayer community has become a hybrid community.

In Belgium, too, there are several initiatives that make use of the new social media. The Dominican community in Ghent wants to use short films for faith formation. The faith community in Grimbergen wants to make the liturgy in one of the most beautiful baroque churches in the Netherlands virtually accessible.

The important thing with this type of initiative is to think carefully about the exact objectives and the expected interaction with the audience. Therefore, it is important to consult the right experts. In the church, one should appear professional - also on the internet. This includes investing in technology AND design: For a good digital church service, it is not enough to put a film camera in front of the altar!

And another digital example from Germany: **Nine influencers of faith** were coached as a group in the Osnabrück diocese. Their many hundreds of posts on Instagram and lively communication with the (also secular) net community show how necessary it is for the Church to consistently open up to the digital world. Each of these influencers reaches more people than an average Sunday service.

Here is a quote from the final report: *If people are encouraged to show and discuss their faith online - not for the sake of self-expression, but to proclaim the Good News - and if these people are not only tolerated but even supported by the church, then a stone has been laid on the way to overcoming the current church crisis.*

*The recognition of the digital lifeworld of many believers and church workers, but also of those who are disillusioned and searching, must urgently be on the agenda. We are convinced that the turn towards digital faith practice is neither a fleeting trend nor a departure from the Catholic Church's doctrine of faith. Rather, it is a way into the centre of the Christian faith, in which the basic functions of proclamation, charity, community and liturgy are valid and effective.* End quote

Last but not least, don't just focus on youth when using digital media. The channel "**Grandpa and his faith**" shows the value of intergenerational faith communication.

## 4.6 You are not alone: Networks and evaluation give you a tailwind [Pieter].

An important experience, which I hope all of you will also have these days in Hanover, is the feeling of not belonging to the last generation of a dying church. Our networks also serve this purpose. At the first meeting of the German Space partners we heard more than once the sentence: Finally some good news from the church!

Or as a Dutch colleague put it: "It is good to see that we are not the only strange birds!"

That is why we invest a lot of time and resources in making our networks permanent: In the Netherlands there is the "Huis van Dominicus", where Prof. Erik Borgman and his colleagues organise a permanent network for ecclesial innovation and theological resources. In Flanders, this function is taken over by the interdiocesan lay forum, and in the French-speaking world an international network is forming around Prof. Arnaud Join-Lambert's ecclesialab.

In order to make sustainability possible in Germany, we have begun to bring those responsible for the innovation funding pots of the German dioceses into conversation with each other. A first meeting of these "potters", as we call them internally, took place here in Hanover today.

And a note on our own behalf. Even though our programme is currently entering the home stretch, we still have funding opportunities for good ideas: Remember our faces and get in touch with us: Me for projects in Belgium and the Netherlands, and my two comrades-in-arms for Germany.

## 5. what happens next? [Peter]

What's next? With Space for Grace we hope to make a small contribution to a positive image of the church and to light local bonfires of faith. Because we still believe that the church can offer a blueprint for community and a good life to many people, even in this time.

In the first years of the programme we have learned a lot about the importance of innovation in the church context. I would like to mention two points in conclusion:

1. The first important realisation is that while many faith communities are willing and curious to work on their vitality. Unfortunately, it is not easy to develop truly innovative projects. Our response to this is twofold: for example, we first offer applicants with good will and unclear ideas a grant for innovation coaching to structure their own ideas. And we try to create as much exchange as possible in the network meetings to also make use of the swarm intelligence of our many great partners.
2. The target groups of our projects are very different, but mostly "unchurched". Often the concept of "belonging before believing" is practised, which means that people feel invited before they find or even confess their faith. It is about welcoming community for seekers and lonely people who do not know what exactly they believe.

If our talk has whetted your appetite for more, here's a reading tip for the journey back: We have summarised everything important about our space-for-race journey in a book that we would like to give to you all tonight: It is currently available in German and English, a Dutch translation is in the works.

I hope that all of you are among the people who also want to try something new - or, to stay with the opening image - cast the nets on the other side of the boat. Who still want to try with their respective churches. Even if the times are challenging.

Take a look to the right and to the left. A good 500 people have registered for this conference. According to the church statistics from spring, for every person in this room, 1000 others left the Catholic Church in Germany in 2022. We can't and don't want to gloss over that...

But - to return to the image of Jesus with the fishermen: We continue to cast our nets, even if they are certainly not in danger of breaking under the weight of too many fish at the moment... But an angler is happy about every single fish.

So in the next two days we would like to teach you a few techniques for fishers of men. And remember: the first disciples were only a handful. And for every disciple back then at the lake of Tiberias, there are more than 40 fishers of men sitting in the hall today....