

## **Mapping Experiences of Salvation and Good Life in New Faith Communities**

The Lectorate Theology of the CHE<sup>1</sup> focusses on the interpretation and communication of 'salvation' within new faith communities. The goal of the Lectorate is to find new ways for contextualizing the Gospel in our secular society, through investigating theologies and processes of sense-making in emerging faith communities. One of the current research projects is 'Heeft meedoen zin?' ('Does it make sense to participate?'), a practical-theological research in six faith communities in the Netherlands. In each community six carefully selected participants were interviewed. In this project we try to find an answer to the following questions: What do participants of pioneering faith communities experience of (the) good life when they get involved? In what ways is participation meaningful to them? What lessons can we learn from their experiences for mission in the West?

To map the answers of participants, we developed a holistic research model with eight dimensions of meaning. This 'Compass of Meaning' is based on a holistic interpretation of salvation, as well as on modern perspectives in social sciences and healthcare. In this short paper we introduce this model and its backgrounds. In our presentation at the Conference, we will share the first results of our research. We invite you to reflect critically on the validity of our model and to help us interpret the first results.

### **Ongoing quest for meaning**

In western countries such as the Netherlands new faith communities emerge in reaction to the decline and loss of function of traditional churches. Many people that break with institutional religion continue their search for meaning in life and for meaningful connection with others. In this quest some of them get involved in new faith communities that try to communicate the good news in new contextualized ways. What do these participants experience or receive so that they come back and stay involved? How do these initiatives make a meaningful difference in their lives? How can we relate these positive experiences to a Biblical vision on 'salvation'? Is it possible - with regard to Christian mission - to translate these experiences into a more generally accepted view on the 'good life'?

### **Salvation as the restoration of good life**

In our search for a helpful tool to investigate the complex concept of 'meaning', we started with a broad understanding of salvation. For this research, we defined salvation - and 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, her and now and/or in the hereafter'.

In our opinion, the 'good life' has to do with *human wellbeing* and with a *hopeful perspective* in life, in both good and bad circumstances. The Biblical perspective on these two basic elements is expressed and revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It speaks about the perspective of God as Creator of all life, and about salvation as the restoration of life in all its dimensions. In our view, a missionary approach should therefore be both creation-centered and redemption-centered (Bevans 2002, 21-22). It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that all things are reconciled and made new, become healed and restored. Jesus' goal was to bring life in all its fulness (John 10,10) and we are

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<sup>1</sup> The Lectorate Theology of the Christian University of Applied Sciences (CHE) at Ede (The Netherlands), under the leadership and supervision of senior researcher dr. Sake Stoppels. See also: <https://www.che.nl/lectoraten/zingeving-geloofsgemeenschappen>.

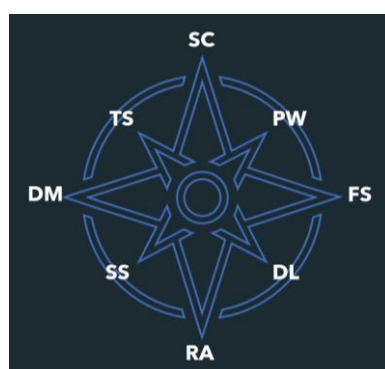
called to follow in His footsteps in our lives and ministries. Salvation therefore must be understood, communicated and embodied in a holistic way.

### Models from social sciences

Starting from these basic convictions we felt free to look for scientific models of human flourishing that could help us to develop a systematic model to map human experiences in missional practices. We selected and analysed four models. We started with the well-known human basic needs-theory of Maslow (1943) and the influential Positive Health Model of Machteld Huber (2014). Together they gave us a holistic perspective on health and human wellbeing. We completed these with two theories about meaning and belonging: the Diamant Model of Carl Leget (2008, used in spiritual care), and the Modalities of Belonging of Joantine Berghuijs (2017), a theory about different ways in which individuals relate to faith and religious meaning. The overlapping elements were clustered into eight aspects of possible meaning that could be experienced by participants in faith communities (both new as already existing). These elements were combined in a new model, the Compass of Meaning.

### Research model: Compass of Meaning

The Compass of Meaning is condensed and explained in two figures: the compass itself and a further developed Restoration of Life-model that is both creation- and redemption-centered.

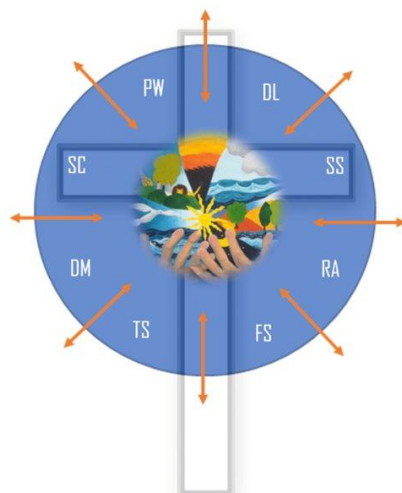


**Figure 1** - Compass of Meaning

The Compass of Meaning consists of eight aspects of possible ‘meaning’ in participating in faith practices (Figure 1; see Table 1 for explanation of the abbreviations). Together they form the eight dimensions of the compass. In our research method – explained in the next alinea - we used this model in several ways, both qualitative and quantitative. A questionnaire (Likert Scale) with 48 propositions (6 per aspect) enabled us to calculate a score for each aspect per respondent and community and to compare the different communities on their meaning for the participants. During the presentation we will show the main results.

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

**Table 1** – Aspects of the Compass of Meaning



**Figure 2** - The Restoration of Life-model

Figure 2 shows the 'Restoration of Life-model'. The model illustrates the interconnectedness of the creation- and the redemption-model, creation and the cross, and the double arrows underline that every human need can be a way to discover and to communicate the good news (God's salvation).

### Research method

How did we interview the selected respondents? We started with a brief social chat to get to know each other a little and hear something of the personal background. This was followed by step 1 (open interview), via an open question: What does this place mean for you? Can you illustrate that with personal examples? In step 2 we asked to illustrate the meaning in a personal image and to tell something about that image. Respondents could also choose one or more pictures from a selection of 32 photocards. In step 3 we gave them eight cards with the names of the eight aspects and the short description of table 1. We asked them to divide these in two groups: with or without meaning, and to explain their choices with personal experiences. We also asked to select a 'top 3' of meaning. We concluded with the question if they wanted to add something they had missed in the interview. After the interview we asked them to fill out the questionnaire (see Research Model).

### Discussion

We hope we have interested you to learn more in our presentation and hear about the first results. We invite you to discuss the following questions with us: Does this 'Compass of Meaning' help in the hermeneutical challenge to understand the impact of (new) faith communities on the lives of people? Is it well-founded in theory and valid in its method? See you in the presentation.

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