



# PIONEERING: STATE OF AFFAIRS

The impact of pioneering on social  
cohesion and religious development



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## Preface

What is the state of affairs of the pioneering spots that have been started by the Protestant Church? This report gives an impression. This state of affairs is not about the numbers. Instead we will focus on what pioneering means concretely in the lives of people. We have done research into social relations and religious development of visitors of pioneering spots. First, we list the pioneering spots which are active now, how many people are involved in them and why spots are sometimes discontinued.

As Protestant Church, we support pioneering spots for two reasons. First of all, we want to share the gospel in a serving way with those who are open to it. Furthermore, we hope that pioneering spots contribute to the renewal of our church as a whole. It is good to see that this is now actually happening: the synod has discussed the issues raised by the memorandum 'Mosaic of church spots'. That was valuable and helps us to get better focus on what church is really about.

The occasion for this state of affairs is the start of a new policy period in 2021. That is why we take stock now. The last state of affairs can be found in 'Fingers Crossed', which dates back to January 2017<sup>1</sup>. That evaluation was mainly quantitative. The evaluation you are reading now is based on solid qualitative research: we spoke to 42 people from 12 pioneering spots. That gives an impression of what pioneering brings about in the lives of people, see chapter 2. I was impressed by the work of the Spirit.

We hope that new spots will develop in the coming years. And we are very happy with all the people who are already committed to a pioneering spot. Will you please continue to pray with me for them? Because the practice of pioneering spot is beautiful and stubborn.

*Rev. René de Reuver,  
General Secretary of  
the Protestant Church  
of the Netherlands*



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<sup>1</sup> 'Fingers Crossed' can be downloaded at [www.lerenpionieren.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Fingers-Crossed-fresh-expressions-in-the-Netherlands.pdf](http://www.lerenpionieren.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Fingers-Crossed-fresh-expressions-in-the-Netherlands.pdf)





*'My idea of  
what is valuable  
has completely  
changed'*

## **'I feel noticed and welcome'**

**Barbara Jikai de Zoete** (53) first met pastor Hinne Wagenaar while she was in a clinic, recovering from a fractured leg. Through him she became involved in Nijkleaster, a monastic pioneering spot in the Frisian village of Jorwerd. At first she was only interested in 'the stones': 'This was my chance to see the church of Geert Mak.' However, she is deeply touched by the morning prayers that are being held there every Wednesday. Her involvement in Nijkleaster marks the beginning of a big change in her life. 'I had a small social network, now there is a large group of people I completely trust.' She was not against the Christian nature of Nijkleaster, but was at first not very taken by it either. Nevertheless, she grew interested. 'To my own surprise I found out that I developed a belief in God. This is something I wrestled with for a long time. In the end I decided to give in.' At Easter 2019 Barbara was baptised.

Through Nijkleaster Barbara developed a new social network. To her it is important that Nijkleaster is a group of people where you can share a lot with others in a safe way. 'We are in conversation. We listen to each other. Nijkleaster has a rule of life: listen each other into being. I have never felt any obstacle to completely be myself. I have never felt judgment. I feel noticed and welcome, without obstacles. I don't need to leave any part of myself behind.'

Through her involvement in Nijkleaster she has gotten more involved with people in her own town Appelscha. She also got involved with the church there and is a volunteer in the local nursery home. 'It has given my life a different direction. I was desperately looking for a steady job, the standard homely bliss.

Now I am no longer reaching for great things. When the sacristan calls because he needs help to move some chairs, I get on my bike. My idea of what is valuable has completely changed. I never thought that I would volunteer in a nursery home. I have completely changed.'

# 1. The facts

We are living in interesting times. Churches are decreasing, yet at the same time new initiatives arise. Shortly after the Protestant Church of the Netherlands was established in 2004, it chose to reach out to groups of people who do not feel connected to the church or to the Christian faith. From that moment on the first pioneering spots emerged.

During the past fifteen years new ways of being church have started on hundreds of places in the Netherlands: Messy Churches, monastic initiatives, communal living, pioneering spots, and more. In this report we focus on pioneering spots.

What is a pioneering spot? A pioneering spot is a new way of being church for people who don't attend a church. There are three basic principles to start a pioneering spot:

- tune in to the context  
(by listening)
- work based on a shared faith  
(starting with the pioneering team)
- sustainable community  
(aimed at the long term)

A pioneering spot can start if there is one of more protestant congregations that are willing to give this pioneering spot space and support. Therefore it is important that there is a sound plan and a team that is willing to work hard.

## 1.1 NUMBER OF PIONEERING SPOTS

Early 2020 there are 147 pioneering spots which have started or are in preparation. Compared to early 2017, when 'Fingers Crossed' was published, that is an increase of 56 new initiatives.

Subsidies for pioneering spots have become more modest after 2013. Many pioneering spots turned out not to grow so much that they would (in the long term) need a full time minister. A more modest subsi-

	Early 2020	Early 2017
In preparation	26	21
Now active pioneering spots	107	70
Discontinued or continuing differently	14	0
Total started pioneering spots	147	91

dy also encourages that right from the start the team works towards a financial sustainable form of being church. Also, in this way more pioneering spots can be supported. From that moment on the Protestant Church also invested more in training and support of pioneering teams.

Where do pioneering spots start? On page 6 you can find a map of the Netherlands with an overview. An interactive overview can also be found on [lerenpionieren.nl/maps](https://lerenpionieren.nl/maps)

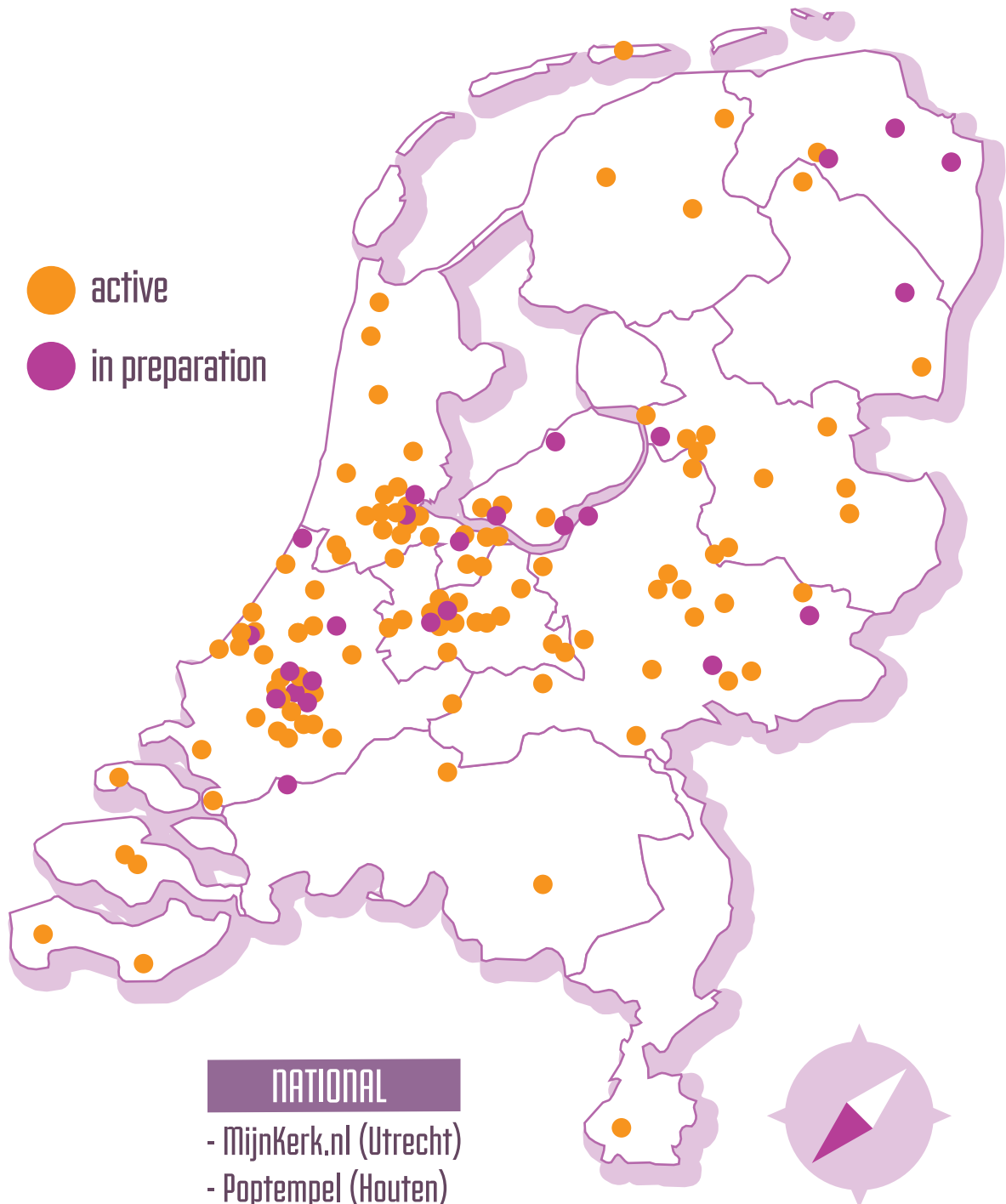
During the past three years we see that pioneering spots not only start in medium and large cities, but also more and more in rural areas. The amount of pioneering spots per region is now roughly equivalent to the population density and number of members of the Protestant Church in that region.

There are less protestant congregations and therefore also less members of the Protestant Church in the south of the Netherlands.

## 1.2 NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The past years almost every pioneering spot has reported how many people are involved in their spot. We differentiate between people who already are involved in church and those who are not. And we differentiate between people who are closely involved in the pioneering spot (monthly or more present at activities) and people who attend occa-

# PROTESTANT PIONEERING IN THE NETHERLANDS



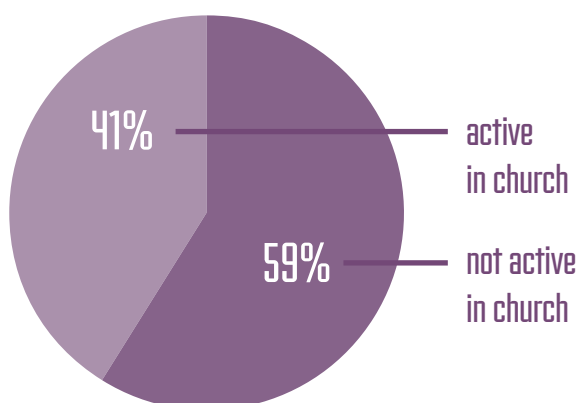
sionally. That yields the following averages for all pioneering spots together:

	Closely involved	Incidental visitors	total
Already active in church	26	49	75
Previously not active in church	26	80	106
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>181</b>

These numbers are based on estimates provided by the spots. It is important to note that these are averages of very diverse numbers per pioneering spot.

There are on average 52 people closely involved in a pioneering spot, of whom about half already was active in a church. This includes the pioneering team and volunteers who are involved in the pioneering spot through the sending church.

Of all people involved, 59% was not active in a church before. This means that pioneering spots succeed in reaching people who did not have an active relation with a church.



If we take an average involvement of 181 people per pioneering spot and 107 active pioneering spots, that means there are now over 19.000 people involved in a pioneering spot. Compared to 2017 pioneering spots have grown slightly on average and a higher percentage of non-churchgoers is involved. This is likely caused by the fact that many pioneering spots are relatively young and still growing. Both in number of participants and in percentage of not church affiliated people the Dutch numbers are comparable to those of the Fresh Expressions of Church in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3 LEARNING FROM DISCONTINUED SPOTS

Of all the pioneering spots that start, some come to the conclusion after a while that they have to stop or continue in another way. This often is a painful process, it is not the result that was hoped for. At the same time it belongs to the experimental nature of pioneering that not every pioneering spot brings the results people hoped for. Because part of experimenting is that not everything succeeds. That is okay, as long as we as a church learn from it.

In 2017 research has been conducted among pioneering spots that were discontinued.

According to the pioneers involved the following circumstances were the main causes to stop:

- The relation to the sending congregation is not good; e.g. there is friction or jealousy which leads to withdrawal of support.
- The team does not succeed in developing sufficient structural relations with the target group. This happened predominantly at pioneering spots which aimed at reaching younger generations.
- The dynamics within the pioneering team are not good; e.g. the pioneer has taken the lead too much and didn't invest in building a team.

<sup>2</sup> See among others: G. Lings, *The Day of Small Things. An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (2017) and H. Leese and A. Orton, *Methodism's Hidden Harvest? The story of the first fifteen years of Methodist involvement in fresh expressions* (2019). Both reports can be downloaded as PDF.

This research into discontinued pioneering spots was part of a broader research project into making pioneering spots more sustainable, learning from social start-ups<sup>3</sup>. This research has found six essential contributing factors for sustainability:

1. Continue to be driven by religious passion
2. Deeply rooted in the neighbourhood or target group
3. Entrepreneurship
4. Suitable income and expenditures
5. Shared leadership in the team
6. Well embedded within the church

These research results have led to incorporating these six factors into the training sessions for pioneering teams and to taking more time in the preparation process of a pioneering spot for developing good relations between the pioneering team and the congregation involved. This research also showed that it often takes 6 to 12 years until a pioneering spot can stand on its own two feet.

The first seven pioneering spots are now mainly supporting themselves financially and organisationally. That was possible through fund raising among people involved and by reducing the hours of the paid pioneer (sometimes by half). New spots now start on a smaller budget, also to make sure there is a greater chance on financial sustainability. What percentage of pioneering spots will eventually be

sustainable is impossible to say now; most pioneering spots are still relatively young.

## 1.4 FITTING ACCOMMODATION

The goal of pioneering spots is that they develop into self-supporting congregations. This will not happen in all cases, but it is a dot on the horizon to work towards. Sometimes however building a new congregation fails. And sometimes it proves to be better to let the pioneering spot continue under the umbrella of the existing congregation. That too is supported wholeheartedly.

Until recently support was offered for 6 years. Research showed, however, that growing into a self-supporting community often takes 6 to 12 years. Therefore it was decided in January 2019 to offer 4 more years of support to pioneering teams. However, the national church in principle offers no more financial support to pioneering spots after 6 years, just support concerning content and the pioneering network.

The gaining of self-sufficiency of the first pioneering spots has shown that it is almost impossible for pioneering spots to become 'normal' congregations. Pioneering spots have a difficult time with the existing possibilities in the church order.<sup>4</sup> The degree of



3 M. Vellekoop, *Pioniersplekken die doorgaan*. Wat de kerk kan leren van de verduurzaming van social startups (2017). Download on [lerenpionieren.nl/kernthemas/bestendigen-en-doorgaan](https://lerenpionieren.nl/kernthemas/bestendigen-en-doorgaan).

4 Protestantse Kerk, *Mozaïek van kerkplekken*. Over verbinding tussen bestaande en nieuwe vormen van kerk-zijn (2019), p. 22. Download on [protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken](https://protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken).



organisation of a regular congregation often is too high. The undesirable alternative can be that pioneering spots feel compelled to form a foundation outside the church. For that reason an effort is being made to establish an extra option for pioneering spots, to offer them fitting accommodation within the Protestant Church. That is the option to become 'kerngemeente': an option that offers both a lesser degree of organisation and sufficient self-support. The synod decided in 2019 that this is agreed; more proposals about the role of the minister in a 'kerngemeente' will follow in 2020.

There will be a moment in time that a pioneering spots officially stops being a pioneering spot. That moment is now at a maximum of 10 years of support.

There are several options for continuation:

- Stop (this is not preferable, but it is possible)
- Continue under the umbrella of an existing congregation
- Continue as regular congregation (difficult, but possible)
- Continue as missionary congregation (connected to a regular congregation)
- Continue as 'kerngemeente' (resolution of the synod of 2019)

In consultation with the pioneering team, the sending church and the national church a decision is made on the best option for the future.

## 1.5 CHURCH RENEWAL

At the start of the pioneering program a secondary goal was a renewal of the church as a whole through the practice of pioneering spots.

Locally many examples of this renewal are visible. Research shows the following influences: the missionary awareness of the existing congregation is strengthened, the type of activities changes, and it sparks new reflection on the identity of the congregation. But renewal and learning often goes hand in hand with friction.<sup>5</sup>

Through the memorandum 'Mozaïek van kerkplekken' the renewal that is caused by pioneering spots has also reached the national level. Many fundamental questions have been brought up, also from the practice of pioneering spots. What is church? Is celebrating Communion an indispensable part of being church? Does every form of church need worship? Are elders and deacons required? What to do when a group of volunteers start a Messy Church and there is a request to baptise a child, are these volunteers allowed to baptise or is it required that an ordained minister does that? This kind of questions brings our church back to its core.

## 1.6 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The lessons learned from pioneering now reach further than just the Netherlands. During the past years many groups of church leaders from European countries and New Zealand came on a working visit, to learn from the approach and experiences of the Protestant Church. In June 2019 there was a European conference on this subject in the Netherlands. We ourselves learned a lot from the Fresh expressions of church in the United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

Internationally there are two matters that evoke a lot of interest. Firstly it turns out that the process and lessons learned from the memorandum 'Mozaïek van kerkplekken' encourage and inspire. It is considered courageous that the Protestant Church openly discusses bottlenecks and is prepared to make adjustments in being church. There is also appreciation for the way the learning community for pioneering teams is organised, with among others training sessions, a website and local pioneering coaches. What is also considered special is that the focus of the training sessions is on the teams and that there is not always a need for an ordained minister to be part of the team. Besides enthusiasm from abroad, there are also sharp questions, e.g. into the sustainability of pioneering spots and on how innovative a specific pioneering spot really is.

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5 Protestantse Kerk, *Over speelruimte en spanning: Praktijkonderzoek naar de relatie tussen bestaande en nieuwe kerkplekken* (2018). Download on [protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken](http://protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken).

6 For more information [freshexpressions.org.uk](http://freshexpressions.org.uk).

## 1.7 COOPERATION

Several partner organisation cooperate to make the start and guidance of pioneering spots possible. These partner organisations meet five times a year at the National Team Pioneering. At this moment the following partner organisations are present at these meetings: Op Goed Gerucht, Protestant Congregation The Hague, Protestant Church Amsterdam, IZB, Vereniging van Vrijzinnige Protestanten, Evangelisch Werkverband, Intercultural Church Plants and Evangelie & Moslims. In addition to this also the Christian Reformed Churches (CGK) participate in the learning community of pioneering.

Besides the cooperation partners who are part of the National Team Pioneering there are partners involved who support financially or who collaborate in a less intensive way.

These are for example the Maatschappij van Welstand, the Commissie Steunverlening, the Hemmensch Zendingstichting, the Protestant Theological University (PThU) and the Christian University of Applied Sciences Ede (CHE).



*"Religion  
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life for me  
here"*

## 'Religion has come to life for me here'

**Mahshal Safi (18)** 'When I first came here I felt immediately that it's good to be here, peaceful and safe. I felt at home immediately. I am amazed by the amount of help that I get here from everybody. Our pastor accompanied me to the court and talked to the government, as a kind of lawyer. Mieke took me into her home when I had no place to live. She helps me with practicalities, but has also become a real friend.

In Afghanistan I was a Muslim. After about a year in the Netherlands I was baptised a Christian. Why? I was looking for a safe place, filled with love. I didn't know that, not in my own country either. I was also searching for who God really is. When I was Muslim, God didn't mean anything to me. I only saw people doing bad things to each other, people who don't see and know God. Here I really got to know God.

I have a lot to worry about, so I always pray, I feel rest then. God will not give me a residence permit, but He says: I give you other things. That is what I believe and I trust He will take care of me.'

**Mieke Kaspers (84)**: 'I was very lonely before I came here. That has turned around completely now. The pioneering spot has really enriched my life. I have met many new people and formed new friendships. I can be myself here. But more importantly: religion has come to life for me here. I come from a traditional church and religion always staid superficial there. The deepening I was looking for I have found here.

I am now a member of two bible circles and cannot get enough of religion. I have grown up with the Bible and religion has never been completely away, but it does need nourishing. Through ICF I received a present while I was 80 years old, it's overwhelming.'



## 2. The effects on people of pioneering

In preparation of this report there was a research conducted in 2019 among people who are actively involved in a pioneering spot. In total 42 people were interviewed from 12 different places. What is the effect of pioneering spots on the lives of people? That is what we wanted to get an idea of. We looked specifically at the influence of the pioneering spot on the religious development and the social life of people.

In this chapter you can find a summary of this research. A more comprehensive report, including an account of the methodology used, can be found on [lerenpionieren.nl](https://lerenpionieren.nl).<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Because we wanted to get an impression of the impact of pioneering on the lives of people, we have limited this research to pioneering spots which exist for at least three years. We have randomly chosen these 12 pioneering spots:

- Huis voor de ziel, Amsterdam
- Taizé, Amsterdam
- Westerwijk, Amsterdam
- De Sleutel, Apeldoorn
- Taste, Delft
- Leven in Laak, Den Haag

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<sup>7</sup> Onderzoeksverslag Impact Pionieren. Sociale verbondenheid en geloofsontwikkeling bij deelnemers aan pioniersplekken. Sake Stoppels, February 2020. Download on [lerenpionieren.nl/impactonderzoek](https://lerenpionieren.nl/impactonderzoek).



- Spoorzoeken, Doetinchem
- International Christian Fellowship (ICF) Gouda
- PioWij, 's-Graveland
- Nijkleaster, Jorwerd
- International Christian Fellowship (ICF) Veenendaal
- Het Plein, Zwolle

Per pioneering spot 3 to 5 participants were interviewed. We have spoken to a total of 42 people. The selection of the interviewees was made by the spots themselves. That means that we cannot claim the result to be representative. In this report you find quotes of people who participated in this research. 4 of the people interviewed are portrayed more elaborate.

Central to this research are the interviews with the participants. Besides these we have also held interviews with the leaders of the 12 pioneering spots. We have also looked at the yearly reports of these pioneering spots and each researcher participated in an activity of the chosen pioneering spots.

## 2.2 ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

The interviewed participants are very diverse. Within specific pioneering spots we see many common characteristics between participants, but between the pioneering spots there are big differences. Each pioneering spot attracts its own kind of people.

Remarkable is that woman form the vast majority: 31 women were interviewed and only 11 men. Many of the respondents (53%) were older than 50, but younger people are certainly reached. 13% of the respondents is younger than 30. Per pioneering spot there often is a dominant age group. We see young people mainly at those places that specifically aim at reaching a younger audience, we see them less at the other spots.

Of the 42 respondents 17 say that they live with a partner (married or living together). Three of them live in another way of shared living (community, house mates). This means that more than half is single: partly because of a divorce, some because of the death of their partner.

At most seven respondents have no Christian or church background at all. Three of them have a Muslim background. The biography of 35 participants is coloured by a Christian upbringing. Sometimes there was a thorough church socialisation, but more often this was more diffuse. Seven people said they deliberately broke with their church/tradition. That happened in most cases long before they came into contact with the pioneering spot. Eight respondents are also in contact with another congregation at this time. This means that the vast majority of the respondents have no other church contacts besides the pioneering spot.

The way they came into contact with the pioneering spot varies greatly. Most of them met through personal contacts. Meeting digitally is only scarcely mentioned; only four of the respondents have found the pioneering spot through the internet.

## 2.3 VULNERABILITY

The interviews showed that at least 27 respondents have had to deal with personal crisis or fundamental turning points in their lives. The questions were not aimed at this, but in the conversations the vulnerability and hurt of the participants sometimes were clearly expressed: health problems, burn out or accidents (6x), psychological problems (5x), death of a partner (4x), a move (4x), being a refugee (4x), losing work due to retirement or dismissal (2x). For the participants these were turning points in their lives.

For a majority of the participants these turning points played a role in coming into contact with the pioneering spot. Pioneering spots function as safety net for people who are in some way socially or psychologically isolated.

## 2.4 SOCIAL IMPACT

What are the words used when people think of their pioneering spot? This wordcloud gives an impression.

Words that jump out are: 'family' (8x), 'home' (5x), 'friends' (4x), 'rest' (4x), and 'safe' (3x). Only a minority states that the spot is not very important ('more important for daughter', 'of average importance', 'one of my networks'), for the vast majority of the people the pioneering spot really is of high, sometimes supreme importance.

*'After the death of my husband there was no other way I could think of to continue than the church.'*

*'When I arrive, I hear 'Hi aunt, good to see you' - and my heart immediately opens. Even when I stay only for a short while, I always leave with peace in my heart.'*

*'This is of more use for me than the mental welfare services. This a group of people I belong to, a purpose too, because I help too. And I meet the pioneer every fortnight.'*



Sometimes being connected to a pioneering spot has surprising results:

*'I also mention my participation in the pioneering team on my CV now because it's an important part of my life. They asked about it in a job interview, they thought it was really cool that I did this. Church language evokes resistance, words like 'spirituality' are liked though.'*

When people are asked how they would qualify their relation to the pioneering spot, all responses are positive. Nine respondents praise in different words the openness of the spot ('easily accessible', 'space', 'impartial'). Five speak about 'home'. Three respondents are happy that it is place where they can really be themselves: 'No masks'.

*'I can recharge my heart here. For a long time I lived evasively because I avoided all social interactions. That helped to feel less exhausted. But I became very lonely. And I felt worthless. I really had the feeling that if I'd die now, very few people would notice a difference in their lives. I didn't like that feeling. So I went looking for a kind of meaningfulness, a place to go to. Then I found this place.'*

Most interactions between the participants take place within the pioneering spot. In some cases people also meet each other outside the spot. Five people speak of friendships formed with other participants. Several do things together (visits, theatre, movies, soccer games). Opposed to this are five respondents who more or less deliberately choose to limit their contacts to the pioneering spot.

For the vast majority of the respondents the pioneering spot is an important social meeting place. Almost without exceptions the participants have met new people. Seven respondents answered that this means that their world has expanded ('getting to know other environments', 'learned to live with other people').

*'The spot has done very much for my social life, more than other churches in which I have been active. Because there the focus was mostly on worship, not much else. Now, because we meet for two hours besides the service and eat together, we know a lot more about each other. Therefore we can help each other better.'*

## 2.5 RECOGNISABLE CHRISTIAN

How recognisable are pioneering spots as places of Christian faith? It turns out that the pioneering spots involved in this research are very diverse in this regard. Spots such as ICF Gouda and ICF Veenendaal present themselves expressly as churches. The Christian identity of these places is undeniable. But there also are spots which - looking at their content - are less recognisably Christian, such as the meal project PioWij in 's Graveland and the activities for children from De Sleutel in Apeldoorn. Of the people we spoke to 35 said that they were aware of the Christian roots or character of the pioneering spot. Only seven didn't really know; two of them said they wouldn't have made contact if they had known, the other five didn't mind one way or the other:

*'That played no role at all. I didn't believe in God. It was all fine to me. I just wanted to see the church. I have always been interested in church buildings. This was my chance to see the church of Geert Mak. I was just interested in 'the stones.'*

For all respondents - now that they are involved in the spot - the role of the Christian faith in the pioneering spot is clear. Most speak of it in an appreciative way.

*'I then said: I want to go to a real church, a real church building, a real story, no sugar coating, something nice for atheists, but the true story, like: what is it about?'*

This clarity obviously does not mean that all of the 12 spots are the same in this regard. There are considerable difference, but that doesn't have to surprise us in light of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. What stands out is that, without asking for it, people often speak about the open identity of the spots. No less than 17 people speak on one way or the other about their appreciation for the open way in which religion plays a role in the spots. This is expressed with words such as 'tolerance', 'honest', 'people don't stand above you', and 'searching faith'.

*'You are not required to believe in God to participate, but especially H. is very watchful for things that might not belong to Christianity. Besides this, the form is very recognisable. The question of faith is always central. In every activity. How you handle that, how you answer it for yourself, is always okay. You can't do wrong. It is safe there. There is no-one who watches over you to see if you are doing things right.'*

*'Religion is triggered in a subtle way. For instance by the stories that are being read. Everyone can have their own interpretation. There is openness. Religion has become more important to me and that feels good.'*

## 2.6 RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

Most of the people we spoke to have some sort of Christian background. Often this Christian socialisation is a long time ago and sometimes also diffuse. A minority has grown up entirely outside of Christian traditions; among them three people with a Muslim background. One of them is still Muslim, the other two have become Christian. For both of them that happened miraculously while they were in the Netherlands without a residency permit or a place to live:

*'Here I have met many Christians. They spoke about the things they experienced with God, that God showed himself to them in dreams. But I couldn't trust on that: how is it possible that God does these things in your dream? I asked the church to pray for me, so that I too can see God. Then God came to me in a dream. And I understood everything and I have faith. That changed everything for me.'*

Someone without a Christian background has looked into Buddhism, but discovered Christianity through the pioneering spot. She was baptised at Easter (2019):

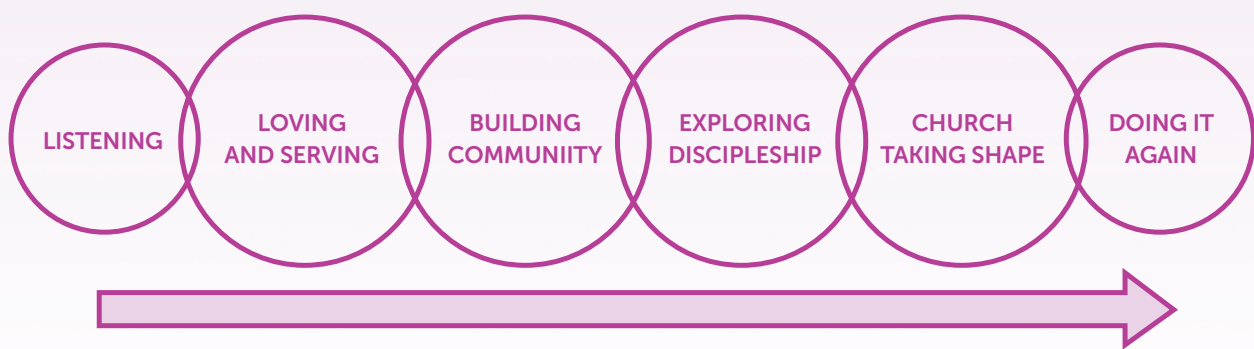
*'To my own surprise I found out that I developed a belief in God. This is something I wrestled with for a long time. In the end I decided to give in. It has given my life a different direction. I was desperately looking for a steady job, the standard homely bliss. Pastor R. has guided me to my baptism. I have revised my life.'*

Of the 35 participants with a Christian background - however diffuse sometimes - 18 say that their faith has changed because of their involvement with the pioneering spot. They use different words for it: more conscious (4x), more personal (2x), deepened (2x), enriched (1x), grown (1x), closer to God (1x), and more human (1x). An older man from a Christian background decided to be confirmed after all. A young woman described her development this way:

*'I call myself religious now and that was not the case five years ago. Now I say that I believe, but for a long time I found it hard to say that. Religion gives me something to hold on to and through religion I live my life more consciously.'*

The prevailing view is that the deepening and growth of the personal faith of people is also caused by the interactive methods used, which invite participants to actively engage in questions about religion and





sense making. Some of them also point out the contrast to normal congregations:

*'At Nijkleaster you know that things have a reason. I sometimes say to my husband: when I go there, I know I have to pay attention to the Bible reading because I have to do something with it later. Whereas when I go to H's congregation I don't have to do anything, it all is one-way traffic.'*

*'Others ask questions which are not asked in other churches. By and large we all believe the same in the church. Here you are challenged to say: what do you yourself think?'*

The pioneering spots are regularly asked to provide numbers about sacraments and other churchly rituals. In these 12 spots one person younger than 12 was baptised in the past few years. There were 14 baptisms of people older than 12. Two people were confirmed and in four places they celebrate Communion. The real numbers are probably higher because we did not have reports of all the spots. Furthermore, not all pioneering spots baptise or provide the possibility to be confirmed at their spot because that sometimes happens in the protestant congregations they feel connected to. Of the 14 baptisms to people above the age of 12, 10 were at ICF Veenendaal. Most of the people baptised came from a Muslim background.

## 2.7 THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

The world of pioneers is just as multicoloured as the Protestant Church itself. There is a large theological diversity. This is among others visible in the way they are aimed at conversion of non-Christians. At some places this is the spearhead of the spot, while other places have almost an allergy against conversion. When we look at the stages of the pioneering journey (see diagram above), we notice that not all pioneering spots invest in equal measures in 'exploring discipleship' and 'church taking shape'. Most spots are not strongly aimed at converting people. We see a combination of clearly presenting the Christian tradition and offering space for people to make their own choices.

Within this large diversity of theological convictions we see at the same time a shared basic principle, which is clarity about the identity of the spot. There is no inclination to gloss over their Christian identity or to disguise that in any way.

Theology probably plays a role against the background of this relaxed position. Where one believes that people will be lost without Christ, they will be more motivated to convince non-believers or people of other religions to choose for Jesus Christ than those who have a 'broader' view on religion. In the interviews the thought of 'being lost' is in fact not mentioned. This possibly plays a role for some of the pioneers, but it is not mentioned in the interviews. Pioneers are enthusiastic about their faith, are not afraid to talk about it, but let others free to choose.

8 The Dutch pioneering journey is an adapted version taken from Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context. An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (2012), p. 208. This journey is the starting point for the training sessions for pioneers. See [lerenpionieren.nl](http://lerenpionieren.nl) for more information about this.

## 2.8 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

Several pioneers note that people will attend activities, but will not commit easily. That doesn't have to surprise us, as this is common social phenomenon. At the same time this produces tension because an important goal of pioneering is 'building lasting community'. The idea is that pioneers search for forms of community that offer a sense of closeness and continuity. They are succeeding in this according to the stories of the people we interviewed. Some communities are aimed at single visits and use the strength of that (e.g. Nijkleaster and Spoorzoeken). Other pioneering spots know that a fast flow of participants is intrinsic to their target audience (e.g. Leven in Laak and Taizé Amsterdam). Building lasting communities turns out to be not easy in a time when loneliness is a growing social problem. Something else is important here too. We notice that many pioneering spots attract people who are vulnerable. They simply don't always have the ability or space to work actively at building a community.

- The theological diversity of the pioneering spot is large. That can be seen for example in the extent to which they are aimed at bringing the gospel to non-Christians. If a pioneering spot doesn't believe in the last stages of the pioneering journey, it would be good to discuss this. If desired, more support can be given to reach these last stages of the pioneering journey, in a way that is fitting for that spot.
- The Christian profile usually is clearly visible at the pioneering spot, but at the same time they think it's important for the participants to feel freedom and room to choose their own way.

## 2.9 CONCLUSIONS

The central question of this research was: what impact do pioneering spots have on social cohesion and the religious development of those involved.

The conclusions are:

- This research shows that pioneering spots are able to reach people who are not or not anymore in contact with a 'regular' church. Therefore they meet the goal of reaching non-practising members of the church and churchless people.
- Most of the participants in this research have had something to do with a church, no matter how small, at some point in their biography. Apparently it is more difficult to attract people who have never had a relation to the Christian tradition; the exception on this rule is formed by participants with a Muslim background.
- The pioneering spots mean a lot to the people who were interviewed, both for their sense of social belonging as for their religious development. There really is religious development and new and deeper relations are formed.



*"Through Taste  
I have come  
to faith"*

## 'Taste has become my home'

**Anja de Jong** (60) is involved in pioneering spot Taste in Delft. She is single, has two children from her first marriage and a foster son. She has long taken care of her handicapped sister, who died in 2014. She has cancer.

'Early October 2015 I moved from Schiedam to Delft. I walked by Taste every day when I walked my dog. One day someone addressed me: 'We are open on Friday, you are welcome for a cup of coffee and a chat.' It intrigued me. At first I felt a barrier, but after a few weeks I crossed it. It immediately felt like a warm bath and fortunately they didn't start talking about religion right away.

I have moved house many times in my life and never really felt at home anywhere. I have two sons, but how can I give them a home if I have never known one myself? I can now say: I feel happy and grateful when Taste opens because Taste has become my home. It is also my motive to stay alive.

I didn't really want to celebrate my sixtieth birthday because of what cancer is doing to me, physically and mentally. But my friends, who also visit Taste, said: 'Come on, Anja, you turn 60 only once and if you are not here anymore next year, we at least have a nice memory.' I thought that was a good reason to celebrate.

Because I only have a tiny house, I could rent some space in Taste. I have invited twenty people, well, then you are blessed. Although it is a pity that those relations have to come to me so late in life, because of my illness I don't have ten years left. But this is God's blessing.

I didn't know Taste was Christian. If I had known, I wouldn't have entered. That is caused by my past; as a child religion was forced onto me.

Through Taste I have come to faith, in my own way. I read from the Bible every day, which I never did before. I have also learned that I am allowed to wobble and to be angry when bad things happen. In the past I felt ashamed to do that.'





### 3. Towards a mosaic of church spots

Within the Protestant Church many pioneering spots have developed during the past years. And besides these there are also many Messy Churches, monastic initiatives, living communities and more. These new communities give rise to questions about being church. What actually is a church? Does it need elders and deacons? How many members should there be? And what do we do when a group of volunteers starts a Messy Church and they are asked to baptise a child? Are the volunteers allowed to do that or is that the task of an ordained minister?

As the years went by, more and more pioneering spots wanted more self-sufficiency. That turned out to be difficult. For example, to become a 'normal'

congregation it is required to have seven ministers (pastor, elders, deacons) and three governing bodies (church council, board of church stewards and board of deacons). It is also required to have a pastor who is university educated and paid for at least 0.33 FTE. These and other requirement from the church order cannot be met or don't fit for pioneering spot. How do we deal with that?

#### 3.1 RESEARCH INTO QUESTIONS

Some of the pioneering spots will grow into lasting additions to the existing ways of being church. These newcomers in the existing church order evoke ques-

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9 Research report: [lerenpionieren.nl/blogs-en-columns/speelruimte-en-spanning](https://lerenpionieren.nl/blogs-en-columns/speelruimte-en-spanning)



tions. These have been researched in 2018.<sup>9</sup> Some important conclusions are:

- Fruitful connections between new and existing churches is not a matter of course. It takes an effort to let that work and be fruitful.
- Many new communities need equality and being awarded their own space within the church as a whole to function well.
- Church ministries are viewed differently and demand renewal, but they are of essential importance if the new communities are to be accepted as full members of the church.

This research and many conversations led to the memorandum 'Mozaïek van kerkplekken'.<sup>10</sup> It answers the question to the minimum requirements to be a self-sufficient congregation in the Protestant Church. This memorandum has been discussed in the general synod in April and June 2019. The synod agreed to the proposals, there just will be more studies conducted concerning the church ministries. The framework that is now constructed will be in place for five years and will then be evaluated.

### 3.2 TEN ESSENTIALS TO BEING CHURCH

Based on these decisions pioneering spots can be accepted as extraordinary congregations, which are called 'kerngemeentes'. To become a 'kerngemeente' a pioneering spot needs to meet the following ten essentials to being church.

A 'kerngemeente' is a group of people:

1. who want to live through the Spirit from God's grace in Jesus Christ,
2. who gather regularly in public around Word and sacraments,
3. who want to form a sustainable congregation together,

4. and want to commit to a missionary and diaconal ministry for the world, starting in their own context,
5. comprising of at least ten adult members, who are committed to the church spot,
6. that take responsibility for their own policy and finances,
7. that is governed by a council, consisting of at least three confirmed members of the Protestant Church, who are also ministers,
8. with at least one minister within that council, who is ordained to administer Word and sacraments,
9. in connection with the church at large, specifically with the Protestant Church,
10. and cooperates to be supervised and to the handling of complaints and conflicts.

In 2020 the first applications will be made by new church spots to become a 'kerngemeente'.

The general synod has appointed a committee for further study of ministries in a 'Mozaïek van kerkplekken'. They will among other things study the proposal in the memorandum 'Mozaïek van kerkplekken' to differentiate within the ministry of pastor. That would make it possible for different kinds of communities to choose a kind of minister that fits them. The committee will present their proposals in the general synod of November 2020.

### 3.3 COLOURFUL

Moved by the desire to bring the gospel to more people, a large diversity of ways of being church is necessary. These new forms of being church form a mosaic, with stones in different shapes, dimensions and colours. Seen from a distance, they form a colourful image of Christ's love for people. We hope that pioneering spots contribute to let people experience God's love in their lives, in word and in deed.

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<sup>10</sup> Protestant Church, *Mozaïek van kerkplekken. Over verbinding tussen bestaande en nieuwe vormen van kerk-zijn* (2019), p. 22. Download on: [protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken](http://protestantsekerk.nl/kerkplekken).



*'The ground  
I stand on now  
is much  
firmer'*

## **'As if I came home'**

**Henk Kortekaas** (54) is involved in pioneering spot Westerwijk in Amsterdam. He is a garbage collector at Schiphol, single and father to two daughters. He found himself in the middle of a crisis when he first got to know Westerwijk. 'I was out of a job and had just had an accident with my moped, which had resulted in two broken arms. I was completely dependent on others. Six people from Westerwijk helped me at home. That was fantastic. My daughters and friends also helped, but most of the time the people from Westerwijk were there, I didn't even have to ask them.

I discovered God when I was fifty years old. One of my daughters had done Alpha and was very impressed by it. Then I also attended Alpha and came to faith. Because I wanted to know more about religion and the Bible I went to a course at Westerwijk. After that I felt I was ready to be baptised there. It was very beautiful: the church was completely filled, my children, mother, and friends were all there. I was completely submerged in the water; it was very special.

That baptism meant a big change for me. I felt as if I was renewed from the inside, spiritually cleansed, clean. It also started some changes in my personal life. I decluttered my house. Everything changed for the better, I even found a new job. The ground I stand on now is, thanks to Westerwijk, a lot firmer. Religion is such an enrichment to my life. I involve Jesus in everything that is important to me. I try to think how He would act in a that situation and mostly I can come up with an answer, through reading the Bible stories. I am very grateful for having such an advisor now. And I'm continuing to learn new things, such as praying before meals. Very beautiful, a moment of rest. That rest was also what I felt when I returned to Westerwijk after the summer break: it was as if I came home.'



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