

THE DIACONAL CITY OF ROSENDAAL

The diaconal appearance of the combined parishes at Roosendaal

In November 2009 at Roosendaal in Western-Brabant, The Netherlands, deacon Peter Hoefnagels, father Jan van den Elxen (Mill Hill) and some others initiated The Diaconal City. They brought together the virtues of the three parishes in a town of 77,000 inhabitants. Together with active parishioners they wanted to put fresh vigour into the diaconal mission of the local Church.

To that purpose the group took a threefold aim:

- They went looking for people “whose lives threatened to become more and more needy” owing to lack of contacts or the want of means of contact.
- Apart from that they met each month to pray and to have a meal together. In this way they shared experiences with one another and with God. This evening meeting takes place each third Thursday of the month.
- Finally they wanted to give concrete form to the Social Doctrine of the Church.

Three focal ideas were taken as starting points: **prayer – friendship – community**. These words were chosen after a number of visits to the Sant’Egidiocommunity at Antwerp. (62 km. south of Roosendaal). The community at Antwerp has been working for the poor in the city for many years. The initial group at Roosendaal was faced with the challenge to transfer the experiences in the large city of Antwerp to Roosendaal, a town with barely 77,000 inhabitants.

At the moment The Diaconal City carries out the following activities with about 60 volunteers:

Buddies for seniors

Owing to its contacts with social workers they got hold of addresses of elderly people with few social contacts. They are visited every fortnight by a regular buddy. They are also invited to come to a communal lunch, a performance and the monthly evening meeting. Apart from their own buddy about 25 elderly people were regularly visited for four years by a student of a secondary school within the frame of social probation.

Children – Home of games and learning – Homework assistance – Language support

From August 2013 onwards the initial group started with a reception centre for children from Roosendaal-West, a low rent area. Most children have a migration background. They are welcomed during their free Wednesday-afternoon in the district-hall for a program of games, sport and education. At the start approx. 15 children came by regularly, but now the group receives over 30 children.

During the contacts with the mothers it appeared that homework assistance was necessary. Children of foreign parents are considerably behind in several ways which is problematic at the transition to secondary education.

Therefore in November 2015 The Diaconal City started offering homework assistance and extra lessons for children from families with low income. Ways of language support are being experimented for the initial years of primary education.

These initiatives have drawn the attention of local professional organisations in the educational and sport sphere. Primary schools and the municipality are interested and now cooperate in consolidating this support for the children.

Network Combatting Poverty Roosendaal

In 2014 The Diaconal City took up coordinating the Network Combatting Poverty Roosendaal. Three times a year it gathers all smaller and larger organisations which are active in the field of poverty to exchange information and to stimulate cooperation. The local authorities also take part in this consultation.

Diaconal St. Antony-prize

On 1st June 2014 we received the diaconal St. Antony-prize from bishop Mgr. J. Liessen. The Diaconal City was defined as a project that shows "how much the religious community is connected with society in championing people in need who feel deficiencies brought home to them." A jury led by deacon Wim Tobé chose this project and it is to be hoped for that these activities can take up a lasting position in Church and society.

A different Christmas

After having made contacts with Sant'Egidio movement we were advised to organise a meal on the First Day of Christmas for the lonely. In December 2015 via auxiliary and pastoral assistants 25 people were invited for a sociable gathering on the First Day of Christmas in the afternoon. We found 30 volunteers willing to share this Christmas afternoon with them. They cooked and served dinner and were hosts and hostesses at table. For each one invited there was such a host or hostess. In December 2016 this activity was organised again successfully. It appeals to many people to place themselves "voluntarily" at the disposal of people with no or hardly any social contacts.

Contacts with Syrian Christians

It is a new initiative to make contacts with Syrian Christians and to invite them for prayer and mutual encounters. The first contacts have been made in March of this year.

The Diaconal City and Sant'Egidio

From the start the Sant'Egidio spirituality played a role in the background. The combination of prayer and meeting an elderly or a child is much more than a christian mission. Being prepared to become friends of an elderly or a child appears to be educative to oneself as a believer. Especially in a society where mutual solidarity in relations and in the local district is considerably declining a small counter-movement develops which is acknowledged within the parishes and appeals to people.

Based on these experiences The Diaconal City will completely merge into the Sant'Egidio community of Roosendaal by September 2017.

Steering committee of The Diaconal City: Cas van Beek, Monique van Irsel, Geerten Kok, Hans van Nispen, Mieke Stroop, Henk van der Westen

Deacon Peter Hoefnagels

Delegate for Caritas in the Diocese of Breda: Wim Tobé