

Facing Decline, Finding Hope – Paper Call Conference Transsylvania June 8-15th 2023

For many Christians, the reality of a declining church in Western-Europe causes great concern. Most congregations – regardless of denomination, size or location – worry about their future, and are experiencing constant frustration, because the way they worked for decades or even centuries seems not to appeal to people anymore. In seeking solutions, the first attempts are usually multiplying the invested effort with the hope that it will lead to the previously seen results. As the desired results doesn't come, and copying ideas from others does not work either, pastors and church members are truly struggling to keep courage in their situation.

Jeffrey D. Jones in his book **Facing Decline, Finding Hope** suggests, that for breaking this vicious circle first of all church-leaders must face the difficult reality of decline and possible disbanding of their church-communities.

“This is a time in which institutions, old structures, old ways will need to die. This is a time in which we need to be highly attentive to the new thing God is doing in our midst. This is a time in which we need to face the difficult, often painful reality that new life comes only when we die to the old life. Too many renewal efforts seek to avoid this practical and theological reality, and because they do so, they are unable to address the true nature of our situation and offer a solid hope for the future. We need to be more concerned about resurrection than renewal.” (Jeffrey D. Jones, Facing Decline Finding Hope, 2015 London, 34)

This includes giving up not just the illusion that past can be brought back, but also the idea that the only goal of church is to bring in more people to the church. It means that the present division of responsibilities must be restructured, so that laity can take part in the “shared ministry”. It changes the goal the church goes for – from maintaining the institution, filling up all the committees and keeping the church run – to searching for answer to the new basic question: “What is God up to?”

“In the church today there is a compelling need to be at least a little bit subversive, a desperate need to give up control. There is, in other words, a need for the Holy Spirit.” (Ibid., 118)

The struggle of facing and accepting the reality is a spiritual journey that helps the church become more what God created it to be. Through this spiritual growth God calls the church to a new future – beyond the decline.

Do you recognize these challenge in your ministry?

We kindly invite you to contribute to our conference in presenting a paper in which you share with us how you deal with this challenge of facing decline and finding hope. It can be either a more theological and theoretical presentation, of a reflection on your ministry, the situation of the church or your personal spirituality.

There will be 30-45 minutes available for each paper, 15 minutes max. presenting and 15-30 minutes dialogue, depending on the number of papers presented.

If you want to contribute, please sent a abstract of 200-250 words to Wim de Jong, wim.dejong@hetnet.nl before May 1 along with your personal information.

Some aspects to reconsider:

- Short description of your community and your place/role in this community
- In what features in your community do you experience the decline of the church?
- What are your worries for the future? Where do you feel your own disappointment, powerlessness?
- Where do you experience a way forward for the church beyond decline? Do you recognise 'resurrection' in that, guidance by the Spirit?
- What are your sources of hope?
- What kind of literature helps you most?