The Person and the Challenges Volume 15 (2025) Number 2, pp. 65–84
ISSN 2083-8018 (print) • ISSN 2391-6559 (online)
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Ausra Karaliute Cane
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3964-8539

The Open University, United Kingdom
https://ror.org/05mzfcs16

Towards pastoral application of contemporary art spaces: Chapel of Disclosure (Belgium) facilitators' views

https://doi.org/10.15633/pch.15204

Abstract

The Catholic Chapel of Disclosure is a contemporary art space established in 2011, responding to the decline of religious practices in Catholic schools in Belgium. The Chapel's pastoral process is structured and organized. It offers perspectives on how pastoral activities may be implemented in other contemporary art spaces and ways to engage with nonbelievers and individuals who have left the Church. Between 2016 and 2022, in-depth interviews with the Chapel's creators and facilitators examined the process, the significance of "emptiness" and silence, and the range of emotions experienced by participants. The study identified three main elements that contributed to the pastoral approach: participants' openness to transcendence, lack of active indoctrination during facilitation, and importance of shared communal faith in relating participants' life stories to Biblical narratives.

Keywords

contemporary art, pastoral applications, process facilitation, pre-evangelisation, silence

1. Introduction

In recent decades, numerous artistic initiatives have focused on constructing, renovating, and repurposing derelict chapels, including Catholic ones, across the Western world. These re-envisioned or repurposed chapels serve various functions, such as liturgical events, youth gatherings, and both religious and secular educational activities, often acting as spiritual spaces without explicit religious associations or being presented as art installations. While the majority of these chapels do not pursue specific religious objectives, the Chapel of Disclosure in Belgium stands apart in its mission and vision. This Chapel has been transformed into a contemporary art space with the intention of providing an inviting environment where individuals can reconnect with a nurturing divine presence. The primary visitors are typically non-believers or individuals who do not attend church services regularly, though some may identify as Catholic or be open to experiences of transcendence. The Chapel's core objective is to foster a deliberately minimalistic and introspective atmosphere that encourages spiritual harmony, personal transformation, and renewed engagement with the divine. It represents a tangible "hermeneutical space," inspiring new interpretations and dialogue by recontextualizing its historical architecture through the interplay of external light and interior silence.[1] These experiences are guided by skilled facilitators. The purpose of this study was to gather the perspectives of these facilitators concerning the Chapel of Disclosure, examine their pastoral approaches, and understand the needs of visitors for effective pastoral care. From 2016 to 2022, both informal and formal interviews were conducted with Brother Herman Lombaerts—the visionary behind the project—as well as architect Tom Callebaut and additional team members involved in facilitating the Chape of Disclosure experiences.

1.1. The context

Many repurposed chapels serve as contemporary art spaces and public venues accessible to visitors for tourism, performances, or facilitated visits. These

[1] Ch. Hilken, *Belgium – The Chapel of Disclosure: Spiritual rest and discovery in the De La Salle Centre in Groot-Bijgaarden*, 4.10.2016, https://www.lasalle-relem.org/belgium-the-chapel-of-disclosure-spiritual-rest-and-discovery-in-the-de-la-salle-centre-in-groot-bijgaarden/ (11.10.2025).

locations typically resemble other tourist or art experiences rather than offering unique elements to provoke curiosity or provide distinct immersive encounters. For example, James Turrell's Dorotheenstadt Cemetery Memorial Chapel in Berlin (Germany) has significant immersing lighting aimed at "connecting the natural world with the spiritual one."[2] In England, Theaster Gates utilised salvaged materials from nearby sites to construct Sanctum within the remains of the Temple Church in Bristol, which hosted 522 sequential performances, including spoken-word poetry and gospel choirs. Gates noted that this project attempted to make space inside a sacred space that people might connect with another.[3] Comparable projects exist in the United States, such as the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, established by Dominique and John de Menil as an interfaith sanctuary integrating art, architecture, and spirituality [4]. The chapel was designed to promote a meditative atmosphere rather than resembling traditional religious spaces, encouraging introspection. Dominique de Menil described the chapel as a location for shared orientation, whether towards God or broader human aspirations and conscience.[5]

Kelly's Austin Chapel (2015) installation was constructed on the grounds of the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, USA, and is frequently compared to the Rothko Chapel.[6] Its design draws influences from Romanesque and Byzantine architecture, featuring Kelly's distinctive use of colour, light, and shaped stained-glass windows. The chapel is intended as a public space for contemplation, without religious associations or prescribed practices.

The Chapel of Disclosure in Belgium stands out due to its development by a Catholic institution for the use of the De La Salle Brothers' Catholic Schools Network.[7] Established in 2011, its creation was a response to the observed decline in traditional sacramental devotion within Belgium. While nearly 70% of schools continue to identify as Catholic, both educators and students have

---

2 A. Alexa, *From Matisse to Turrell, 8 artists who designed transcendent chapels*, 10.04.2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-matisse-turrell-8-artists-designed-transcendent-chapels (11.10.2025).

3 A. Alexa, *From Matisse to Turrell.*

4 A. Alexa, *From Matisse to Turrell.*

5 A. Alexa, *From Matisse to Turrell.*

6 E. Kelly, *Chapter 4: Conceiving Austin: 1986–2015*, 2018, https://blantonmuseum.org/permanent-collection/austin/primer/conceiving-austin/ (11.10.2025).

7 Br. G. Van Grieken, FSC, *The Chapel of Disclosure*, 2021, https://lasallianresources.org/product/the-chapel-of-disclosure/ (11.10.2025).

largely moved away from conventional Catholic beliefs and practices.[8] Many chapels throughout Belgium, including those within the Flemish Lasallian Perspective school network, have been repurposed as libraries or instructional spaces.[9] Comprehensive research into Catholic school identity has confirmed this trend across most Belgian Catholic schools.[10]

Professor Herman Lombaerts and architect Tom Callebaut[11] aimed to create a Chapel of Disclosure, which is tactile and physical, where "an unforgettable, dramatic turning point in peoples' personal lives' could take place." At the core of the Chapel of Disclosure experience is not a "controlled" content of faith but rather a facilitated experience where, in silence, a person is encouraged to embark on a journey of discovering the deep meaning of traditional Christianity, "translated" through contemporary art, space, objects, and images.

The principal theological foundation of the Chapel of Disclosure project is Christ's resurrection and the personal encounter with the risen Christ in a place where an individual's eyes can be opened and where they might recognise Jesus.[12] Professor Lombaerts contends that this need for a tangible, real space is rooted in the Gospel passages: Luke 24:31, "their eyes were opened, and they recognised him on their way to Emmaus;" Luke 24:33, "there they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled in Jerusalem;" and Matthew 16:7, "they discussed this among themselves in Galilee." These experiences were intensely tactile, physical, and locally situated. They proved to be decisive and transformative: from the shocking confrontation with the unacceptable death of Jesus the Nazarene—the rejected, condemned, and tried Jesus—people were moved to recognise and confess Him as the "Messiah, the Christ, the living" (Matthew 16).

---

[8] *CEEC* [*European Committee for Catholic Education*], 2021, https://cogree.org/members/ceec/ (10.09.2025).

[9] K. Teugels, *Kapel van de ontluiking bekroond*, 3.10.2012, https://kriesteugels.wordpress.com/2012/10/03/kapel-van-de-ontluiking-bekroond/ (11.10.2025).

[10] D. Pollefeyt, J. Bouwens, *Dialogue as the future. A catholic answer to the 'colourisation' of the educational landscape*, 2013, https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2019/04/7.-Pollefeyt-Bouwens-Dialogue-as-the-Future.pdf (11.10.2025).

[11] T. Callebaut, *Kapel van de Ontluiking*, 2021, https://www.vai.be/en/buildings/onderwijsinfrastructuur/kapel-van-de-ontluiking-groot-bijgaarden (11.10.2025).

[12] H. Lombaerts, *The Chapel of Disclosure: Discovering a new self-understanding via emptiness*, transl. by J. Arblaster, 2020.

Since its opening in 2011, the Chapel of Disclosure has welcomed several thousand participants representing a wide range of cultural, economic, and professional backgrounds, as well as diverse ages and genders.[13] They came from different cultural, economic, and professional backgrounds, ages, and sex. The Chapel is not a place for tourism or curiosity, but the whole experience is carefully planned and accompanied by well-trained facilitators. The format of interaction within the Chapel varies according to group size, participants' needs, and age, with no fixed scenario for engagement. The central objective is to encourage visitors to reflect more deeply in their life situations. Attendees hold a variety of worldviews, ranging from those raised in the Catholic faith, those who have left the Church, and individuals with no prior religious affiliation. This Chapel could be analysed as one of the pastoral experiments encouraged by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*, where he invites "everyone to be bold and creative" in the task of rethinking "the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation" by allowing the flock to strike out on new paths" to address catholic disaffiliation.[14] This qualitative research project asked the facilitators about their views and experiences of people who came to the Chapel and their pastoral insights.

1.2. What happens in the Chapel of Disclosure?

Access to a Chapel of Disclosure is typically managed through advance registration. The aim is to ensure that participants are supported by a facilitator who guides them throughout the experience. Although there is no universally standardised scenario suitable for every group, individual, or event, it is expected that the facilitation process remains focused on the participants' needs.[15]

The visit to the Chapel may last several hours. Upon arrival, participants proceed along the designated corridor. The architect has explained the rationale

---

[13] *Kapel van de Ontluiking*, http://www.dagvandearchitectuur.be/2015/website/programma/Vlaams-brabant/kapel-van-de-ontluiking (12.01.2021).

[14] Francis, *Apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world Evangelii gaudium,* 24.11.2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (30.12.2020).

[15] H. Lombaerts, *The Chapel of Disclosure: Discovering a new self-understanding via emptiness*, transl. by J. Arblaster, 2020.

behind the corridor's design, stating that it is intended to create a more immersive transition into the Chapel experience:

> The corridor is basked with the full red colour effect in a direct opposite to the white of the Chapel, which will appear even whiter when a journey from the dark to the light begins. The space before the main space is just as important in the total concept of the Chapel and gives you the context for the interpretation or feeling for the next space. (Architect Tom Callebaut, 169–173)

Upon entering the Chapel, individuals remove their shoes and encounter a spacious area distinguished by white-panelled walls and a white ceiling. The floor is covered with warm white sand to enhance the sensory environment. Art installations within the Chapel are intentionally selected for their specific function. Architect Tom Callebaut has articulated his reasoning regarding the choice of red for the floor as well as the incorporation of red lines and shapes. He notes that the addition of red establishes structure and rhythm in the space. The vertical red line, in particular, evokes the presence of a person, enabling physical interaction and reflecting human scale. The red floor is designed to become visible when participants draw or write in the sand, offering a deliberate choice to highlight these marks. The red elements complement the white features; the white ceiling, notably, softens and absorbs sound. Both walls and floor are tactile surfaces, inviting touch and contributing to sound absorption (127–146).

When the Chapel door closes, participants remain in silence without a defined orientation point. They may choose to sit on wooden seats with soft lighting or move around the space. The experience can begin by viewing a contemporary art image, followed by the display of the original chapel's stained-glass windows, or all panels may be opened simultaneously to reveal the Chapel with its windows and altar. This process may vary for individuals and groups, creating different circumstances for facilitators. The facilitator monitors participant interactions and, if needed, offers support to encourage self-directed exploration. Individual responses range from being at ease in the silence and engaging with surfaces like sand and walls to experiencing discomfort in an unfamiliar setting. Although the Chapel is not explicitly intended as a pre-evangelisation project, its format and activities may correspond with aspects of such initiatives.

2. Method

Over the course of six years (2016–2022), I conducted multiple visits to the Chapel of Disclosure. During this period, I held numerous informal interviews with Brother Herman Lombaerts, whose vision shaped the Chapel, as well as meetings with architect Tom Callebaut and other key team members involved in facilitating the Chapel of Disclosure experiences. Additionally, I recorded more than 15 hours of formal, in-depth interviews with three facilitators, who discussed their roles in guiding and welcoming a diverse range of individuals and groups across various age brackets. The facilitators provided reflections and pastoral insights without identifying any individuals, instead referencing general categories of visitors. Their perspectives on facilitation processes, objectives, and outcomes offer valuable guidance for adapting or developing pastoral initiatives within contemporary art spaces.

The study adhered to BERA[16] requirements, ensuring that participants contributed their perspectives voluntarily and retained the right to withdraw at any point. Unstructured interviews were conducted to provide respondents with greater flexibility in sharing their experiences and insights, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Contributions were anonymised to protect confidentiality. All data were transcribed verbatim, with line numbers assigned for clarity. Analysis of the comprehensive dataset revealed several significant themes.

3. Findings

3.1. Role of a facilitator

When asked about the role of a facilitator in the Chapel of Disclosure experience process, all facilitators were very clear: it is neither intrusive nor suggestive. A facilitator is prepared for different scenarios depending on participants' needs and experiences. Therefore, their involvement ranges from simply being present (most likely for those not visiting the Chapel for the first time) to gently and reassuringly addressing newcomers' fears or anxieties, helping them reconnect

[16] British Educational Research Association, *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, 4th ed., London 2018, https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018.

with their inner selves. All facilitators agreed that their role should be 'as small as possible'. They believed that they should allow the stories of the people to be heard. Thus, it is about people's life stories, not their own.

Most importantly, according to the facilitators, everyone should feel welcome and at ease. They should be helped to feel free and open to talk about their lives. Only when a person opens up about their life story can a facilitator "try to connect their story to my story" (Facilitator 1, 170). Leaders concurred that the stories should focus on the people who come into the Chapel and how their experiences affect them. "This is why the people come to the Chapel for the first time" (Facilitator 1, 175). That is why facilitators do not have a particular agenda in mind; the participants bring the content they are going through in their lives to work with in the Chapel. This finding may have significant implications for our pastoral efforts when encouraging nonbelievers or those who have left the Church. There is often an impression that facilitators of religious experiences have a prescribed agenda or curriculum for those who are to be evangelised, and this approach might miss the opportunity to reach people on a much deeper level, meeting them where they are at that point in their lives.

3.2. The process

All facilitators observed that newcomers typically experience discomfort when entering the corridor leading to the Chapel, where they are required to remove their shoes. Facilitator 1 noted that participants often expressed surprise at this practice. Many display signs of unease coupled with curiosity and report feelings of vulnerability, acknowledging that there is no need to project strength (Facilitator 1, 180–183). At times, participants appear apprehensive, likened to individuals preparing themselves for a challenge. Upon entering the quiet and open space of the Chapel, facilitators allow participants time to acclimate and select a resting place. Frequently, some choose to sit close to the sand or retreat into the corners, seeking privacy against the walls, while others gravitate towards the centre (Facilitator 1, 180). While initial reactions vary among participants, the process of engaging with the space is unique to each individual. Facilitators consistently uphold an atmosphere of silence, which has proven effective in supporting participant adjustment. According to Facilitator 1, there have been no instances where participants initiated conversation during this stage; instead, silence prevails as individuals seek comfort within the environment (Facilitator 1, 186–190).

After entering the Chapel from the vestibule, participants are generally left in silence for five or ten minutes. During this time, facilitators noticed two distinct behaviours: some participants appeared comfortable, while others began to feel anxious and nervous. When someone starts to feel particularly uncomfortable, a facilitator gently reassures the participant, explaining that it is perfectly normal to feel that way:

> I think that it is important that there is someone there who can help you like a guide. […] [a facilitator] is a little like the person […] who helps them to enter and clarify their feelings. (Facilitator 2, 271–285)

Facilitators are particularly careful to be attentive listeners and not to impose their agenda on those attending for the first time. Their role is to support participants in listening to their own stories and becoming aware of their feelings, fears, and what is happening within themselves. All facilitators agreed that the initial experience in the Chapel serves as an introduction to a process that extends beyond a single visit. Therefore, facilitators are always cautious about introducing anything immediately. Instead, they strive to listen to people first, assess participants' experiences and emotions, and help them construct their life stories based on those experiences. The participant's life story is then connected to the Biblical narrative (Facilitator 1, 176–180).

A different approach is taken with those who are not attending for the first time. The facilitator's role is to further encourage deeper reflection on the participant's experiences. A piece of art or a Biblical story may be used as a stimulus, such as a stained-glass window or a painting from the Chapel walls (Facilitator 1, 186–194). The purpose of providing a stimulus for reflection is not to initiate a group conversation but rather to prompt individual contemplation on the topic. Often, a facilitator will have prepared something in advance, offering input and possibly inviting participants to speak with one another, though not as an entire group. Sometimes, people share their reflections in smaller groups, as "it is safer and easier for people to talk in smaller groups of two or three than to the entire group" (Facilitator 2, 200–202).

All facilitators agreed that most of the time, participants leave the Chapel feeling more at peace with themselves and in a state of tranquillity. They usually do not wish to leave the Chapel surroundings immediately, but instead linger outside the building or stroll slowly through the park, "at a different speed than the one that they came into the Chapel" (Facilitator 2, 290–294).

3.3. The notion of "emptiness"

One of the facilitators described the Chapel as an inclusive environment that serves as an effective tool for evangelisation. Its sense of "emptiness" offers individuals the opportunity for personal reflection and exploration. This concept of "emptiness" provides a foundation from which participants are invited to contemplate and potentially share their own experiences. The main objective of maintaining silence and "emptiness" is to bring forward aspects that may remain hidden within individuals, allowing them to reflect thoughtfully and make conscious, independent decisions regarding faith and social justice:

> The emptiness is the main scenario of the Chapel, but you can open stories or bring the light on the Bible stories. You can deal with the silence of the empty space in any way that suits you best. Not in the way that it gives you an answer but will motivate you to formulate an opinion and thus to take a position. (Facilitator 2, 114–121)

The majority of visitors are struck by the peacefulness of the silence and, most notably, by the unexpected presence of sand within the Chapel. This artistic installation contributes to a sense of calm, creating an atmosphere that feels "still, tranquil!" (Facilitator 1, 358–362). Many participants enjoyed interacting with the sand, often running their hands along the walls, opening and closing the panel doors, and relishing the freedom to move in and out of the space. The entire "physical structure" is an integral element of the facilitated experience and plays a pivotal role in the overall process (Facilitator 1, 358–379).

3.4. Transcendence

Although no explicit Christian symbols are visible in the Chapel when the panels are closed, facilitators concurred that many individuals from religious traditions immediately recognise them upon entering the Chapel. For instance, one facilitator recounted an experience with a participant who entered the Chapel, lay down on the large wooden platform, looked up, and remarked, "Now I am looking at heaven." For this individual, the ceiling or the bright lights behind it symbolised the Transcendent. Facilitators observed that only a few participants express such sentiments openly (Facilitator 1, 358–362).

The facilitators found the Chapel's process effective in guiding participants towards an encounter with the Transcendent. They believe it serves as an excellent

model for working with individuals seeking direction in life and who are dissatisfied with their current circumstances, particularly when they feel there must be "something more" to discover and ultimately wish to connect with the Transcendent (Facilitator 1, 332–335). While participants most frequently speak about God and transcendence, the facilitators themselves do not directly refer to God in the Chapel. Nevertheless, the theme of transcendence frequently emerges in participants' reflections. Facilitator 2 believes that the participants' initial movement is towards transcendence in their hearts. The second movement then leads participants to contemplate actions they can undertake in their daily lives—whether for themselves, their families, or others. According to Facilitator 2, the energy and impetus for this practical reflection stem from the initial movement towards transcendence (Facilitator 2, 298–302).

In conclusion, it may be argued that facilitators observed two distinct movements within the Chapel, both of which opened participants' hearts to transcendence and inspired them to commit to living in accordance with Christian values. The first movement is an internal inclination towards transcendence experienced by participants, whereas the second is a subsequent commitment to these values.

3.5. A range of emotions

Facilitators observed a range of emotions among participants, including sadness and tears, as well as serenity and calmness. Facilitators are never certain what experiences they will encounter on the day, what participants will bring with them from their lives, or their objectives for the visit. One facilitator noted that most participants initially experience a sense of unease; however, they eventually come to appreciate the silence, which encourages self-reflection. The initial discomfort gradually dissipates, and most participants begin to wonder how long the silence will last. This phase of the experience may be the most challenging for facilitators, as their aim is to support participants in reaching a reflective state (Facilitator 3, 210). This stage cannot be rushed; rather, resilience and confidence in the facilitation process are essential.

Facilitator 3 observed this aspect of the process and suggested numerous reasons why participants do not reach the stage of self-reflection. Factors may include events preceding their entry into the Chapel, ongoing circumstances in their lives, and their motivations for attending. At this stage, it is crucial to "give them all sufficient time to connect to themselves" (Facilitator 2, 210–219).

When participants identify an "anchor" or a familiar object or symbol within the space, they tend to settle more quickly. Otherwise, they may feel somewhat disoriented. Facilitator 1 recounted an instance in which a participant, who initially expected to embrace the experience, felt somewhat lost. This feeling of displacement subsided when the stained-glass window was opened. The participant remarked, "OK, this is better for me as there is still something familiar to me which I connect to a Chapel and the Church" (Facilitator 1, 52–58).

Overall, all facilitators commented that most participants do not necessarily have negative experiences when visiting the Chapel. Nevertheless, they strongly emphasised that the Chapel experience should not be conflated with "Eucharist and going to a Church as a building" (Facilitator 3, 72–75).

3.5.1. Positive vs experiences of feeling lost

When asked whether everyone enjoyed visiting the Chapel, one facilitator remarked that "it is a difficult question" as "not everyone who comes to the Chapel has a positive experience" (Facilitator 1, 15–17). The reasons for this may vary, ranging from feeling lost or threatened in an unfamiliar environment to responses arising from their deepest sense of self. Some individuals may not find what they expected, may be unprepared, or may not feel any connection with their religious tradition. One of the leaders commented that "sometimes people feel lost in the Chapel because of the lack of orientation points" (Facilitator 3, 25). This leader described an instance where a religious person sought a focal point—something to associate with being in a chapel. Facilitator 3 assumed that she might have felt threatened and insecure because she did not find in the Chapel what she anticipated in a "normal" chapel. Facilitator 3 recalled this particular case as extreme and somewhat unusual. However, they also reiterated that every individual arrives with different expectations and brings a variety of life experiences that are awakened "when you open the access doors or a glass-stained window and there is always still something left." Nevertheless, as soon as people begin to establish connections and links to their tradition, their insecurities dissipate (Facilitator 3, 25–47).

3.5.2. "Out of the comfort zone"

All facilitators with whom I spoke reported encountering individuals who felt lost and insecure at the outset of the experience. Recognising situations that

remove individuals from their comfort zones and familiar environments is an integral part of the process. Many participants attempt to anchor themselves to something familiar as a means of avoiding this sense of discomfort. One of the facilitators made several insightful observations that may shed light on the effect of the Chapel and why emotions may appear more intense for many individuals. This phenomenon may relate to the confrontation with oneself, which is occasionally unexpected and, as such, can be intimidating, as Facilitator 2 elaborated:

> If he [a participant] is nervous, he will become even more nervous, as the Chapel acts like an amplifier, and that is entirely understandable because the Chapel helps you to meet your inner self, which can be frightening or fulfilling. (149–151)

3.6. First-time comers

Facilitators identified two distinct groups among the participants: those attending for the first time and those returning for a second or third visit. Typically, newcomers experience heightened surprise and curiosity, often commencing their participation with a sense of discomfort; they are unfamiliar with the expected behaviour and may not be accustomed to prolonged periods of silence. One facilitator observed that first-time participants often felt unprepared and uneasy, sometimes even concerned about minor matters such as the condition of their socks, but, more significantly, they tended to feel anxious without fully understanding the situation (Facilitator 3, 186).

In contrast, individuals who visit the Chapel regularly perceive the act of removing their shoes and walking barefoot on the sand as a ritualistic practice, and the experience becomes routine for them. Consequently, it is important that all new participants receive some guidance regarding expected conduct prior to taking part in the Chapel experience. They should be informed that extended silence is a core aspect and that entering the Chapel barefoot is required. Nevertheless, facilitators noted that, despite being briefed, newcomers frequently find the experience startling and are often caught off guard.

Adapting to the silence and sparse environment is a gradual process, with facilitators encouraging participants to explore the space until they find a place where they feel comfortable to settle in silence. This adjustment phase is time-consuming, as one facilitator explained: participants do not immediately engage in self-reflection but initially spend time observing their surroundings. For

some, the discomfort associated with silence and uncertainty about appropriate behaviour persists for a considerable period (Facilitator 2, 186–206).

One particular challenge for facilitators is to assist participants in moving beyond their initial curiosity, allowing them to settle and achieve a deeper level of silence. For instance, a facilitator recounted the experience of a first-time visitor who initially struggled to overcome his curiosity. Eventually, he became withdrawn and described his experience as sitting on a stool within a personal, empty space, stating that this area constituted his entire world and fulfilled his needs, expressing a desire simply to remain present in that moment (Facilitator 3, 5–19).

Facilitators generally agreed that, following the initial unease and sense of displacement, participants begin to engage in introspection, with various aspects of their lives and personalities surfacing. The lack of visual stimuli, emptiness, and silence encourage participants to contemplate deeper matters that may have previously been suppressed. As noted by Facilitator 3, when external distractions are absent, participants may undergo a profound internal experience. The silence and absence of focal points support individuals in focusing inward, potentially facilitating personal exploration (Facilitator 3, 5–19).

3.7. Those who return

The facilitators formed the impression that most individuals who attend the Chapel wish to return for subsequent visits and that each visit tends to offer a novel experience. Facilitator 2 recounted the case of a person who visits the Chapel at least once a year. For returning participants, the motivation is no longer mere curiosity. Rather, the facilitators agreed that these individuals return for a different purpose: to deepen their connection with themselves and, perhaps, with their conception of God. One facilitator shared a remark from a returning participant that clearly exemplifies this perspective:

> I know that the shutters can be opened. It is not a surprise for me; that part has already gone, and at that point, you can be there and enter the space and time. (Facilitator 2, 250–255)

According to the facilitators, while many first-time participants seek to anchor themselves by finding a familiar object or symbol associated with their religious tradition, others prefer the opposite—they wish for everything to remain

"closed" to them. This latter attitude is typically observed among those attending the space for a second or third time.

The facilitators indicated that participants are granted the freedom to determine the extent of their exploration and to choose an environment most conducive to their individual needs. For instance, Facilitator 1 noted that some people prefer to have the panels closed and say, "This is my Church or my Chapel or the place as I wish to experience it" (72). Their choices may be influenced by their perception of Christian traditions or the Church, as "both factors, tradition and experience, come into play here" (Facilitator 1, 72–75).

According to the facilitators, returning visitors may have varied intentions and often possess a clear sense of purpose for their visit. However, many individuals come to the Chapel primarily to connect with themselves, rather than with the Christian religion per se. For instance, some attendees reported feeling a sense of connection with themselves within the Chapel, but not in a specifically Christian, religious, or traditional manner. Facilitator 1 observed that such individuals "do not ask to open the stained-glass windows but seek to deepen their spirituality—that is, their own spirituality" (109–115). The facilitators expressed little concern about this, as they are convinced that "these people connect to the Transcendent, although they do not know about God as such" (Facilitator 1, 109–118).

3.8. Different needs and age groups

All facilitators placed considerable emphasis on the individual experiences of different people and the necessity of remaining receptive to their needs:

> I believe the experience is highly personal. For some individuals, their perspectives may be challenged when we open a panel, and they respond, "No, I do not need it and cannot cope with it at the moment." For people of my age—as I am nearly fifty—if you open a panel and see the stained glass with traditional designs, it may conflict with my beliefs. Some participants no longer wish to see traditional imagery. (Facilitator 2, 191–195)

The facilitators' perspectives differed regarding the experiences of various age groups, including children and young adults. One facilitator did not observe any difference in the ways people react or behave within the space, while two others elaborated further, explaining that every age group is welcome in the chapel and can benefit from the experience.

3.8.1. Young people

Some facilitators observed that individual needs vary according to participants' age. For example, younger people are inclined to engage with the sand in silence, treating it almost as a playground where they can externalise their thoughts and process them kinaesthetically. Facilitator 3 believed that this approach enables young people to perceive their life questions more clearly and feel inspired to address them (260–264). Facilitator 2 concurred with this perspective and noted that young people respond differently to the Chapel than older adults. One notable distinction between the age groups is the variation in their vocabularies; younger generations often lack the language to articulate their experiences in the same way as older participants (Facilitator 1, 77–82).

Teenagers posed additional challenges. Their responses encompassed a wide spectrum, ranging from laughter to deep contemplation. Facilitators found it difficult to determine the motivations behind this age group's behaviours and to discern their emotional responses within the Chapel. One facilitator remarked, "Younger people usually are not well connected with their heart and mind and do not connect with the Christian tradition" (Facilitator 1, 224). Some may perceive the Chapel as "just nonsense;" however, it remains challenging to ascertain whether their laughter stems from insecurity (Facilitator 1, 225). Facilitator 3 summarised this by stating that young people aged 16–18 may sometimes remain silent yet share profound thoughts (Facilitator 3, 241–242). Facilitator 2 also agreed with these observations, adding that many adults assume that youth are incapable of silence or detachment from their devices:

> They (young people) surprised me because I saw that they were calm and relaxed and interested in their surroundings […] there was not much friction within the space. (Facilitator 2, 95–97)

Conversely, older adults appeared to experience "more friction in the space" than younger people (Facilitator 2, 98–99). This facilitator also acknowledged that the younger generation lacks a connection with tradition, viewing the Chapel as a beautiful space devoid of historical ties. According to Facilitator 2, younger generations possess more freedom than their elders, as "the older generation had no choice but to be religious" (Facilitator 2, 200).

However, not all young people, including those in teacher training programmes, were receptive to the Chapel as an effective learning environment. Facilitators suggested that these individuals may regard religion as irrelevant

to their lives and, consequently, believe that it should not be taught in schools. This attitude could be attributed to a lack of interest in religious traditions during childhood and within their families. All facilitators agreed that proper motivation and openness to transcendence are prerequisites for visitors hoping to benefit from their experience in the Chapel. Furthermore, individuals need to be accustomed to reflecting on their experiences. Facilitator 1 reflected on their experience training teachers in Belgian Catholic schools, noting that while students were impressed by and appreciated the Chapel's beauty, they did not feel a personal connection akin to those from deeply Catholic backgrounds. Nevertheless, they were still able to experience something extraordinary: "They felt at home in the Chapel and saw it as a rarely special place" (Facilitator 1, 88–104).

3.9. "Extreme" reactions and "aha" moments

On some occasions (not many), each facilitator has an experience with a person in the chapel whose reaction was either extreme or very strong. Some saw participants crying or even wanting to take all their clothes off to feel naked (Facilitator 3, 159), which was not allowed. Depending on the person, almost everyone experienced some "aha" moments in the Chapel, but on different occasions and at different times in the process. Facilitators noted that usually, first comments do not show what they feel at the beginning of the Chapel experience. However, later on, participants cannot hide their surprise and "aha" moments at certain points in the process, such as when the apse doors are opened and the altar and the resurrection stone are revealed. However, at the same time, there is always something left "hidden." A mystery remains. When people come for the second or third time to the Chapel, they usually aim to experience something on a deeper level. Then, it happens. People cry or get so touched emotionally that it becomes obvious that "something profound is happening" (Facilitator 1, 123–143).

4. What makes the Chapel an effective tool for pre-evangelisation?

All three facilitators I spoke with agreed that the Chapel is an effective tool for pre-evangelisation.

The summary of the findings might have pastoral implications and possible application and transfer to different pastoral contexts when working with non-believers and those who left the Church.

First, all facilitators felt that the Chapel was a safe place where a person could explore their life story and life views freely. According to the facilitators, a Chapel's aim is primarily to lead to pre-evangelisation in a broader sense. Therefore, each visit is carefully planned, and participants know the expectations or code of being in the Chapel before arriving at the place and before entering it. Therefore, visiting the Chapel as a tourist is not an option (Facilitator 2, 103–110). The Chapel is intended to become a safe place where participants can search for the true meaning in their lives and a place participants can trust:

> The Chapel gives you the trust to say OK, let it come and let it flow. And we will see what will happen. And the Chapel becomes a tool to help you to search. (Facilitator 2, 48)

All facilitators suggested that Christ becomes "real" to the participants if and when they dwell deep into their life experiences. Facilitators reiterated that the process in the Chapel depends on who the participants are and their worldviews. They were aware that participants' life histories, human conditions, and those who surrounded them from birth and through their lives might have limited the scope of "positive theology" facilitators could propose in the process.

Regardless of how individuals might desire to be with God, connecting with him without even consciously knowing, they still might not "capture" Him or "frame" Him. All facilitators tried to find a delicate balance between "positive" and "negative" theology when addressing each participant's needs. All facilitators concurred that no one was judged in the Chapel, nor were attempts made to indoctrinate.

> What I like about the Chapel is that it gives you a lot of opportunities to evangelise as people do not expect anything. There is no strict ritual or real agenda, and I try to keep it open, allowing for any possibility and not imposing a definitive structure and forming a ritual. This allows you to talk about the Christian tradition in different ways. And for that reason, the Chapel becomes a settle conduit, thus facilitating evangelism. (Facilitator 1, 233–239)

Facilitators observed that those with a traditional Catholic upbringing and who left the Church often expect to be indoctrinated in the Chapel. However, their guards are often "dropped" after realising that indoctrination will not happen. The Chapel opens many pastoral opportunities for participants to open

up and explore the depths of their motivations and search for life meetings. The process does not rely on a prescription of what a participant should think or do. Allowing personal freedom, a participant is trusted to find the meaning of life and, eventually, God. Facilitators recognised that a personal choice to answer God's call remains within the person.

Many visitors to the Chapel felt that the space was somehow sacred. One of the facilitators explained the process using the term of a mediator, saying that "the Chapel acts as a facilitator and as a conduit for mediation" and that people feel there is "a sacred place" (Facilitator 1, 148–150). Something there makes participants feel that way. According to the facilitators and the architect, there should be certain necessary ingredients in the personal attitude towards the transcendence for the Chapel to be experienced as sacred by the participants. This idea is about openness to transcendence. Also, it is about reliving personal life in the light of living a Christian story as lived by community, a sense of togetherness, which results in reconciliation:

> The Chapel is not just a tool for pre-evangelisation, but it also an environment which inspires people to reconcile their feelings and come to terms with themselves, which eventually leads to God. (Facilitator 1, 154–161)

Facilitators believed that openness to the transcendence and feeling part of faith community are essential ingredients of the effective "methods" or "approach" when helping adults to return to the Church and initiating them into the Christian tradition, which is reenvisioned and re-contextualised.

5. Conclusions

The Chapel of Disclosure exemplifies a contemporary approach to spiritual engagement, blending art, architecture, and pastoral care to create an inclusive environment that invites reflection and personal transformation. Through its minimalistic design and carefully facilitated experiences, the Chapel fosters openness to transcendence and encourages visitors to explore their life stories without the constraints of traditional religious expectations. The insights gathered from facilitators highlight the Chapel's effectiveness in supporting pre-evangelisation, particularly for those who have distanced themselves from institutional religion or seek a renewed sense of spiritual connection. Ultimately,

the Chapel stands as a model for innovative pastoral practice, demonstrating how reimagined sacred spaces can nurture individual journeys towards meaning, reconciliation, and faith within a pluralistic society.

References

Alexa A., *From Matisse to Turrell, 8 artists who designed transcendent chapels*, 10.04.2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-matisse-turrell-8-artists-designed-transcendent-chapels (11.10.2025).

British Educational Research Association, *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, 4th ed., London 2018, https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018.

Callebaut T., *Kapel van de Ontluiking*, 2021, https://www.vai.be/en/buildings/onderwijsinfrastructuur/kapel-van-de-ontluiking-groot-bijgaarden (11.10.2025).

CEEC [*European Committee for Catholic Education*], 2021, https://cogree.org/members/ceec/ (25.04.2021).

Francis, *Evangelii gaudium: Apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world,* 24.11.2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (30.12.2020).

Hilken Ch., *Belgium – The Chapel of Disclosure: Spiritual rest and discovery in the De La Salle Centre in Groot-Bijgaarden*, 4.10.2016, https://www.lasalle-relem.org/belgium-the-chapel-of-disclosure-spiritual-rest-and-discovery-in-the-de-la-salle-centre-in-groot-bijgaarden/ (01.08.2020).

Kelly E., *Chapter 4: Conceiving Austin: 1986–2015*, 2018, https://blantonmuseum.org/permanent-collection/austin/primer/conceiving-austin/ (11.10.2025).

Lombaerts H., *The Chapel of Disclosure: Discovering a new self-understanding via emptiness*, trans. by J. Arblaster, 2020.

Pollefeyt D., Bouwens J., *Dialogue as the future. A catholic answer to the 'colourisation' of the educational landscape*, 2013, https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2019/04/7.-Pollefeyt-Bouwens-Dialogue-as-the-Future.pdf (11.10.2025).

Teugels K., *Kapel van de ontluiking bekroond*, 03.10.2012, https://kriesteugels.wordpress.com/2012/10/03/kapel-van-de-ontluiking-bekroond/ (11.10.2025).

Van Grieken G., FSC, *The Chapel of Disclosure,* 2021, https://lasallianresources.org/product/the-chapel-of-disclosure/ (11.10.2025).