CHURCHES THAT CHANGED THE NETHERLANDS

VOLUME 1

A City on a Hill

Eight congregations, from a hedge sermon near Hoorn to a woman in the pulpit

A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
Matthew 5:14

WIM KAMPHORST

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A City on a Hill. Churches that changed the Netherlands, volume 1

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The sources consulted are listed after each chapter. Stories known only from a person's own testimony or from later tradition, or that cannot be verified, are marked as such in the text and in the overview at the end of each chapter.

This book can be read and downloaded free of charge at whispermagazine.org.

Introduction: a city you cannot miss

Jesus said it to a crowd of ordinary people on a mountain in Galilee. *You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.* (Matthew 5:14). He was not talking about buildings. He was talking about people who belonged to Him, and about what others would see in them.

This book is about people like that. Not about one hero, but about congregations. About groups of ordinary believers in one place in the Netherlands who together did something that could be felt outside their church. They cared for old women, took in refugees, taught a country to read, helped poor farmers get credit and put a woman in the pulpit.

Why congregations

In the series *Follow Their Faith* I wrote about men and women of God. In *To the Ends of the Earth* I wrote about missionaries. In *What Do These Stones Mean?* I wrote about places where the church history of the Netherlands took a different turn.

This series looks at something else. What happens when a congregation opens its door? Sometimes a minister or a priest led the way.

But almost always it took deacons, church council members, women and ordinary members to keep it going. Much less has usually been written about them. I have tried to show their side as well as I can, and I say so when the sources are silent about them.

Eight congregations, from 1566 to 1911

This first volume begins in a meadow near Hoorn, a port town in North Holland, in the summer of 1566, at one of the first open-air sermons in Holland, the western heartland of the Netherlands. It ends in a small Frisian village, where a Mennonite congregation installed the first woman minister in the Netherlands in 1911.

In between are a group in Rijnsburg that met without a minister, the diaconate in Amsterdam that built a home for hundreds of old women, a French-speaking congregation that took in refugees, a Mennonite congregation in Monnickendam where a movement began to teach the whole country to read, a working-class parish in Enschede and an abbey in Brabant, the southern province, from which the farmers' union and the farmers' cooperative banks grew.

Each chapter begins at the place as it looks today. Then we go back to the moment that made the difference. At the end of each chapter, under **Go and see for yourself**, you will find where to go and what you can still see there.

Facts first

In this book, too, I keep to the facts. Where a story comes only from tradition, or from the words of someone who was involved, I say so. Where sources contradict each other, I show it. After each chapter there is a short overview of what is certain and what is not, and a list of sources.

Some subjects are sensitive. Congregations did things that other Christians disagreed with, then and now. I do not take sides. I tell what happened, what people said about it and what it changed.

People about whom I have already written a full chapter in other books appear here only briefly.

Who this is for

Maybe you are part of a congregation yourself and you wonder what one small group of Christians can mean for a village or a city. Then read how it went here. It almost always started small, and it was almost never easy.

Westerblokker: the field where no one walked away

A monk jumped over the ditch. He shouted something, loud enough to rise above the sermon, hoping the people on the other side would be frightened and scatter.

It was Sunday, July 14, 1566, in a field at Westerblokker, just east of Hoorn. No one left. The people stayed where they stood, women and children in the grass, men behind them, and the man in front of them, a basket maker from Alkmaar, kept on preaching.

On the far side of the ditch, between the road and the monastery, stood the schout of Hoorn (the town's chief officer of justice), his deputy, one of the monks and two young noblemen. The schout called out something about the tenth chapter of John. Then he turned around and walked back to the monastery.

That is how the public Reformed church began in this part of Holland: with a psalm, a prayer and a sermon under the open sky, in full view of the town's rulers. You can no longer point out the field. There is no sign and no stone. But you can go to the place, to a Protestant church with a churchyard, and see a nun kneeling there

in stone. That is where the other half of this story lies, and I do not want to skip it.

A basket maker from Alkmaar

The man's name was Jan Arentsz. He was a journeyman for a basket maker, Albert Gerritsz., in a small workshop on the corner of the Appelensteegje on the Luttik Oudorp in Alkmaar. That is how a popular biography by R. Boon tells it, based on the seventeenth-century historian Geeraerdt Brandt and on later research. About his year of birth or his parents Boon writes nothing.

In 1555 a priest in Alkmaar, Cornelis Cooltuyn, began to preach in a way that leaned toward the new teaching: grace, not merit. Jan went to listen every Sunday. On Mondays his master retold what he had heard in church, and Jan also read the Bible himself. So he came to the conviction that a person is saved by trusting in Christ, and not by his own works. When Cooltuyn was driven out of the town and left in 1559 for Emden, in East Frisia, just across the border, Jan stayed behind. For years he wove baskets and preached in small circles.

You need to know what that meant. In the Low Countries the king's placards were in force, strict laws against heresy with heavy penalties. Anyone who preached or met outside the Roman Catholic Church put his freedom and his life at risk. Jan did it for years, in houses and small groups. He still wove baskets.

According to Boon, the turning point came in the first days of July 1566. The authorities in Alkmaar were looking for him. Albert Gerritsz. warned him that spies were about. On the night of July 2 a carter from Bergen, Krijn Aartse, arrived with a cart and two horses. Jan put on a blue smock and a farmer's cap and rode out of the town with them, toward Heiloo. The guard at the gate let them through.

On the way, at an inn, the innkeeper grew suspicious, and horsemen from Assendelft warned that there were people on the road ahead, watching. They sent Jan another way, to the IJ, where he boarded a boat to Amsterdam. There he found shelter with relatives, Huib Jansz. and his wife, in the Oudebrugsteeg. This story of the escape appears in that one book. I have not been able to check it in other sources.

Six men in the reeds

The decision was made on July 8, says Boon. Six men met in the reeds at the Houtewaal in Amsterdam, and a seventh stood watch. Jan opened with prayer. A cloth merchant, Gerbrandsz., offered to bear the costs and to ask the town government whether it would cooperate.

Jan himself proposed to do what had not yet happened in Holland: preach openly, outside the towns, in the field. He would begin near Hoorn, on July 14, on behalf of what they called the scattered congregation of Amsterdam. This was later called a hedge sermon, after the places along hedges and ditches where people gathered.

Boon puts a sentence in his mouth that he gives as Jan's driving motive: everywhere the people were crying out for bread, but they were given stones. Whether Jan said it that way, no one can check any more. It fits what he had done up to then.

Two monasteries on the Koewijzend

The field they chose lay in Westerblokker, just outside Hoorn. There, on the south side of the Koewijzend, an old boundary between Westerblokker and Zwaag, stood the monastery of Nieuwlicht. Canons regular had built it between 1388 and 1392. These were clergy who lived together like monks under the Rule

of Augustine. They belonged to the Windesheim movement, a renewal of monastic life that had swept through the country from Overijssel in the east. The monastery was dedicated to Mary. Brandt simply calls it the Regulierenklooster, the monastery of the canons regular.

Just north of it, in the hamlet of de Bangert, there had been a convent since 1475: Bethlehem. It belonged to the Order of the Holy Cross, the Crosiers. In 1494 it received a chapel and its own cemetery. Around 1548 a wall surrounded a site of about one and a half hectares (almost four acres), with a brewhouse and outbuildings.

These were not quiet years. Historian Christiaan Schrickx, who earned his doctorate on Bethlehem in 2015, shows that Lutheran ideas were already circulating in Hoorn in the 1520s. In 1529 a group forced its way into the Bethlehem convent and harassed the sisters. He also mentions the parish priest of Zwaag, Anthonius Laurensz., whose misconduct showed why many people were fed up with the clergy. After 1548 only a few women entered the convent.

So church reform did not come out of nowhere around Hoorn, and it would not come without victims either.

Wagons along the Streek

On the morning of July 14, according to Boon, a stream of carts and wagons moved along the road that connects Hoorn with Enkhuizen. Many travelers wore their Sunday clothes. Fishermen from Enkhuizen rode along and said they would protect the preacher. People came from Obdam, from Wervershoof, from Medemblik. Brandt writes only that people came in great numbers from the town and the villages around it. How many there were, he leaves open.

The field lay in front of the Regulierenklooster, on the road from Blokker to Zwaag and the Bangert. According to Boon, a ditch with a small wooden bridge separated it from the monastery grounds, and there was a simple pulpit made of planks. The wagons stood in a ring along the edge. That was the fishermen's doing: if things went wrong, the crowd could take cover behind them.

Jan Arentsz. first had the people sing a psalm. Boon names Psalm 27 in the Dutch metrical version of Datheen. Then he prayed for the Holy Spirit. And then he began to preach.

Singing a psalm in an open field, in Dutch, with a basket maker leading. To anyone reading it now, it sounds ordinary. In 1566 it could cost you your life.

The tenth chapter of John

At that very moment the burgomasters of Hoorn were sitting at table in the monastery with the canons. With them were the schout, Master Joost Huikesloot, his deputy Henrik Korver and two young noblemen from South Holland. The schout was the town's highest officer of justice, the man who had to act against heresy.

They heard the noise and sent someone to look. He came back with the news that there was preaching going on. They were astonished, Brandt writes.

The schout, his deputy, one of the monks and the two noblemen walked to the ditch between the road and the monastery, right behind the preacher. Perhaps they meant to frighten him. Jan kept preaching. Then one of the monks leapt over the ditch with a loud cry. According to Boon, he landed in the water, and no one reached out a hand. Wet and muddy, he scrambled back to his monastery, with the burgomaster and the schout behind him.

The schout shouted that he would teach them the tenth chapter of John. In the English edition of Brandt it reads: "Yes, yes, I'll teach you John chapter ten." What he meant, Brandt does not say. I think of the beginning of that chapter: *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.* (John 10:1). A preacher without ordination by the church could be just such a man in his eyes.

The deputy and the noblemen stayed. They listened to the whole sermon. Afterward they told the monks that they had not disliked it.

Two hours, and no one left

What Jan Arentsz. said that afternoon has not been handed down. Brandt gives not one word of the sermon. Boon does tell it, and his picture is this: Jan spoke for more than two hours. He used strong images from daily life, in language everyone understood, and the crowd listened breathlessly. The core was that salvation does not come from works but from faith, and that under heaven there is only one Name by which a person can be saved. Many hearers were deeply moved. After one more verse and a prayer of thanks, it was over.

The fishermen from Enkhuizen wanted Jan to come to them as well. According to Boon, he promised to preach in Enkhuizen on July 18. Then he rode back to Amsterdam in a covered wagon, together with the cloth merchant Gerbrandsz. and a grain buyer from the Sint-Antoniesbreestraat. On the way they sang psalms from Datheen's book.

Think for a moment about those rides home. Ordinary people on wagons, on a Sunday, with psalms in a language they spoke themselves. Of the people in the field, not one word has been kept. What

we have is the sermon as others retold it, and the picture of people who stood their ground.

By chance at table?

Was it by chance that the town government happened to be dining with the canons that day? Schrickx thinks not. He names the two noblemen: Adriaan van Swieten and Jakob Kopier, early opponents of Spanish rule. In his view some council members knew in advance what was going to happen and arranged it with these noblemen, so that they could be there "by chance." According to him, the town government of Hoorn was fairly tolerant toward the new teaching.

That gives the story another, perhaps more human, side. Anyone who sat on a town council in 1566 had to choose between the king's law and the people of his own town. Some chose a meal in the right place.

About the ordinary people in the field we know almost nothing. No names, no numbers. Only this: they stood their ground when the schout and a monk came toward them. What would you have done, with your town's chief officer of justice on the other side of the ditch?

Four hours at Overveen

What followed that summer went fast. On Sunday, July 21, there was preaching near Overveen, outside Haarlem, on land of the lord of Brederode. The burgomasters of Amsterdam tried to prevent the gathering with false reports and had the gates of Haarlem closed. Many people came from Amsterdam. Estimates of the crowd range from about three hundred, according to Bor, to five thousand, according to Laurens Reael. Brandt reports that Pieter Gabriël preached for about four hours on Ephesians 2. Boon writes

that many people stayed on the site overnight. The next day Jan Arentsz. himself stood on that spot and preached on Psalm 118.

On July 25 Pieter Cornelisz. of Alkmaar held the first public sermon for the people of Enkhuizen behind Grootebroek. Jan also preached in a cornfield outside Alkmaar, the town he had fled a few weeks earlier. And on August 21 he stood at the Lastage in Amsterdam. In many places the listeners came armed. They said they wanted to be able to defend themselves.

In August the Iconoclastic Fury began in West Flanders. Groups of people went into churches and smashed statues, altars and paintings. The wave swept through the Low Countries and reached Holland too. Hoorn was largely spared in 1566, Schrickx writes.

A priest on the Jaapswerf

In Hoorn itself something else happened. On September 14, 1566, Clement Maertsz., priest of the Sint-Anthoniskerk in the town, left the Roman Catholic Church. He began to preach openly on 't Keern, north of the hospital, at a spot called the Jaapswerf. He baptized children there and married people. He had a helper, Evert Gerritsz. Gorter. Among his listeners, Brandt says, were some of the leading citizens.

That is how a congregation begins: with people who have their children baptized and get married outside the church of their parents, before there is even a church building. In a town like Hoorn, no one could miss it.

Peter calls believers living stones, built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). On the Jaapswerf there was not yet a wall. There was a priest who had left his church, a helper, and citizens who had their children baptized.

Jan Arentsz. went back to Amsterdam. According to his biography, he led the Reformed congregation there in the chapel of the Franciscan friary until May 1567, together with Pieter Gabriël.

Smoke over the Bangert

That freedom did not last long. In Amsterdam the burgomasters banned Reformed preaching on April 17, 1567. Preachers and the citizens who had supported them fled. The Amsterdam merchant Laurens Reael, for example, arrived in Emden on May 22, 1567. He was later declared an outlaw by the Duke of Alba and his house was confiscated.

On the side of the rebels, too, things were not gentle. On May 2, 1567, soldiers of Hendrik van Brederode, one of the leaders of the rebellious nobles, plundered the Bethlehem convent and set it on fire. One of the plunderers, Jan Lubbertsz. Cranckhooft, was sentenced to death on November 13, 1568.

In October 1568 trouble came to the Bangert again. On October 21 Dirk Maertsz. van Schagen came with a band of men to extort money from the canons and the sisters. Men from the neighborhood took him and his followers prisoner. At the end of November 1568 they were executed.

Between 1566 and 1570 no one entered Bethlehem. I have found nothing written down about what the sisters themselves thought of these years.

Waiting in Emden

When the Duke of Alba came to the Low Countries on behalf of the king in 1567, the persecution began. Jan Arentsz. fled across the border to Emden, where his old teacher Cooltuyn had also gone. Boon has him arrive in November 1567, together with Pieter Gabriël, and

stay there for about five years. He preached to the refugees, visited the sick and the poor, and urged the Sea Beggars (the rebel privateers) to behave decently. Brandt writes that he also lived for a time in Kampen with his wife and children, where he preached in secret. I have found no name for his wife or children anywhere. Whether he attended the synod of Emden in 1571, a church assembly of Dutch Reformed exiles, is uncertain.

For these years I have found no names of the people who had stood in the field at Westerblokker in July 1566. Those who stayed kept quiet. Those who could, left.

The statues from the Grote Kerk

In 1572 everything turned around. On June 18, 1572, Hoorn chose the side of William of Orange, the leader of the revolt.

Two weeks later, on July 3 and 4, the altars and statues in the Grote Kerk, the main church of Hoorn, were destroyed. What Hoorn had been spared in 1566 happened now after all. On July 30 the order came to take the church treasures from the villages around Hoorn to Dordrecht. These included the treasures of Nieuwlicht and Bethlehem.

Jan Arentsz. came back. According to Boon, he sailed with Pieter Gabriël and two men of Alkmaar, Reinier Cant and Nanning van Foreest, on the ship the Eendracht to Enkhuizen, and traveled from there by cart to Alkmaar, where the Reformed were now in charge. The basket maker who had fled Alkmaar by night six years earlier became a minister in that same town in 1572. On the Sunday after his return he preached in the great church on the words that the Lord had done great things for them. It was full.

In March 1573 he led a synod in Alkmaar, an assembly at which the young Reformed churches of the Noorderkwartier, the part of

Holland north of the IJ, settled their affairs. Boon relates that he was chosen chairman with nearly all the votes, that the assembly sat four days in the Sint-Laurenskerk, and that they adopted the Heidelberg Catechism as their common confession. Jan and Pieter Gabriël signed at the top. Out of the little groups that had met in fields and houses, congregations now grew with a church council and a minister, in church buildings that until then had been Catholic.

A prophecy for Alkmaar

Then came the siege. Don Frederick, the son of Alba, set up his camps around the town. The food supply was cut off, the cannon fired at the walls. Nanning van Foreest organized the defense, former Sea Beggars manned the guns, and men, women and children repaired the breaches. The Spaniards stormed three times. Three times they were driven back.

Jan Arentsz. had already fallen ill before the attacks began. His condition grew worse and his friends feared for his life. He prayed for the town and for those defending it, that it would not fall into the hands of the enemy. Shortly before the third assault he spoke words that his biographer presents as a prophecy: God would make it turn out well, and the enemy would not take the town this time. They were his last words.

On August 28, 1573, Jan Arentsz. died, while Spanish troops were besieging Alkmaar. He did not live to see the relief of the town on October 8, 1573. A few days later nobles and ordinary people followed his bier to the Grote Kerk, where he was buried. His grave is unknown, and his name is not there. His death was mourned by Reinier Cant, Dirk Cater and others, in the Netherlands and in Emden.

A basket maker. He began a church without walls in this part of Holland, and he never saw a church building grow from it.

Fifty sisters on a ship

For the canons and the sisters on the Koewijzend, 1572 meant the end. The canons of Nieuwlicht fled. On October 28, 1572, William of Orange ordered that the nuns of the surrounding area be brought together in one convent in Hoorn. On December 12 that was done.

On November 23, 1572, Hoorn asked permission to demolish Nieuwlicht. An enemy could use the large complex outside the town as a fortress. Demolition began on December 14. On March 6, 1573, the town signed a contract for tearing down the remaining monastery buildings, probably including Bethlehem. Schrickx did not find an archival document about the demolition of Bethlehem itself.

On March 9 and 10, 1573, about fifty sisters were taken by ship to Amsterdam. According to reports, some of them were mistreated by soldiers. About eighty sisters stayed in Hoorn, in the Agnes convent. From 1574 they received an allowance from the monastery properties. In 1597 thirty-six sisters still lived there, and forty other women who lived outside the convent also received support.

The properties of the monasteries went to the town and the States. In 1584 the possessions of the abbey of Egmond, of Nieuwlicht and of Pietersdal were divided by lot among seven towns of the Noorderkwartier.

I do not want to skip this here. For the Reformed in Hoorn, 1572 was a liberation. These women had given their lives to God in their own way. For them the year meant the loss of their home, their place of prayer and their community.

In the letter to the Romans it says: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* (Romans 12:15). In the Hoorn of 1572 those two groups lived in the same town. The story of the congregation that arose then has room for both.

The schout in 1575

One name comes back. In 1575 Diederik Sonoy, who acted for Orange in the Noorderkwartier, set up a special court. It was to try Catholic heads of households who were suspected of treason. The court sat first in Alkmaar, then in the castle of Schagen. One of its members was Master Joost Huikesloot, schout of Hoorn.

The same name and the same office as the man who stood by the ditch in July 1566 and shouted that he would teach the preacher John 10. I assume it is the same man, but the source about 1575 does not make the connection itself. Nine years after the hedge sermon at Westerblokker the roles were reversed. Now it was Catholic citizens who stood trial.

Jesus gave a rule that does not change when power shifts: *Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.* (Matthew 7:12). In 1566 the Reformed themselves had the schout against them. After that, the rule applied to them too.

A kneeling nun

Of Nieuwlicht a ruin remained, which stood until 1834. During excavations and observations in 1932, 1952, 1987 and 2003, remains came to light, among them a fireback. The site is now an archaeological monument. The west wing of Bethlehem stood for a long time as part of a farmhouse. It was shortened in 1793 and demolished in 1932. Later the site was covered with greenhouses.

Between 2003 and 2008 archaeologists excavated the Bethlehem convent before a residential district was built there. They found the buildings, the wall, bridges, wells and the cemetery. Residents of Blokker cleaned the kloostermoppen, the large bricks from the old walls, and used them to build a gate on the Bangert. A keystone from Nieuwlicht was given a place in a new gate.

On October 28, 2010, the sisters themselves, and the men who had been buried in their cemetery, went into the ground again. This happened in the churchyard of the old Saint Michael's church, Roman Catholic in the sixteenth century and Protestant since the Reformation, on the corner of the Westerblokker and the Kolenbergstraat. In the tomb lie the remains of sixty-four people, each in a small wooden box of their own with the cross of the Crosiers on it. A few days later the statue was unveiled: a kneeling nun, made by Henny Bulsing.

A Catholic nun praying in a Protestant churchyard. I know few places in the Netherlands where the history of the Reformation lies so quietly and so closely together.

You can no longer point out the field where Jan Arentsz. preached. There is no sign and no stone. Anyone walking along the Westerblokker sees a Protestant church, and in the churchyard a nun in stone praying on her knees.

Go there yourself

The Protestantse Kerk Westerblokker stands on the corner of the Westerblokker and the Kolenbergstraat in Blokker, municipality of Hoorn. In the churchyard stands the tomb with the kneeling nun by Henny Bulsing, which holds the remains from the Bethlehem convent.

On the Bangert, at numbers 36 and 38, stands the gate that residents built from monastery bricks found in the excavations. Both places are part of the Cultuur Historische Route Blokker, a local heritage trail. For the route and the other points, see the website of that route.

Nothing is left above ground of the Nieuwlicht monastery or of the field of the hedge sermon. The monastery site lay on the south side of the Koewijzend and is an archaeological monument. In Hoorn itself you can visit the Grote Kerk and the old town center, where the story of 1572 continued.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the location and history of the Nieuwlicht monastery of the canons regular (1388-1392 to 1572) and the Bethlehem convent (1475 to 1572-1573); the hedge sermon of Jan Arentsz. at the Regulierenklooster on July 14, 1566; the hedge sermons near Overveen (July 21 and 22, with Pieter Gabriël and Jan Arentsz.), Grootebroek and Alkmaar in July 1566, and the sermon at the Lastage on August 21; the open preaching of Clement Maertsz. in Hoorn on September 14, 1566; the plundering of Bethlehem on May 2, 1567; Hoorn's choice for Orange on June 18, 1572, and the destruction in the Grote Kerk on July 3 and 4, 1572; the demolition of the monasteries and the gathering and removal of the sisters in 1572-1573; the ministry and death of Jan Arentsz. in Alkmaar (1572-1573); the excavations of 2003-2008, the gate on the Bangert and the reburial of 2010.

Only from later tradition or chronicle: the details of the sermon (the meal in the monastery, the monk who leapt over the ditch, the schout's outburst) come from one chronicle tradition, recorded by Brandt in 1671. The life story of Jan Arentsz. comes from the popular biography by R. Boon, which also gives dramatized details

that I found nowhere else: his youth under Cooltuyn and his master's weekly retellings, the night escape on July 2, 1566 with the blue smock, the carter Krijn Aartse and the family in the Oudebrugsteeg, the meeting in the reeds at the Houtewaal on July 8 with Gerbrandsz., the saying about bread and stones, the wagons and the fishermen from Enkhuizen, the pulpit of planks, Psalm 27, the sermon of more than two hours, the monk who landed in the ditch, the promise for Enkhuizen on July 18, the ride home with psalms, his work in Emden, the crossing on the Eendracht, the sermon on the great things the Lord had done, the synod with the Heidelberg Catechism, his illness, his last words and his funeral. His work in the Amsterdam Franciscan chapel comes from the same biography. The mistreatment of sisters by soldiers in 1573 is a report passed on by Schrickx. Not one word of Jan Arentsz. himself has survived; what he prayed and preached we know only through others.

Where the sources differ (in the story I have chosen one reading each time):

- *Place of the first sermon.* Brandt and the other sources about Hoorn name the field in front of the Regulierenklooster on the road from Blokker to Zwaag; Boon places it at the border with Westwoud and elsewhere names Westerblokker.
- *Month of the synod.* Schrickx and other sources say March 1573; Boon gives no month.
- *Number of listeners at Overveen.* About three hundred (Bor) to five thousand (Reael and Boon).

Unconfirmed:

- Whether this was the first hedge sermon in all of Holland (Brandt and Reael) or the first north of the IJ (Schrickx).

- The differing dates of July 4 (near Zwaag) and July 13 (Amsterdam, outside the Haarlemmerpoort) in an Alkmaar chronicle, which refers to Bor.
- Whether Jan Arentsz. was at the synod of Emden in 1571.
- Whether the schout Joost Huikesloot of 1575 is the same man as the one of 1566 (same name and office, probably so).
- The year in which the second Bethlehem convent was demolished (1964 or 1966).
- What exactly can be seen today at the site of Nieuwlicht and the preaching field: nothing found, and no memorial for the hedge sermon.

Interpretation: that the schout, with John 10, was referring to the thief who does not come in by the door is my own reading. That the town government helped arrange the sermon is the view of historian Christiaan Schrickx.

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Rijnsburg: the village where everyone could speak

On Pentecost Sunday, May 29, 1757, a physician from Leiden stood up from his seat in Rijnsburg. His name was Jacob van Eems. He was not a minister. He did not speak from a pulpit, because the Collegiants had none. He stood among the others, just before the Lord's Supper, and spoke about Christian tolerance.

His speech has been preserved. Gerard van Nijmegen included it in his notes in 1801, because he thought the important speeches of the Rijnsburg meeting ought to be printed. The manuscript is now in the Allard Pierson in Amsterdam.

I find that a beautiful picture. A physician, not a pastor, rises on the feast of the Holy Spirit in a village near Leiden and speaks about how Christians must bear with one another. In Rijnsburg that had already been the practice for more than a hundred years.

Walk through the old center today and you will come to the water. The Vliet flows right through the village, past houses and bridges. On the Moleneind stands a farmhouse that already faced that water with its front house in the sixteenth century. It is now a rijksmonu-

ment, a national monument. A little farther on, on the Spinozalaan, stands a small house from 1660. In April 2026 it reopened as a museum after a renovation.

And somewhere in the village hangs a street sign with a word that means nothing to most passersby: Collegiantenstraat.

It is the only trace in the streets that I have found of a community that met here for almost two centuries. They had no minister and no pulpit. They asked no one for a confession of faith. Twice a year they came from all over the Dutch Republic to this village near Leiden, to read the Bible together, to pray, to share bread and wine and to baptize adults in the water. Anyone could speak. In the seventeenth century that was striking, and to many people it was also suspicious.

It began with a minister who had to go.

Three hundred empty pulpits

In 1618 and 1619 a great synod, an assembly of the Reformed Church, met in Dordrecht. The church had been caught up in a bitter conflict for years. On one side stood the Remonstrants. They held that people are free to accept or reject God's grace. Opposite them stood the Counter-Remonstrants, who put the emphasis on God's election. The synod chose the Counter-Remonstrants. About three hundred Remonstrant ministers were removed from office.

One of them was Christiaan Sopingius, minister in Warmond, a village on the edge of the Kaag lakes. In 1619 the synod of South Holland deposed him, after he had signed the act of stillstand (a pledge to stop preaching). His congregation was left without a pastor.

In that congregation was a family of tanners, people who worked hides into leather: the Van der Kodde brothers, Adriaan, Gijsbert

and Jan. They lived scattered across Rijnsburg, Warmond and Oegstgeest. The Biographisch woordenboek, a biographical dictionary, describes them as people of devout life, sincere and faithful to the Bible. They had read Castellio and Coornhert. Another brother, Willem, was professor of Hebrew in Leiden. So they were not unlettered farmers. Zilverberg, who wrote about them in the journal De Zeventiende Eeuw, calls Gijsbert an erudite farmer. Gijsbert was an elder in Warmond and the most prominent of the three.

A psalm, a teaching, an interpretation

In the summer of 1619 Gijsbert van der Kodde made a proposal. According to a Leiden study of the movement, it was in August. If there was no minister, couldn't they simply meet? Read a few chapters from the Bible, pray together and build one another up, each one who had the gift for it? Such meetings were not so strange in the Reformation, writes the old Biographisch woordenboek. But Gijsbert was the first to lead one in Warmond.

He appealed to a text of Paul about the meetings in Corinth: *How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.* (1 Corinthians 14:26). Whoever had something to say, said it, from his place at the table and not from a pulpit. The Collegiants called this free speaking.

What would it be like for you, a church service in which no one knows beforehand who will take the floor?

For the Remonstrant leaders in Antwerp it was a problem. They wanted to keep the congregation in Warmond going and sent a preacher, Henricus Holthenus, who had earlier been minister in Waddinxveen. Gijsbert was not eager to have him. He warned

Holthenus of the risk he was running, told him there were plenty of other ways to build up the congregation, and advised him to learn a trade. The office of minister did not seem very important to him, perhaps even unnecessary.

Holthenus left. After him came Wouter Cornelisz van Waerder. Gijsbert asked whether he could speak freely in the services. Van Waerder was not against it, but the majority of the congregation did not want it, so he could not allow it. Gijsbert, his brothers and a minority kept pressing.

When Paschier de Fijne came to serve the congregation, he came with a proposal. He would preach first, and afterward a meeting could follow immediately in which anyone could speak, himself included. The brothers refused. Jan van der Kodde said he feared being damned if he swallowed his objections to the sermon and died before the next meeting, because then he would not have said what the congregation needed for its edification. That is how seriously they took it.

With a small group of supporters they began to meet separately. De Fijne himself came to look a few more times. In his view the sermons were too long and the use of the Bible sometimes doubtful, and he returned having achieved nothing. According to Zilverberg, the Remonstrant preachers did not succeed in winning the group back. Later De Fijne wrote an account of how it had begun, which was published in 1671 and speaks of the new sect of the prophets, or Rijnsburgers.

A tanner's pond in July 1620

In 1620 Gijsbert van der Kodde moved to Rijnsburg. There the group really came into its own. They met in a private house, and

their meetings were called colleges. That is how they got their name: Collegiants, or, after their village, Rijnsburgers.

They did not want a fixed confession of faith. That Jesus is the Christ, that the Bible has authority, and that errors are to be rejected was enough for Gijsbert.

On July 1, 1620, a man named Joannes Geesteranus was the first to ask to be baptized by immersion. He was born in 1586 and would die in 1622. In such a baptism an adult goes completely under the water, after the example of the first Christians. Geesteranus thought that holding public office and bearing arms did not fit a Christian, and for that very reason he chose the Collegiants, not the Mennonites. The Reformed Church, to which most Hollanders belonged, baptized infants, with water on the head.

The first baptisms took place in a tanner's pond, or in a tanning pit, as the Leiden study also calls it. Later the Collegiants baptized in the Vliet, the water that still runs through the village. In the end a permanent baptismal pool was built, at their own house. These details come from one Leiden study, which relies on the work of the Mennonite historian Meihuizen. I have not found them in a second source.

According to that same study, the idea of immersion came by way of Johannes Crellius, a man with contacts among the Polish Socinians. More about those Socinians shortly, because this is also where the suspicion begins.

One thing was settled for the Collegiants from the beginning. Nobody had to be baptized to take part. Whoever wanted to be baptized was baptized. Whoever did not was just as welcome at the table. According to Zilverberg, Hermannus Montanus had himself baptized again in Rijnsburg after a few years, fully under the water.

Paul wrote: *Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God* (Romans 15:7). At the table in Rijnsburg the baptized and the unbaptized sat side by side. The Collegiants did not turn baptism into an entrance ticket.

Pentecost and the end of August

After 1640 the movement grew fast. In towns across the Republic colleges arose, in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leiden, Hoorn and Haarlem. The heart remained Rijnsburg. English Wikipedia names Adam Boreel as the founder of the Amsterdam college in 1646. In 1645 he had written that the existing churches continued to exist only by God's gracious toleration.

Twice a year there was a great meeting in Rijnsburg: at Pentecost and at the end of August. Collegiants from all over the country traveled there. On Saturday morning, before the meeting began, the candidates were baptized outdoors. According to the Mennonite encyclopedia GAMEO, the person being baptized could choose who baptized him. Then followed days of Bible reading, speaking, praying and singing, mostly songs by D.R. Camphuysen, and of the Lord's Supper, the sharing of bread and wine as Jesus did with His disciples. Twice a year they gathered in the Vergaderplaats (the meeting place) on the east side of the village, and there were also informal gatherings about the religious and philosophical questions of the day.

More and more people came, and so the Collegiants bought a house and rebuilt it. They called it the Groote Huis, the Great House. Guests could lodge there. According to English Wikipedia, which relies on a study by the municipality of Katwijk, it stood on what is now the Kwakelsteeg. What is left of that house I have not been able to establish.

The meetings were open to everyone who accepted the Bible as God's Word. You did not have to sign a confession, and you could simply remain a member of your own church. People from different churches and social classes sat there as equals. According to the Dutch scholar Peter van Zonneveld, women could also take the floor. I have not read that so explicitly in my other sources.

What Locke saw in Haarlem

A well-known visitor to a college was the English philosopher John Locke. In 1684 he attended a meeting in Haarlem and wrote about it in his diary. Prayer was offered at the beginning and at the end, and the meeting closed with the Lord's Prayer; the rest of the prayer was formed on the spot. Whoever felt moved could speak. One person sang a psalm alone. During prayer those present stood or knelt. And every Christian could take part in the Lord's Supper. Locke also noted that it was their duty to meet in love with those who thought differently.

Locke is the only eyewitness of whom we have an extended description of such a meeting, and his report is about Haarlem, not Rijnsburg. That the great meetings in Rijnsburg went the same way is what the sources say about the freedom of speech and the open Lord's Supper, but I have found no eyewitness account of one.

A suspect company

Here I must be honest about something that belongs to this story. The Collegiants were highly controversial in their time, and there were reasons for that.

The greatest charge was Socinianism. The Socinians were a movement with its center of gravity in Poland. They rejected the doctrine of the Trinity: the confession that God is one in three persons, the Fa-

ther, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For most Christians that touched the heart of the faith, because it concerns who Jesus is.

Well into the eighteenth century Reformed ministers accused the Collegiants of this. Zilverberg finds those accusations often unfounded. They were not entirely out of the blue either. There were lines to Socinians, such as Crellius, and the Leiden study calls Collegiantism partly influenced by them. And because nobody had to sign a confession, there was also no fixed standard for turning anyone away. That, at least, is how I see it.

There was a second objection. The Collegiants found a fixed, ordained minister unnecessary. They also rejected what they called Constantinian Christianity: a church that leans on the state. The Reformed Church was the public church of the Republic, with the support of the government. The Remonstrants too kept their distance. The Mennonites blamed the Collegiants for their influence in an Amsterdam quarrel that went down in history as the Lammerenkrijg (the Lambs' War).

Opinions about the Collegiants differ. You can see in them people who kept the conversation open in a time of harsh church conflict. You can also feel that a community without limits in doctrine opens the door to anything. Both sides had their spokesmen in the seventeenth century. I will not settle that here. I do see that the same freedom that attracted some repelled others.

A tenant on the Katwijkerlaantje

On July 29, 1661, a young man took a room in the house of the surgeon Herman Homan. His name was Benedictus de Spinoza, and he would become one of the best-known philosophers of Europe. Until 1663 he lived and wrote in Rijnsburg.

In the summer of 1661 he received a visit from the Englishman Henry Oldenburg. On August 26, writing from London, Oldenburg reminded him that in Rijnsburg they had talked about God, about extension and thought, about the union of soul and body. Oldenburg had arrived home safely on August 9. He offered Spinoza sincere friendship and asked him to share his insights. Spinoza answered in September 1661, from Rijnsburg. It was the beginning of a correspondence that would last for years.

Was it chance that he came to live here? Zilverberg holds that he probably had contact with the Collegiants, even if he perhaps did not attend their meetings. Van Zonneveld writes that he was probably friends with several Collegiants. With certainty the sources say no more.

What is certain: Spinoza's ideas later brought the movement into great trouble. At the end of the seventeenth century a fierce struggle broke out, the Bredenburg disputes, named after the Rotterdam merchant Johannes Bredenburg. He led the party that followed Spinoza's thinking. The Amsterdam bookseller Couper wrote a book against him, with a title that accused him of atheism. The Collegiants in Rijnsburg split into two parties, each with its own meeting place.

Only around 1700, when the main players had died, did reconciliation come, among others through Coenraad van Diepenbroek. In Haarlem he urged those present to be silent about the points of dispute, so that edification, the general and great purpose of the meeting, would be promoted.

That too is an honest piece of history. A community that gave everyone the floor also heard words that pulled it apart.

James wrote: *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath* (James 1:19). In Rijnsburg everyone could speak. Listening proved harder.

Orphans from all over the Republic

The influence of the Collegiants did not stay within the walls of their meetings. You see it most clearly in Amsterdam.

In 1675 Amsterdam Collegiants rented a building on the Keizersgracht. In 1677 they bought it. It became an orphanage, De Oranjeappel. In 1680 a girls' orphanage on the Herengracht was added. In the orphanages the Collegiants also met themselves. According to the historian Wessels, the orphans came from all over the Republic.

On February 10, 1746, a girl of four was admitted whose parents had died a year earlier. Her name was Aagje Deken. She stayed there until February 4, 1767, until she was twenty-five. One of the regents in those years was the historian Jan Wagenaar, and according to the Leiden study Aagje received her religious instruction mostly from him. The Amsterdam bookseller Isaak Tirion was a regent there too.

Aagje grew up in a house where religion was taken seriously. In one of her poems, the *Oeconomische Liedjes*, she calls herself the grateful orphan and praises the upbringing she received. She went on remembering Willem van Maurik warmly, who taught her the principles of godliness with great earnestness and love, and his fervent prayers helped her, she said, to break free from sin. That is how an article in De Gids from 1920 tells it.

On August 23, 1760, Aagje stood in Rijnsburg among the candidates for baptism. Agge Roskam Kool gave the sermon, and he was known for urging the orphans among his candidates to a holy earnestness. The next day, August 24, she took part in the Lord's

Supper in Rijnsburg for the first time. Adriaan Houttuin then spoke about the principles of the Collegiants: love and peace.

When she left the house in 1767, a regentess wrote that she left to the great satisfaction of the regents, although she was only moderate at housekeeping.

Later Aagje Deken became known as a writer, together with Betje Wolff. She also wrote about the house where she grew up. On August 11, 1775, on the hundredth anniversary of the house, her *Eeuwgetijde van het Weeshuis der Collegianten De Oranjeappel* appeared. As a poet she sat that day at the banquet of the regents and recited a pastoral song.

Psalm 68 calls God *A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows* (Psalm 68:5). Aagje Deken had no parents left when she was admitted. She grew up in the house of a congregation, and later had herself baptized in the village where that congregation had begun.

According to Wikipedia, De Oranjeappel still exists as a foundation for youth work. In a source of that foundation itself I have not been able to check this.

A young man and a second baptism

Jan Wagenaar had been to Rijnsburg himself. As a young man he had left a time of nights out behind him, and in 1726 he began to attend the colleges in Amsterdam. His parents were glad of the change in his life, but they disapproved of the meetings. On August 26, 1730, he was baptized in Rijnsburg, at the meeting at the end of August, together with Willem van Maurik, Gerrit du Plouis and Jan van Rijswijk. It was his second baptism, and with it he was a full Collegiant. In Rijnsburg he also had rooms in the Groote Huis.

Through that circle he got to know Isaak Tirion, who around 1730 asked him to work for him. Later Wagenaar wrote large works on the history of the fatherland and of Amsterdam. In the orphanage he gave religious lectures, which were a success. In 1745 he wrote a speech on water baptism, delivered in Rijnsburg on August 28. In it he stressed that whoever was baptized in Rijnsburg remained free to join the company or not. Whoever preferred to belong to another Christian community was not condemned.

Twelve years after that speech, the physician Jacob van Eems stood up in Rijnsburg to speak about Christian tolerance.

How great was the influence of such words on society? Historians differ. Andrew Fix sees in the Collegiants one of the sources of the Dutch Enlightenment, because they gave reason a place in faith. In the period without a stadholder, between 1650 and 1672, influential regents also joined them, such as Coenraad van Beuningen and Adriaan Paets. The historian Jonathan Israel is more cautious about Dutch tolerance in general. He describes it before 1800 mostly as a stalemate between churches that could not overcome one another.

The Collegiants themselves were already thinking about it in 1775. That year Elias van Nijmegen wrote the first history of the Rijnsburg meeting. Why was the movement declining? One of the reasons he gave stands out. Other churches had become more tolerant. He spoke of a "tolerance breaking through everywhere" ("alom doorbrekende verdraagzaamheyt"). What the Collegiants had almost alone been doing, others now did as well.

The last Pentecost

For the movement the eighteenth century became a century of slow decline. There were years without a single candidate for baptism. More and more colleges in the towns closed.

Then came politics. In the 1780s the Republic became divided between the Orangists and the Patriots, who wanted more influence for the citizens. In Rotterdam two leaders of the college, Cornelis van den Bosch and Pieter de Koker, belonged to the Patriots and held town offices. In 1787 a Prussian army marched into Rotterdam and Stadholder William V returned to power. Collegiants who had supported the Patriots had a hard time. The Rotterdam college closed in September 1787. Van den Bosch and De Koker died in 1788 in exile in Brussels.

The last open meeting in Rijnsburg was on May 27, 1787, on Pentecost Sunday. That date comes from English Wikipedia; in a second source I have not been able to check it. In Amsterdam the college ceased in 1791.

After that it grew quiet. According to Zilverberg, baptisms and the Lord's Supper continued until about 1800. The last baptism in Rijnsburg is said to have been in 1801. In that same year the Rotterdam Collegiant Gerard van Nijmegen, the brother of Elias, wrote his notes on the Rijnsburg meeting, with a list of those baptized in the eighteenth century. He also tells about the places where the meeting gathered, about baptism by immersion and about the events from 1781 to 1801. The manuscript is now in the library of the Remonstrant Congregation of Amsterdam, in the Allard Pierson. Elias himself had died in 1781, twenty-six years before that appendix appeared.

When the last Collegiant had died, the property in Rijnsburg was sold in 1828.

A street name by the water

A story like this is not easy to round off. The Collegiants are not a church you can still visit. A church building or memorial of theirs I

have not found in Rijnsburg. What they did leave is in the sources: the habit of meeting without one person having the last word, and an orphanage that took in children who could go nowhere else.

About their teaching you can differ, and in their own time many Christians did so fiercely. Their habit of letting people speak who did not agree with one another, Elias van Nijmegen already saw in others in 1775.

On the Moleneind the old farmhouse still lies with its front house on the Vliet. That water was already flowing when Gijsbert van der Kodde came to live here. Visitors now walk through the small rooms on the Spinozalaan. And on a sign in a residential street is a name that is easy to read past: Collegiantenstraat.

Go there yourself

Rijnsburg lies between Leiden and Katwijk and belongs to the municipality of Katwijk. The old center lies on the Vliet. On the Moleneind stands farmhouse number 35, a sixteenth-century rijksmonument with its front house on the water. The Grote or Laurentiuskerk (the Great or Saint Lawrence Church) stands on the Burgemeester Koomansplein.

The Spinozahuis stands at Spinozalaan 29. The museum reopened in April 2026 after a renovation and tells about the life and thought of Spinoza. For opening hours, see the website of Museum Het Spinozahuis. A museum or memorial of their own for the Collegiants I have not been able to find in the village. The Collegiantenstraat lies on a cycling route along the monuments of Katwijk and Rijnsburg.

Whoever wants to go further can visit the Allard Pierson in Amsterdam on the Oude Turfmarkt, where the manuscript of Gerard

van Nijmegen is kept. For the reading room, see the website of the Allard Pierson.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the origin in Warmond after the deposition of Sopingius in 1619; the role of Gijsbert van der Kodde and his brothers, and the attempts of Holthenus, Van Waerder and De Fijne; meetings without a minister and free speaking on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:26; Rijnsburg as the center; the great meetings twice a year with the Lord's Supper and baptism by immersion; the Groote Huis as a lodging house; no compulsory confession; the charges of Socinianism; Spinoza in Rijnsburg from 1661 to 1663 and Oldenburg's letter of August 26, 1661; the Bredenburg disputes and the reconciliation around 1700; the Collegiant orphanage De Oranjeappel in Amsterdam and the youth of Aagje Deken there; the speech of Jacob van Eems on May 29, 1757; the history by Elias van Nijmegen from 1775; the end of the colleges at the end of the eighteenth century.

Only from one source or tradition: the month of August 1619; the first baptism of Geesteranus on July 1, 1620, in a tanner's pond and the later baptism in the Vliet; the role of Crellius; the speaking of women; the accounts of Locke's visit to Haarlem (only the Leiden research gives the details of his diary; I have not opened the diary itself); the founding of the Amsterdam college by Boreel in 1646; the years 1675, 1677 and 1680 for the orphanage and the origin of the orphans; the life course of Aagje Deken as De Gids described it in 1920 (her admission at the age of four, the baptism on August 23, 1760, the Lord's Supper on August 24, the departure on February 4, 1767, and the note of the regentess); Wagenaar's baptism in 1730 with three others, his rooms in the Groote Huis and his speech of August 28, 1745; the last open meeting on May 27, 1787, the last baptism in

1801 and the sale in 1828; the location of the Groote Huis on the Kwakelsteeg. From the Collegiants themselves I found no report of a meeting in Rijnsburg: the descriptions come from opponents, from later historians and from one English visitor in Haarlem.

Where the sources differ (in the story I have chosen one reading each time):

- *Aagje Deken.* De Gids (1920) and the Biographisch woordenboek give February 10, 1746 for her admission to the orphanage; English Wikipedia says 1745. That she was baptized in Rijnsburg in 1760 comes from Zilverberg and De Gids; the Biographisch woordenboek mentions only an infant baptism in Amstelveen on December 10, 1741, the month of her birth.
- *The year the Rotterdam college closed.* 1787 according to the Allard Pierson, 1788 according to Wikipedia.

Unconfirmed: whether De Oranjeappel still exists as a youth foundation; whether Spinoza himself attended the meetings; what is left of the Groote Huis.

Interpretation: how much the Collegiants contributed to Dutch tolerance and the Enlightenment is undecided among historians. Fix sees a clear contribution; Israel calls the tolerance before 1800 mostly a stalemate. Whether their openness in doctrine was gain or loss is a question that Christians answer differently.

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Amsterdam: four hundred little rooms on the Amstel

On October 18, 1680, a merchant died in Amsterdam, Barent Helleman. No portrait of him has survived, and no letter. What has survived is a decision: his entire fortune, about 90,000 guilders, went to the diaconate of the Reformed church.

About Helleman himself I found nothing reliable. Why he gave so much, we do not know. But a few years later a building stood on the Amstel in which four hundred poor old women could live, and that building stayed open for more than three centuries.

You can still see it. On the Amstel, at number 51, stands a building that is hard to take in all at once. The facade is 102 meters long, flat, with a row of windows and a pediment in the middle. When it was built, it was the longest facade in Amsterdam. Anyone who goes inside today enters the H'ART Museum, a museum of art from all over the world. In the fall of 2026 there is an exhibition on Matisse, with work from the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Above the middle door there are still a few words that have nothing to do with art: "Diaconie Oude Vrouwen Huys anno 1681," the

diaconate's house for old women, in the year 1681. That door is a false door. It does not open. According to English Wikipedia, the burgomasters of the day felt that a building of this size needed a flight of steps at the front, so it got an entrance that leads nowhere. But the words above it tell what this building was: a house where the church of Amsterdam let its poor old women live. Later men were admitted as well. The home existed for 324 years. In 2007 the last residents left.

Behind that facade lies a courtyard with three old chestnut trees. That is not where this story begins. It begins with a few men with a collection bag, more than a hundred years before a single stone was laid.

Two funds in one city

In 1578 Amsterdam went over to the Reformation. Historians call this the Alteratie, the overthrow. From that moment the Reformed church was the public church of the city. Later it would be called the Dutch Reformed Church. From that year the Reformed congregation in Amsterdam also kept books on the money for the poor. Those accounts run on without a break from 1578.

Who looked after that money? In a Reformed congregation the deacons did. The word comes from the Greek and means servant. In the book of Acts the first congregation in Jerusalem chooses seven men to distribute food, because the widows of one part of the congregation were being overlooked. The Reformation built on that example. The deacons collected the offering every Sunday, managed gifts and inheritances and visited the poor at home. Together they formed the diaconate.

Alongside the diaconate Amsterdam had municipal poor relief. The historian A.Th. van Deursen describes how strictly the two were

kept apart. The church cared for its members, the city for its citizens. A member was someone who had made a public profession of faith and was allowed to come to the Lord's Supper. Someone who only attended church was not yet that.

The sums were large. In the years of the Twelve Years' Truce, between 1609 and 1621, the Amsterdam diaconate spent about 70,000 guilders a year. The municipal poor masters, the almoners, supported about 16,000 people in 1616. The city was growing fast. Between 1500 and 1650 Amsterdam grew from about ten thousand inhabitants to more than two hundred thousand.

That created tension. In 1604 the Amsterdam minister Helmichius complained that poor newcomers came to the city to find work and then became a burden on the diaconate. Van Deursen found that newcomers sometimes got a probation period of two or three months, or were questioned first, before the diaconate helped them.

Bread, peat and a home visit

How did it work in practice? From Amsterdam itself I found few details. Van Deursen does sketch how diaconates in Holland worked in those years, and in broad lines the picture was the same everywhere. Deacons came to the poor at home. They looked at how someone lived and could raise or lower the support. Usually the help came in kind: bread, cheese, peat for the fire, linen, shoes or wooden clogs. Often they delivered it quietly, so that the neighbors did not see who was receiving help. The poor were ashamed to be openly recognized as recipients. So the deacons often handed out their support in secret, and gave account of it in public in the church.

Jesus said about giving: *But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing* (Matthew 6:3). Dea-

cons who quietly dropped off the bread and peat let the poor keep their dignity in front of the neighbors.

There were rules with it. Whoever received support was not allowed to beg. In Delft you were not allowed to sit in the tavern either. Whoever drank, fought or cursed could be struck from the list. Elsewhere, as in Haarlem, women were excluded whose husbands were not church members.

Such a system raises questions that still sound familiar today. Did the church help people because they were poor, or because they belonged? And did some people come to church because there was bread to be had? Contemporaries openly suspected one another of this. Reformed people said it of the Mennonites, because their deacons also gave generously. A text from that time speaks of people "derwelker buyk haren God is" (whose belly is their god), people who really came for their stomachs. The competition with the Mennonites was fierce: they gave their support only to their own members, but that often won them loyal followers. Van Deursen does warn that you should not assume poor relief drew the poor into the church in large numbers. That effect is hard to measure.

And those who did not belong to the public church? After 1578 Catholics had to arrange their poor relief in secret. From that grew the Roomsch Catholijk Oude Armenkantoor (the Roman Catholic Old Poor Office), which for centuries helped poor elderly people from Catholic families. Lutherans had their own diaconate, as did the Walloon, French-speaking congregation. Each group cared for its own people. Whoever belonged nowhere depended on the city, and in principle the city helped only its own citizens.

An extra bed and a little bag on a stick

What the poor themselves said has rarely been preserved. In the church archives of Holland Van Deursen found a few moments when their voice comes through. They come from other cities than Amsterdam, but they show the world in which the deacons worked.

In Haarlem in 1616 Jan Tricot and his wife both fell ill. They asked the deacons of the Walloon congregation for an extra bed, so that they could sleep apart. The deacons refused. At that, they said the true church is not where there is no love, "là où il n'i avoit point de charité," and they went over to the Mennonites.

In Haarlem the church council wrote in 1610 that some recipients made their need greater than it was, while there were also "eerbare beschaemde herten" (honorable, ashamed hearts) whose need weighed heavier than their complaints. The deacons went to look at the homes of the poor. In 1621 deacon Folckert Jacobs asked to be relieved of collecting, because he was too weak to carry the bag around. The church council agreed and appointed another.

In Krommenie in 1612 Jan Arisz. asked the deacons for help with his debts and hoped for a hundred daalders. He got forty guilders. In Hazerswoude a man from Middelharnis received four stuivers, because he had been cut for the stone twice. A woman from Haarlem received fourteen stuivers, because her husband had been beheaded in the time of the Arminians. In 1622 the collection bag at a funeral held half an Italian pistolet, worth almost four guilders. Usually only small coin went in, and sometimes even "quaet gelt" (bad money).

In Amsterdam itself Van Deursen mentions a woman who around 1600 promised to stop her work in her dealings with men, if the deacons would give her an annuity. Few were so frank, he writes.

That is what the work looked like from which the building on the Amstel grew: small amounts, small coins, contradictory stories and sometimes also a bag that became too heavy to carry.

A merchant who left everything

Back to Helleman. The diaconate knew what it wanted to do with the money. Until then it had placed poor old women with private persons, who were paid for it. According to the history that the museum later had told, that was expensive and cumbersome. A house of its own would be better.

The city helped. In those years Amsterdam had expanded to the east, with new canals along the Amstel. The demand for building land disappointed, and the city donated plots to charitable institutions. So the diaconate received a piece of land between the Nieuwe Herengracht and the Nieuwe Keizersgracht, with the front on the Amstel.

Sixteen months of building

In 1681 the building began. According to the museum, the house stood there sixteen months later. The Rijksmonumentenregister (the national register of monuments) takes a wider view and names the years 1681 to 1684, which suggests that building went on after the opening. The design is attributed to the city architect Hans Jansz. van Petersom. The museum's commentary says that he "probably" drew it.

It became a closed block around a large courtyard, with wings along both canals. In the wings lay the little rooms of the residents, the chambrettes. On the Amstel side came a large hall. There they ate, and on Sunday the same hall became a church. Until the twentieth century it was the second-largest church hall in the city.

The house was opened in 1683. Some sources say 1682. The museum itself holds to 1683, and on a silver medal struck a hundred years later it says "Gestigt A°. 1683" (founded in the year 1683). That last seems the strongest to me, because the house celebrated its centenary in 1783.

There was room for four hundred women.

Fifty, fifteen, ten

Not every poor old woman got in. The diaconate set three conditions. You had to be at least fifty years old. You had to have lived in Amsterdam for fifteen years. And you had to have been a member of the Reformed congregation for ten years already.

Who, then, was left standing at the door? The woman who became a widow at forty and found no more work. The woman who had come to the city from Friesland or Germany later in life. The Catholic or Mennonite woman, however poor. And the Reformed woman who sat in church every Sunday but had never made a profession of faith.

I want to be honest here about what I do not know. In the sources I was able to read, there is not a single name of a resident from the first century. I do not know what their days looked like, what they ate or how strict the house rules were. There is a book about the building from 2010, by Nelleke Noordervliet and others, that according to the publisher also describes the residents and caregivers. Whoever looks for their faces must search further there and in the City Archives.

What is certain is the reasoning behind the rules. The diaconate had a limited fund and a city full of poor people. It chose to care first for those who had belonged to the congregation for a long time. The Bible knows such limits too. Paul writes to Timothy about the list

of widows who were supported by the church: *Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man* (1 Timothy 5:9). The Amsterdam deacons did something similar, with their own numbers.

You can find those rules hard. You can also see in them the only way to build something reliable with limited means. Probably they were both. How would you have done it, with four hundred places in a city of more than two hundred thousand people?

A token for a loaf of bread

The house on the Amstel was one part of a larger whole. Since 1657 the diaconate also had an orphanage of its own on the Binnen-Amstel. And it went on supporting the poor who lived at home.

In the Rijksmuseum lie small metal tokens from 1777 of the Reformed Diaconate of Amsterdam. A needy member with such a poor token received bread for it at the distribution. There is also a medal that new deacons and deaconesses received when they took office. They are small objects, but they show how it worked: whoever was on the list received a token, and with that token you got food.

A large part of the money came from the collection bag. The historian E.G.H. Boersma calculated that around 1770 the Reformed diaconate drew about 43 percent of its income from collections. The rest came among other things from inheritances, like Helleman's. So the house on the Amstel ran on the money of ordinary churchgoers, Sunday after Sunday.

About a poor widow with two small coins Jesus said: *Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury* (Mark 12:43). Helleman's inheritance is in the books.

The names of those who put something in the bag every Sunday are not. They carried almost half.

In February 1783 the house celebrated its hundredth anniversary. A silver medal was struck with the city maiden of Amsterdam in front of the facade, with an open book in her hand. A print also appeared in a monthly magazine, the Maandelijkse Nederlandsche Mercurius of March 1783, with a caption saying that the jubilee was celebrated on February 22 and 24. On the precise days print and medal do not agree: one names February 22 and 24, the other February 23 and 24. The print shows the facade, and no celebrants.

1817: the men come in

In 1817 the door of the house on the Amstel opened to old men as well. That is how the museum and other sources have it. There is a puzzle in it, though. The print and the medal of 1783 already speak of an "Oude Vrouwe & Mannen Huys" (Old Women and Men's House). Perhaps the diaconate already had a men's house in another place then, or a few men had lived here earlier. I have not been able to sort it out.

In 1810 the church hall received a new organ, built by J. Strumphler. It is still there. In 1979 it was restored by the organ builders of Flentrop. On Sunday there was a church service here. On the other days the residents sat at the table in the same place.

The governance lay with regents and regentesses. From the nineteenth century we know, for example, the Wendelaar sisters of the Herengracht. Three unmarried sisters lived at Herengracht 434: Johanna Benjamina (1843 to 1927), Wilhelmina Laura (1845 to 1933) and Johanna Elisabeth (1846 to 1913). Wilhelmina Laura succeeded her aunt Alida as regentess of what was then called the Diaconate Old Women's and Men's and Boarding Homes.

A descendant of the family wrote down in 2025, for the Women of Amsterdam platform of the Amsterdam Museum, what her mother told about them. According to this family tradition, the regentesses met well into the twentieth century in eighteenth-century dress: a black gown with a wide skirt, a white millstone collar and a white lace cap, although the writer herself says she may be mistaken. They gave so generously that they took the nameplate off the door, because there was too much begging. An ancestor wrote about them in a family book that they were Amsterdammers of the highest caliber, diamonds of the purest water.

Another story is about an ice-cold day. Wilhelmina Laura was driving to a meeting in her costume. The horse slipped on the frozen Herengracht, the carriage ended up in the water, and bystanders pulled her out. She got off with a fright. What happened to the horse has not been handed down.

Meanwhile the law changed. The Poor Law of 1854 laid down that civil poor relief could help only when church and private persons could not, and even then only "in case of absolute necessity." Support was a favor, not a right. Whoever was old and poor in nineteenth-century Amsterdam therefore had to turn first to the church. For those who belonged to the diaconate, it was the first door to knock on.

The new name

In 1953 the house was given the name Amstelhof. In the twentieth century the old women's home for poor church members slowly became a nursing home.

The book from 2010 describes precisely that transition, from charity to professional elder care. In the 1970s the building was thoroughly renovated.

In the 1990s the managers concluded that the building no longer met the requirements of the times. They went looking for new construction. In 2007 the last residents of the Amstelhof left for new homes in Diemen and Nieuw-Vennep.

I pause for a moment on what that means. From 1683 to 2007 old people lived here without interruption. For more than three centuries people ate and held church services in this hall. Then the last resident walks out the door, and the house is empty.

A museum in a care home

What was to happen to the building? The city of Amsterdam rented it to a museum. The idea came from Ernst Veen, director of De Nieuwe Kerk on the Dam. He later told how, in the courtyard of the Amstelhof, he asked Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, whether an Amsterdam branch was a good plan. We know that conversation from his own memory. In 2009 he told the Christian Science Monitor that the public in the Netherlands was hungry for collections from Russia.

The renovation cost 40 million euros. Little of the old interior remained. The facade was preserved, the church hall was restored and the courtyard became a garden to a design by landscape architect Michael van Gessel. Next to the three old chestnuts came four wingnut trees.

On June 20, 2009, Queen Beatrix and the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev together opened the Hermitage Amsterdam. In the first years the museum had a permanent presentation on the history of the Amstelhof. On March 3, 2022, the museum broke its ties with Saint Petersburg. Since September 1, 2023, it has been called the H'ART Museum.

In the description of a book about the building it also says that during the Second World War it sheltered the resistance. I have found no other source for that. The story deserves research, but I cannot present it as fact.

What the diaconate left behind

What does this house say about the role of the church in care, before there was a welfare state?

To begin with, that the church carried that care. There was no health insurance, no pension, no social assistance. Whoever grew old and had nothing depended on family, on the city or on the diaconate. In Amsterdam one church congregation, with the collections of ordinary churchgoers and the inheritance of one merchant, built a house for four hundred women, and kept it open for more than three centuries.

Also that this care had limits. It was for members, for those who had lived in the city long enough, for those who behaved. Whoever fell outside that had to knock elsewhere. Other faith communities built their own provisions: in 1866 the Catholics opened the large old people's home Sint Jacob, paid for from an inheritance. So Amsterdam became a city of pillars, before that word existed.

That history does not end here. Along the Nieuwe Herengracht and the Nieuwe Keizersgracht stand other houses that the diaconate had built in the eighteenth century for the elderly and the sick, such as the Corvershof and the Amstelrank. Organizations connected with the diaconate are still housed there. In the Amstelrank today is Het Wereldhuis (the World House), which helps refugees. Once the diaconate asked whether you had lived here for fifteen years. Now, in one of its old houses, people who have only just arrived receive help.

Jesus mentioned the stranger in the same breath as the one who is hungry and thirsty: *I was a stranger and you took Me in* (Matthew 25:35). The deacons of 1681 began with their own members. In the Amstelrank it is now about refugees.

Chestnuts in the courtyard

Whoever visits the museum today can stand in the courtyard around which the wings with the residents' little rooms once lay. The chestnuts are still there. On the Amstel side lies the large hall with Strumphler's organ, where the residents ate and went to church on Sunday.

Outside, above the door that does not open, stand the words with the year 1681. Diaconate. Old women. House. The visitors who come for Matisse walk underneath them.

Go there yourself

The Amstelhof stands at Amstel 51 in Amsterdam, between the Nieuwe Herengracht and the Nieuwe Keizersgracht. From the other side of the Amstel you see the long facade. Above the middle door is the inscription "Diaconie Oude Vrouwen Huys anno 1681." The building is a rijksmonument, a national monument.

Inside is the H'ART Museum, with changing exhibitions. The museum has an inner garden with chestnut trees and a Grand Café. The old church hall with the organ from 1810 is mainly used for events. For opening hours and what there is to see, check the website of the H'ART Museum.

In the neighborhood you can walk along the Nieuwe Herengracht and the Nieuwe Keizersgracht, where more former diaconate houses stand, such as the Corvershof and the Amstelrank. On the

Nieuwe Herengracht also lies the Hortus Botanicus, which has been there since 1682.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the inheritance of Barent Helleman (died October 18, 1680, about 90,000 guilders) to the diaconate; the land donated by the city; construction from 1681; room for 400 women; the admission requirements (at least 50 years old, 15 years in Amsterdam, 10 years a member); the church hall that was also the dining hall; the centenary in February 1783; men admitted from 1817; the Strumphler organ from 1810; the name Amstelhof since 1953; the departure of the last residents in 2007; opening as the Hermitage Amsterdam on June 20, 2009; the name H'ART Museum since September 1, 2023. For the diaconate in general: the separation between church care for members and municipal care for citizens, the complaint of Helmichius in 1604, the spending in the Truce years and the poor tokens of 1777; the incidents from the church archives of Haarlem, Krommenie and Hazerswoude that Van Deursen describes.

Only from tradition or own testimony: the conversation of Ernst Veen with Mikhail Piotrovsky in the courtyard (his own memory); the clothing, the nameplate and the story about the carriage of the Wendelaar sisters (family tradition, written down in 2025); the explanation of the false door (English Wikipedia); that before 1683 women were placed with private persons at great cost and effort (only from the museum's account of its history). Of the residents themselves not a word has been preserved in the sources I opened.

Where the sources differ (in the story I have chosen one reading each time):

- *Year of opening.* 1682 according to English Wikipedia, 1683 according to the museum and the medal of 1783.
- *Building time.* Sixteen months according to the museum, 1681 to 1684 according to the Rijksmonumentenregister.
- *Days of the centenary.* February 22 and 24 on the print, February 23 and 24 on the medal.
- *The longest facade.* The longest in Amsterdam according to Wikipedia, in the Netherlands according to a tourist website.
- *Architect.* Wikipedia names Van Petersom firmly, the museum writes "probably."
- *When men were admitted.* 1817 according to the museum and other sources, but the print and medal of 1783 already speak of an "Oude Vrouwe & Mannen Huys." The puzzle is not solved.
- *The carriage in the canal.* Earlier this said the sisters slid into the water together; the source I have now read names only Wilhelmina Laura.
- *Income.* The 43 percent from collections around 1770 comes from Boersma; house-to-house collections from before 1700 I have not included, because they may have been about collections elsewhere.

Unconfirmed: that the building housed the resistance in the Second World War and that it was a reception hall for kings (only a book description).

Interpretation: exactly how Amsterdam deacons visited and checked their poor is described here after the general picture that Van Deursen gives of Holland diaconates around 1600. Details such as the ban on the tavern come from other cities. The scenes from Haarlem, Krommenie and Hazerswoude are examples of the same world, not of the house on the Amstel.

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Amsterdam: the refugee church that took in refugees

A girl and her little brother come into a room. The girl looks at you. Her brother looks at a man who is writing their names in a register: Jean Dailly, one of the regents of the Walloon orphanage. Next to him stands Nicaise le Clercq with the wax seal ready. Pierre Sauchelle straightens his cloak and looks at a woman, the *mère de dedans*, the mother of the house.

A painter captured this moment in a group portrait of the regents from 1641 or 1642. The canvas is kept by the Amsterdam Museum. The book the museum published with the paintings says of the scene that the children are in good hands with these gentlemen.

The children in the painting had something in common. Their parents were dead, and they belonged to a congregation of French-speaking refugees. How that congregation came to have such a house, and what it did with the next wave of refugees, is the story of this chapter.

Two buildings that belong together

On the southern stretch of the Oudezijds Achterburgwal lies a small square. Officially it has had its name only since the 1970s: the Walenpleintje (Walloon Square). On that square stands a church that began as a monastery chapel. Whoever comes in can read a plaque in the north aisle with three words: "Fondée en 1409." Founded in 1409. Above the congregation hangs an organ by Christian Müller from 1733. In the floor lie old gravestones, which were put back in place during the restoration of 1990 to 1992.

Every other week on Sunday morning there is still a service here in French. Whoever does not follow French can read along with a Dutch translation of the meditation.

Farther south, on the corner of the Vijzelgracht and the Prinsengracht, stands a broad seventeenth-century building with two low wings. In October 2024 there were construction fences around it. The regional broadcaster saw cracks in the brickwork and wooden window frames slowly rotting away. Part of the wooden cornice had already been removed. For almost three hundred years orphans from the congregation of that French church lived here, and beside them old men and women.

Those two buildings belong together. Together they tell the story of a church of refugees that took in the next refugees.

A chapel without brothers

The church on the Walenpleintje was not a French church at first. It was the chapel of the monastery of the Brothers of Saint Paul, which first appears in the sources in 1409. The brothers were ordinary citizens who led a monastic life. A fire in 1452 probably damaged the complex. In 1493 permission came for a chapel, and three years later it was consecrated.

In 1578 Amsterdam chose the side of the Revolt and of the Reformation. In Amsterdam history that turnaround is called the Alteratie. The city seized the Catholic churches and monasteries. For the brothers of Saint Paul the end of their monastery had come. Their chapel served for a time as storage and for other purposes.

In that same year 1578 a Walloon congregation arose in Amsterdam. Walloons in this context were French-speaking Protestants from the Southern Netherlands and northern France. They were Reformed, like the Dutch Calvinists, but they read their Bible and sang their psalms in French. In 1586 their congregation received the old monastery chapel. It has never left.

I write this chapter knowing that there are two sides to this beginning. For the Walloons the chapel was a safe place after years of persecution. For Catholic Amsterdammers it was a loss. Their churches closed, and for a long time they had to meet in hidden churches.

After the fall of Antwerp

The great stream came after August 17, 1585. On that day Antwerp fell into Spanish hands. What had been a migration from the South for years became an exodus. Historians speak of the "first refuge," the first wave of refugees, which lasted from about 1560 to 1619. Before 1619 eighteen Walloon churches arose in the Northern Netherlands.

The Amsterdam congregation was strictly Calvinist. When the Dutch Protestants fell out among themselves over the question of how free a person is in relation to God's grace, the Amsterdam Walloons chose the strict party, the Counter-Remonstrants.

The congregation heard sermons about the poor. In 1591 the minister Jean Taffin preached a sermon on love and alms. What exactly

he said, the source does not describe. But we do know what the congregation did forty years later.

February 16, 1631

The Walloon congregation was led by what they themselves called the Double Consistoire: the double church council. In it sat the ministers and the elders, together with the deacons, who cared for the poor. On February 16, 1631, that assembly met and decided to start an orphanage of its own. In French they added for whom it was: for the orphans of their own nation and religion.

Why a house of their own? Amsterdam had a Burgerweeshuis, a Citizens' Orphanage, but it was for the children of poorters, people with the citizenship of the city. From about 1633 it no longer took in orphans of non-poorters at all. Many Walloon families were newcomers. If the parents died, the city had no bed for their children.

It went fast. On Ascension Day 1631 the first regents met. On July 1 of that year, according to the Amsterdam historian Jan Wagenaar, the first orphans moved into the house. It stood in the Laurierstraat, in the Jordaan, where the heirs of the merchant Baudouin de Bordes donated three houses. On November 17, 1631, the rich merchant Louis de Geer had it recorded with the notary that he donated three thousand guilders to the poor orphanage of the French congregation. The notary wrote it down in the spelling of his time: "drijduijsent guldens capitaels" (three thousand guilders of capital).

That year Joost van den Vondel, the best-known poet of Amsterdam, also wrote a poem for the new house: the "Bede voor het Waalseweeshuys" (Prayer for the Walloon Orphanage). He was a man used to addressing passersby. At the expansion of the Burgerweeshuis, three years later, he called out to the people in the Kalverstraat: "Oh, do not go on through this gate, but help to carry a little!"

At the end of the poem for the Walloons stands a line in the spelling of the time: "True religion is to stand by the orphans in their misery."

That line sounds like an echo of the letter of James: *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.* (James 1:27)

A note, a wax seal and a ledger

The house got a board of its own, the régence. In it sat two elders and two deacons, each for two years. From 1659 three regentesses were added, women who stayed for three years. In the house itself lived an inside father and an inside mother. The "mère de dedans" remained a fixed position into the twentieth century.

We know what those administrators looked like, because they had themselves painted. The oldest group portrait is from 1631. Bartholomeus van der Helst began a portrait of the regents in 1637, which was not finished until 1653. It is the earliest known work of his. Later came portraits by Abraham van den Tempel, Adriaen Backer and Wallerant Vaillant.

Some canvases tell a scene. The portrait with the two children coming in, which I described above, is one of them. On another canvas Daniël de Hochepied shows a ledger, with the quill still behind his ear. In the book it says "Anno 1633 en Amster[dam] / Capital des Orphelins de." His colleague Hattevier has just interrupted the counting of the money.

On the canvas from 1647 or 1648 the inside father, Jacques de la Haye, hands over a note. The art historians remark that the painting looks like a group of separate heads and hands. The painter visibly struggled with the format. What the regents wanted to show

is clear: they were administrators of a house full of other people's children.

You can see such portraits as the vanity of rich gentlemen and ladies. They also show something else. These people wanted the city to know that they cared for their orphans. Care here was a matter of honor, and of accountability.

The first two stones

After almost forty years the Laurierstraat was too small. The city government gave land on the Vijzelgracht, without the congregation having to pay for it. The architect was Adriaen Dortsman. Deacon Jeremias van Raey was one of the driving forces.

On October 29, 1669, the first stones were laid, not by the regents but by children: the children of two families, Godin and Van Raey. It has not been forgotten. In the regents' room, on the chimney breast, it says in French: "LES DEVX PREMIERES PIERRES DE CESTE." The two first stones of this house. In 1671 the new Walloon Orphanage opened. That same year Adriaen Backer painted the regents and Wallerant Vaillant the regentesses.

The house grew with the need. In 1683 a low wing was added for old women, on what is now the Eerste Weteringdwarsstraat. In 1726 a wing followed for old men, on the Prinsengracht. So the orphanage also became a home for the elderly. Later it would be called the Hospice Wallon.

Three privileges on September 23, 1681

Meanwhile it was becoming ever more dangerous in France for Protestants, who were called Huguenots there. The Edict of Nantes had given them freedom of faith a century earlier, but King Louis

XIV rolled that freedom back. From 1681 more and more refugees came to Amsterdam.

Amsterdam did not wait. On September 23, 1681, the city government gave the French refugees three privileges. They received the poorterschap, the citizenship of the city. They were free of municipal taxes for three years. And they were allowed to practice a trade without joining a guild. In the same month the States of Holland gave them twelve years of tax exemption. The Amsterdam Museum puts it briefly: the city rolled out the red carpet.

Those who asked were not anonymous refugees. Among the petitioners of 1681 were a silversmith, Pierre Poulain, an ivory worker from Dieppe, Nicolas Barre, and a diamond cutter from Caen, Jean Quedeville. They brought their trade with them.

In 1685 Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes. Of the roughly 870 Protestant ministers in France about three quarters left. About 405 of them hoped for a place in the Republic. In 1695 Jan Luyken made an engraving of fled Huguenots. In the nineteenth century Hendrik Sluyter made a steel engraving after a painting by Joannes Vaarberg, with the title "Liefderijke ontvangst der uit Frankrijk gevlugte protestanten te Amsterdam" (Loving reception of the Protestants who fled from France, in Amsterdam).

Six thousand members

How many Huguenots came to the Republic, no one knows exactly. The estimates vary widely. Some sources speak of more than 75,000 people, the French Musée protestant holds to 50,000 to 75,000, and a Dutch historian wrote in 1985 of 50,000 to 60,000. More recent research arrives at about 35,000. The philosopher Pierre Bayle called the Republic "la grande arche des réfugiés": the great ark of the refugees.

For Amsterdam there are hard figures. Between October 1681 and 1691, 2,243 refugees were entered on a special list, the Fransche cedul. These were mostly heads of families who wanted to settle. The total number of French refugees in the city is estimated at about twelve thousand men, women and children.

You see the stream most clearly in the church. In the years 1681 to 1685 the Walloon congregation had an average of some 3,480 members. In the years 1686 to 1690 there were more than six thousand. In five years the congregation almost doubled.

What did the church do with all those people? It spoke on their behalf with the magistrate. It raised money for those who had nothing. It looked for buildings and homes. It gave newcomers a place to belong, in their own language. The ministers themselves needed help too. In January 1686 the States of Holland set aside 25,000 guilders a year for about seventy fled ministers. Halfway through that year the Walloon synod reported that 102 others were still living in "groote armoede ende nootdruft" (great poverty and need).

In the law of Moses Israel is given a reason: *Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* (Deuteronomy 10:19) The Walloon congregation had itself arisen from refugees. A century later the new refugees stood at its door.

The help had a flip side. Whoever wanted care for the sick or the elderly had to be a member of the congregation and behave well. The church council kept watch and exercised discipline. Whoever did not comply could not count on the diaconate.

A merchant from Dieppe

From all those numbers a person occasionally steps forward. Josias Duhamel was a merchant in Dieppe, a port town on the Normandy coast. In 1689 he fled. On July 4 of that year he arrived in Ams-

terdam. He became a member of the Walloon church and rented a house on the Prinsengracht. On June 13, 1690, he received the poorterschap free of charge.

That is all we know of him. Yet that short trace in the archives says a lot. Within a year a refugee was a citizen of the city, with a house on the Prinsengracht. And one of his first steps he took toward the Walloon church.

A schoolmaster who wrote down his children

Of another refugee we know more, because he wrote his story. Jean Migault was a schoolmaster and lector in the church of Mougon in Poitou, and until about 1680 also a notary. When Protestants were excluded from such offices, he lost his work. He was persecuted and fell into need. On February 1, 1686, he hid his children in an underground cave. He tried to reach La Rochelle to arrange a passage to England for two sons. There he was recognized, questioned and imprisoned.

In the confusion of that moment he signed a statement renouncing his faith. He later regretted that deeply. That is how it stands in Van der Aa's Biographisch woordenboek, and it is known because Migault wrote it down himself. He wrote an account of what had happened to him and his family and gave each of his children a copy. That account, his *Journal*, has been preserved. In 1835 a Dutch translation appeared in Amsterdam, published by W. Messchert.

After his release Migault traveled by way of Brielle and Rotterdam to Amsterdam. In 1688 he settled there with his children. He stayed until May 22, 1696. Then he went to Emden, where the French church appointed him lector and teacher. How he earned his living in those eight years, and whether he attended the Walloon church in Amsterdam, my sources do not say. They do say that a man who

had denied his faith and deeply regretted it found a place in Amsterdam where he could live with his children.

Among the wine barrels

Another trail runs into our own time. Lucas Bouyssavy was born in 1660 in Bergerac, in the Dordogne. In 1688 he left France. Around 1691 he settled in Amsterdam, where he began to call himself Boissevain.

The family tells how he traveled. For three years he was on the road in a country where he was not safe. With the help of Protestant friends he got aboard a sailing ship full of wine barrels bound for Amsterdam. Before the ship left, he is said to have sat among the barrels for days and nights without anything to eat. After a few weeks he arrived, sick and without money.

His wife Marthe Roux, too, has her own flight in the family story. She is said to have come across the border with her two children, hidden at the bottom of a hay basket. A soldier thrust his bayonet into the hay and hit her. She controlled herself and made no sound. One of the children died on the way in Antwerp, from the hardships of the long journey.

The family itself adds that this has often been told, and the writer of that family history claims no historical accuracy. The dates in his own text do not fit together either. So I bring it as what it is: a family story.

The church books are more sober. Lucas appears by name in the books of the Walloon church, the first trace of the family in the Netherlands. He earned his living teaching drawing and French and keeping books for merchants. He died young, at forty-four, and left Marthe with two children. She kept the family afloat with French lessons and fine embroidery.

On October 8, 1702, their son Jérémie was born. Three days later he was baptized in the great Walloon church, by the minister Jean Fesan. According to the family archive, in 1753 Jérémie and his wife Marie Charlotte du Chesne were chosen as father and mother of the Hospice Wallon on the Vijzelgracht. He was fifty, she forty-eight. The Double Consistoire chose them, and the archive notes that Jérémie was often ill. The choice fell mainly on her, for her steady character.

The archive describes how it went, in August 1753. The couple promised to do their duty and received a blessing. They sat by the fireplace, facing the clerks, the orphans, the old people and the minister. Then there was a meal. So the son of a refugee himself cared for the orphans and the elderly of the congregation.

The Boissevains grew into a well-known Amsterdam family. In the nineteenth century Charles Boissevain was editor of an Amsterdam newspaper. Besides the Boissevains, the Amsterdam Museum names the families Huet and Luzac as children of this second refuge.

Silk, silver and a closing door

What did the Huguenots bring to the city? Among the registered refugees in Amsterdam, merchant was the most frequently named occupation. Then followed silk worker, tailor, surgeon, gold- and silversmith, sailor, minister, hatmaker, shoemaker and watchmaker. They came from Rouen, Paris, Sedan, La Rochelle and other cities. Many were makers of luxury goods, and those fitted well with the wealth of Amsterdam.

In many places in the Republic workshops for silk and wool were added, sometimes with money from the town. Mirrors, fans, jewels and hats appeared. Rich merchants brought capital with them.

The historian Willem van Bennekom, who wrote the history of the Amsterdam Walloon church, sees their trace in the architecture of the city and in the rise of Amsterdam as a city of books. A sober voice is heard too. The French Musée protestant calls the long-term economic contribution small.

Not everyone was happy with the newcomers. Shopkeepers complained about French people trading without a permit. The guilds protested against craftsmen who did not have to follow their rules. The more poor refugees came, the colder the welcome became. From 1690 Amsterdam and other cities pursued a stricter policy, and the measure of 1681 was withdrawn. In 1695 the city still held a lottery for the poorest refugees, and the Dutch East India Company gave money too.

Do you recognize that pattern? First an open door, then a city that grows afraid of the cost. It is more than three hundred years old.

A church for the elite

In the eighteenth century the congregation slowly changed. Early in that century the ordinary people in the congregation no longer spoke French. French remained the language of scholars and refined circles. Van Bennekom sums it up in one sentence: then the Walloon church became "a church for the elite." It was a conservative congregation, loyal to the House of Orange.

There were tensions too. Around the middle of that century a French baker's assistant shot at a minister during a service. The minister survived. Why it happened, the sources I saw do not say.

On the Vijzelgracht the work went on. In 1741 Agneta de Ruüsscherde le Becq made her will and named the diaconate as heir. The rent from her properties on the Keizersgracht was to benefit the old people in the orphanage. She also thought of her funeral day: every

resident was to receive three stuivers and a decent meal, sprinkled with "good wine." With her money a new home would be built more than two hundred years later.

In 1771 the house celebrated its hundredth anniversary. On April 22 the minister Jean Scipion Vernède gave a speech on the centenary of the orphanage. Two days later the minister Jacques Jean Desmazures preached, in French, on Psalm 145. For the jubilee Jacobus Buys painted the regents and the regentesses. On his canvas regent Jacques Langlois shows the title page of the speech, and the regentesses point to the sermon. In 1762 Desmazures had still advised the States of Holland to ban Rousseau's *Emile*, because of "une morale relâchée" (a lax morality).

I find it one of the most beautiful things about this story that a will from 1741 helped build a home for elderly people who lived more than two centuries later.

A minister who restored the building

The minister Teissèdre l'Ange, who died in 1843, was remembered in his obituary as someone without whom you could hardly think of the Walloon church in the capital. He restored the church building and so gave it its appearance. In 1807 he preached a sermon for the benefit of the victims of the gunpowder disaster in Leiden. A Walloon minister in Amsterdam thus preached for victims in another city.

The church was restored in 1816 and in 1891. In 1852 a library was added, which is now housed with the Leiden University Library.

The last orphan

The number of Walloon congregations in the Netherlands declined. Around 1688 there were dozens; one source names sixty-two. Ac-

cording to the church itself, the decline came from integration and secularization. The descendants of the refugees had become Dutch. In the twentieth century French became an ever higher threshold for most members. Van Bennekom speaks of a flock that became almost invisible.

In 1955 the last orphan left the house on the Vijzelgracht. The care for the elderly continued for a while. When a new treasurer entered the building in 1962, he saw how empty it was. He wrote: "It soon became clear that the whole main building, except for the front right room that served as the dining room, was empty." He called the situation very dangerous for fire. That same year eighteen elderly residents still lived there. After a firm debate on the board the decision for new construction was made.

On May 15, 1968, a fire broke out on the upper floors. The Hospice Wallon moved to a new home on the Veluwelaan, which later came to be called Torendael. The money came in part from the will of 1741. In 1971 the Hospice left the old house for good. In 1987 Paul Gorter painted the régence in the regents' room of Torendael. In the middle stand the treasurer and a bowl of Chinese porcelain. The secretary did not want to be portrayed. On the canvas only her writing arm is visible.

The building on the Vijzelgracht stayed French. The French state bought it and set up the consulate there and, from March 18, 1971, the Maison Descartes, the French cultural institute. In 2013 France decided to sell the complex. The institute was becoming too expensive, and the building had stood beside a construction pit of the Noord-Zuid metro line for years. Around 2016 or 2017 the French services left. In 2017 it was sold for about nine million euros. After that it changed owners once more.

The paintings of the regents and regentesses went in 2017 to the collection center of the Amsterdam Museum. On September 30, 2020, the Stichting Hospice Wallon signed the loan agreement under which the museum has looked after them since. The owner is still the foundation.

A little flock

The congregation itself has become small. Its diaconate now supports mainly organizations that help people in need in the region of Amsterdam and Haarlem. It belongs to the Walloon churches in the Netherlands and to the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. One source counts eleven active Walloon congregations in the whole country.

Van Bennekom spoke of a flock that became almost invisible. Jesus once addressed His disciples like this: *Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* (Luke 12:32) This congregation has become small. Its diaconate still helps people in need, as the congregation has done for centuries.

On the Vijzelgracht Dortsman's house still stands, with its two low wings for the old women and the old men. In 2024 the new owner announced that emergency repairs were coming. The plans speak of offices with a door that stands open to the neighborhood. What it will become had not yet been decided in the spring of 2025.

On the Walenpleintje every other week the door opens for a French service. Müller's organ plays. On the plaque in the north aisle it still says that it began here in 1409.

At the Amsterdam Museum a canvas is kept on which a girl looks at you. Her little brother looks at the pen. The register is open and their names are being written.

Go there yourself

The Waalse Kerk (Walloon Church) stands at Walenpleintje 157-159 in Amsterdam, on the southern part of the Oudezijds Achterburgwal, close to the Oude Hoogstraat. You can attend a French-language service or a concert; the church is known for its acoustics and the Müller organ. Inside you see the plaque from the monastery period and the gravestones in the floor. For services, concerts and accessibility, check the website of De Waalse Kerk.

The former Walloon Orphanage stands at Vijzelgracht 2, on the corner with the Prinsengracht and the Eerste Weteringdwarsstraat. It is a rijksmonument, a national monument, but not a museum: you view it from the outside. Note the broad front facade by Dortsman and the two lower side wings from 1683 and 1726.

The group portraits of the régence are kept by the Amsterdam Museum. Whether one is on display differs per exhibition; for that, check the website of the Amsterdam Museum.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the chapel of the monastery of the Brothers of Saint Paul, given to the Walloon congregation in 1586; the congregation since 1578; the decision for an orphanage on February 16, 1631 and the start in the Laurierstraat; the donation of Louis de Geer; Vondel's poem; the new building on the Vijzelgracht by Dortsman (1669 to 1671) with wings from 1683 and 1726; the Amsterdam privileges of 1681 and their withdrawal in 1690; the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685; the growth of the congregation from about 3,480 to more than 6,000 members; the occupations of the refugees; the departure of the last orphan in 1955; Maison Descartes from 1971; the sale by France and the poor condition of the building in 2024. The scenes

with the children coming in, the ledger, the inside father with the note, the first stones, the will of 1741 and the centenary of 1771 are taken from the description of the paintings in *Doorgegeven zorg* of the Amsterdam Museum (2021). The statements about the empty building in 1962 and the fire of 1968 come from the same book.

Only from tradition or own testimony: the flight of Lucas Bouyssavy among the wine barrels and the smuggling of Marthe Roux in a hay basket (Boissevain family story). The family archive itself says it claims no historical accuracy, and the dates in the text (a marriage of five years, a flight with two children, the death of Lucas at forty-four) do not fit together well. The year of Jérémie's appointment as father of the Hospice the archive first gives as 1750 and in a minutes note as 1753; this chapter says 1753. The installation scene and the role of Marie Charlotte come from the same family archive and have not been independently checked. The account of Jean Migault rests on his own *Journal*; I have not read the text myself and tell only what Van der Aa writes about it. That the help for the refugees was partly paid for from a special tax on wine, grain and silk is mentioned only by the Boissevain archive.

Unconfirmed: the number of Huguenots in the Republic (estimates from 35,000 to more than 75,000); the year in which the French state bought the building (1968 or 1971) and in which the French services left (2016 or 2017); the year of the move to the Vijzelgracht (1671 according to the rijksmonumentenregister and the museum, 1683 according to the church website, which apparently confuses it with the building of the wing for old women); the year of the shot in the church (1754 or 1755); the name of the first-stone layers (the children of Paul Godin and of Sara or Jeremias van Raey, the sources differ); whether the Walloon church bound Jean Migault to itself; what will happen to the building in 2026.

Interpretation: how large the lasting economic contribution of the Huguenots was is disputed among historians. Van Bennekom sees great influence on architecture and the book trade, the Musée protestant calls the long-term economic contribution small.

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Monnickendam: the small congregation that wanted to teach a country to read

It is November 16, 1784, and in the Mennonite parsonage in Edam a few men are talking about books that poor people cannot afford. One of them is Reverend Jan Nieuwenhuyzen from the little town of Monnickendam, a man of sixty. Beside him sits his son Martinus, twenty-four, who has settled in Edam as a physician. Together they have a plan, and the son wants to make it more concrete than the father does. He insists that it must be about more than reading alone. The education of children must become a main goal as well. They settle that that evening. Then they choose a name, on Martinus's suggestion: Genoodschap van Konsten en Wetenschappen (Society of Arts and Sciences), under the motto: Tot Nut van 't Algemeen (For the Public Good).

So began a society that would change education in the Netherlands. Everyone soon called it simply Het Nut, "the Nut," which in Dutch means "usefulness."

Whoever walks into the Grote or Sint-Nicolaaskerk (the Great or St. Nicholas Church) in Monnickendam much later walks over graves. The floor is covered with old gravestones. There is a pulpit

from 1695 and an organ that Gerstenhauer built there in 1781. Among all that old wood and stone hangs a marble memorial from 1807. The sculptor Sigault, who worked in Amsterdam, made it to a design by Jacques Kuyper. It is dedicated to Jan Nieuwenhuyzen.

Strange, when you think about it. Nieuwenhuyzen was not a minister of this church, which in his day belonged to the Hervormden (the Dutch Reformed), the official church of the Republic. He was the pastor of a small Mennonite congregation in the same town, a group that had stood on the margins for centuries. After his death he was given a monument in the largest church in town.

To understand that, you have to go back to the town itself, and to a November more than 250 years earlier.

A widow before the Council of Holland

In the autumn of 1527 a woman from Monnickendam was questioned in The Hague. Her name was Wendelmoet Claesdochter, in some sources Weynken. She was a widow. In Monnickendam she held Bible gatherings and helped spread the Protestant faith in the town. She was held in the castle of Woerden. On November 15, 1527, she was brought to The Hague. Two days later the governor of Holland, the Count of Hoogstraten, took over the case.

On November 18 the Council of Holland asked her whether she had thought about what had been put to her. She answered that she stood by what she had said. When the gentlemen warned her that a death awaited her that she would not be able to bear, she said she was ready to suffer, if that power was given her from above. About the bread of the Mass she was clear: to her it was bread and flour. She would have nothing to do with saints as intercessors. “I know no other Mediator than Christ,” she said.

So the martyr book *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Sacrifice of the Lord) preserved it, from the edition of 1570. Later the *Martelaarsspiegel* (the Martyrs Mirror) took it over as well.

In the two days that followed, monks, priests, women and friends came to talk her out of it. A simple woman advised her to keep quiet to save her life. Wendelmoet answered that she was called to speak. A Dominican held a crucifix before her and called it her Lord and her God. She called it a wooden god. On the morning of the execution a priest offered her the sacrament. Which God would he give her, she asked, a God who was sold for a penny? The dean of Naaldwijk, who acted as inquisitor, declared her a heretic. He handed her over to the secular judges and added that he did not consent to her death. The chancellor pronounced the sentence: burning, and confiscation of her property.

On November 20, 1527, she stood on the scaffold. The monk held the crucifix before her once more. She held to her Lord and God, she said, and neither death nor life would separate her from Him. She asked the bystanders to forgive her if she had hurt anyone, but she no longer answered the monk. When the monk asked her whether she regretted her error, she said that she had erred before and that she regretted that. What she believed now was no error. She let the gunpowder be laid. At the stake she asked something very ordinary: whether the bench stood firm, and whether she would not fall. The executioner strangled her, and she closed her eyes as if in sleep. Then the fire was lit.

Strictly speaking Wendelmoet was not an Anabaptist but a so-called sacramentarian: she did not believe that the bread in the Mass became the body of Christ. She is regarded as the first woman put to death for her faith under Emperor Charles V, and the Mennonite martyr books included her. She is the first person from Monnickendam whom we know by name.

Two thirds of the town

The Mennonites of Monnickendam had a long history behind them when Nieuwenhuyzen arrived. Mennonites, in Dutch doopsgezinden or mennisten, did not baptize babies. They baptized adults who chose the faith for themselves. In the sixteenth century you could end up at the stake for that.

Monnickendam lay in the middle of that persecution. In 1534 the parish priest of the town wrote that about two thirds of his fellow townspeople were infected with the Anabaptist teaching. In March of that year many Mennonites from Monnickendam crossed the Zuiderzee, on their way to Münster. A year later a persecution began in North Holland, with Monnickendam at its center. Many people went into hiding in the reeds or fled to Amsterdam, and that is why there were few native Monnickendammers among the victims. In 1539 Arent Jacobsz was put to death, together with his wife and his son.

That is in the international Mennonite encyclopedia GAMEO, which I consulted for this chapter. They are short lines. Behind each line is a family.

The congregation survived. Between 1563 and 1565 the traveling elder Leenaert Bouwens baptized sixty-two people there, and six more later. Around 1565 Pieter Willems Bogaert was minister of the Frisian congregation, later elder, and according to GAMEO he offered Prince William of Orange a considerable sum that Dutch Mennonites had collected for the liberation of Holland. After 1600 the two Mennonite groups in the town, the Frisians and the Waterlanders, merged. In 1675 the congregation had about a hundred and fifty members.

Money for brothers they never saw

Who were those members? I have not found their names in the sources I could open. But we do know something about what they did. Between 1672 and 1736 this small congregation gave generously to collections for persecuted Mennonites far away: in Switzerland, in the Palatinate, in Jülich, in Prussia and in Lithuania. It did this while things were getting worse in the town. Monnickendam lived from shipping on the Baltic Sea, and the wars of that time wrecked that trade. Membership declined.

That is what this congregation looked like: small, not rich, and used to caring for others. Only in 1735 did it call a permanent minister for the first time.

What moves me about those collections: probably almost no one in Monnickendam ever met those fellow believers in Lithuania. They gave anyway. That habit, giving to people far beyond your own town, is something I see again in what began in 1784.

Paul wrote about the churches of Macedonia that, *in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality* (2 Corinthians 8:2). In Monnickendam too a small congregation gave generously while the town's trade was sinking.

A bookseller from Haarlem

Jan Nieuwenhuyzen was born in Haarlem in 1724, on September 1 according to most sources. He learned the trade of bookseller and joined the Haarlem guild in 1743. He was also a printer. In 1751 he married the poet Gezina Wijnalda, called Geesje in some sources. In 1756 he printed her collection, with the long title *Verzaameling van Zeede- en Stichtelijke Haarlemmerhout en Tuin gezangen* (a collection of

moral and edifying songs of the Haarlem woods and garden). So books and family were intertwined early on.

Then he chose a different life. Nieuwenhuyzen studied at the Mennonite seminary in Amsterdam, the training school for ministers, while he kept his shop and printing house running. In 1758 he became a proponent, a minister in the making, and sold the printing business. He became minister in Middelharnis, then in Aardenburg in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. In 1771 he came to Monnickendam. He stayed there until his death, thirty-five years.

A bookseller who becomes a minister: you can see it in what followed. Nieuwenhuyzen knew the making and selling of books from the inside. A nineteenth-century biographical dictionary later called him "a preacher of Christian virtue." That word, virtue, comes back in the little books his son would later write.

The son who became a doctor

Jan and Geesje had three children. One of them was Martinus, born on December 9, 1759, in Middelharnis. When the family moved to Monnickendam in 1771, he went to Leiden, where he entered the Latin school under the supervision of his uncle Daniel Hovens. There he learned about medicinal plants, from pharmacists and from the Leiden professor Van Royen. From 1780 to 1783 he studied in Harderwijk, then in Franeker. He settled as a physician in Edam, a few kilometers north of Monnickendam.

Martinus started writing young. In 1782 he published a handbook for the pharmacy in Leiden, in the form of questions and answers. He was twenty-four when he made a plan with his father.

A circle that talked about nature

The plan began as a conversation. In Edam and Monnickendam a circle met every week, mostly to talk about natural religion: what can you know about God from nature and with your reason? Jan brought his idea there, as the jubilee book that the Nut itself published tells it.

In 1798 he wrote down how he had come to it. "I turned my thoughts away from those placed higher," he wrote: he was thinking of the ordinary citizen. He regretted that the publications of a learned society in Haarlem were too expensive for the common man to buy and read. There had to be a way, he wrote, to offer a helping hand to people who were searching for wisdom. Could those writings not be spread everywhere at a low price?

It is a bookseller's thought. It is also a minister's thought, from someone who stood before ordinary people every Sunday.

What stands out is what Jan did not become. He became neither chairman nor secretary. He gave no speeches, ran no campaign and wrote no Nut book. He came up with the idea and left it to others to make it big. Only later did the society make an example of him, with a portrait, busts, and streets and schools bearing his name.

Six men in the Patriot years

The year 1784 fell in the middle of the Patriot period. In the Republic two camps stood against each other: the Orangists, who supported the stadtholder William V, and the Patriots, who wanted citizens to have more say. Everywhere societies sprang up where citizens read, wrote and talked together about progress. Historians call it the age of the Enlightenment: the belief that knowledge could make people better and happier.

In that atmosphere six men founded a new society. The jubilee book of the Nut names as founders, besides Jan and Martinus, J.A. Hoekstra, a Mennonite teacher in Edam, Jan Roos, inspector of the national seal, the Lutheran minister J.L. Loggen from Monnickendam, and H. Bakker. Hoekstra became the first chairman, Martinus the first secretary and Roos the treasurer. Three Reformed ministers were asked to join the board. They declined.

Martinus worked his father's plan out into a fixed text. It came down to four things: a new society for the uneducated and the poor, members who could help with knowledge, money and hands, cheap and simple books as the main means, and better education. A circular letter went to people among whom the plan seemed likely to succeed. Within a few months several hundred people signed up.

The first prize question followed on January 21, 1785, at a members' meeting in Edam: what proofs do nature and reason offer for the existence of God? The prize went, at the first general meeting in August 1785, to Peter Schouten, a Catholic parish priest in Oegstgeest. That is in the jubilee book of the Nut. So the society was broader from the start than the circle it came from.

On the exact date of the founding the sources differ. GAMEO and the jubilee book give November 16, 1784. A short biography from the Doopsgezinde Historische Kring (the Mennonite Historical Society) gives October 16. The place was Edam, even though an older dictionary writes that Nieuwenhuyzen founded the Nut in Monnickendam. A striking detail: according to Van der Aa's biographical dictionary, Martinus received his doctorate in medicine in Franeker on December 9, 1784, the day he turned twenty-five. By then the Nut had already existed for a few weeks.

For everyone, of whatever rank or religion

What did the Nut want? At its core something simple: to give ordinary people, the poorest too, access to good knowledge. That was to happen through cheap little books in plain language, and through better schooling for children. In this way the society wanted to shape good citizens.

According to GAMEO, the first article of the statutes said that anyone could become a member, of whatever rank or religion. The second article said that the Nut stood apart from every church or political party. For a society that came out of Mennonite circles, that was a deliberate choice. Mennonites knew what it was to be shut out. In the Republic they, like Catholics and other so-called dissenters, were not allowed to hold public office. Only the Reformed church was the public church.

The historian Annemieke Kolle describes the Nut in her dissertation as a society founded mostly by Protestant dissenters, and as the fruit of a more tolerant attitude between the churches. The Nut did have a Christian foundation. Only in 1870 was it understood in a moral sense, writes the historian Wichers in the jubilee book, and as a result Jewish Dutch people could also become members. The English-language Wikipedia reports that from the beginning the Nut admitted no Jews, either as members or as pupils. That fits with that late opening, but I have not found it word for word in a second source. If it is true, the ideal of the statutes was bigger than the practice. It would not be the only society of that time where that was the case.

What would you have done, if in 1784 you had belonged to a small congregation that had always stood on the margins? Protect your own circle, or open the door to the whole town?

A little book of virtues

Martinus set to work with what he could do: write. He made the Nut's first schoolbook, in plain language for children. More titles followed: a *Spel- en Leesboekje voor eerstbeginnenden* (a spelling and reading book for beginners), a *Schoolboekje van Nederlandsche Deugden* (a schoolbook of Dutch virtues), *Het kunstmatig lezen* (artful reading) and the *Trap der Jeugd* (the ladder of youth). He also wrote about teaching reading, and together with his brother-in-law Adrianus Loosjes short biographies of Dutch men and women. His *Lettergeschenk voor de Nederlandsche Jeugd* (a gift of letters for Dutch youth) was still being printed for the fourth time in Haarlem in 1825.

He wrote for adults too. In 1789 his poem *De Mensch* (Man) appeared, and a tragedy, *Desdemona*, after Shakespeare. He wrote many pieces for the magazine *De Menschenvriend* (The Friend of Man). A doctor who adapted plays and made spelling books: for Martinus those things apparently lay close together.

The Nut announced prize competitions. In 1789 it asked for a short Dutch grammar, a grammar for schools. The linguist Jan Noordegraaf quotes the society: it wanted "a correct and regular knowledge of our so beautiful Mother tongue." Lambertus van Bolhuis won the gold prize, and his book appeared in 1793. Later the Mennonite minister Matthijs Siegenbeek wrote a grammar commissioned by the Nut. Siegenbeek became known as the man behind the first official spelling of Dutch, in 1804.

So a line ran from the small Mennonite congregations in Holland to the way Dutch children learned to spell.

A quarrel with the Edam town hall

The Patriot years also brought misery. The Edam town council was Orangist and wanted to bring the society under its protection and so keep it in hand. The jubilee book tells that an Orangist chairman once struck a Patriot fellow member, the only known case of physical violence in the history of the Nut.

In 1787 Martinus was removed from the Edam board, after he had been accused of planning a meeting outside Edam. He took the society's papers with him, left Edam for good and settled in Amsterdam. With that the head office moved too, and from then on the general meetings were held there. Jan became a lifelong member without voting rights, and Martinus remained secretary. A later historian judged that the local branches had saved the Nut: in Amsterdam, Bodegraven, Rotterdam, Woerden, West-Zaandam and Oostzaan departments had already arisen in 1785, Leiden followed in 1786, Alkmaar, Utrecht and Gouda in 1787.

In 1789 Waterland also got its own department. Jan Nieuwenhuyzen was registered as the first to pay his entrance fee. In that year Martinus married Anna Maria Herdingh in Haarlem. They had two children. In 1791 the Nut opened its first library in Haarlem. In that same year the society met in the Oude Lutherse Kerk (the Old Lutheran Church) in Amsterdam. The work was growing.

On February 23, 1793, Martinus traveled to Haarlem to settle family matters. The next day he developed a high fever. On March 6, 1793, he died, thirty-three years old.

In March and April the Nut held memorial gatherings in Amsterdam. His widow received a gold medal, his children a silver one. Gerrit Brender à Brandis, who succeeded Martinus as secretary, gave a funeral oration for the "co-founder and secretary" of the

Society, which has been preserved. It says something about how the members saw the young doctor. He had been the engine.

Jan was sixty-eight at the time. He had already lost his wife Geesje in 1787. Now he lost his son as well. He went on preaching in Monnickendam.

What those losses did to him, the sources do not say. They only say that he stayed. Paul called on the church in Corinth to be *steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*, because their labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). For Jan that meant thirteen more years of preaching after the death of his son.

A teacher training school in Haarlem

After Martinus died the Nut carried on, and it became bigger than the founders could have imagined. In 1795 it founded in Haarlem the first kweekschool (teacher training school) in the Netherlands, a training course for schoolmasters. Amsterdam followed in 1796, Groningen in 1797, then Leiden. The school in Haarlem survived the French period, the others did not last.

In 1795 the Republic became the Batavian Republic, one state instead of a loose collection of provinces. Many members of the Nut were on the side of the Patriots, who now came to power. For the first time there could be one education law for the whole country. In 1796 the Nut published its *Algemeene denkbeelden over het nationaal onderwijs* (general ideas on national education), drawn up by three members of the head board: H. Tichelaar, A.H. van Gelder and C. Wertz. One wish stood in it: the national government should provide education and upbringing for all children, without distinction of rank or sex.

According to GAMEO, the first school law of 1806 leaned heavily on those ideas. The law did not follow the Nut's report in everything,

but it did in the main points, and the Nut circle called it a "glorious monument." An old biographical dictionary later wrote that Dutch schooling owed the Nut "infinite obligations."

In February 1806, the year of that school law, Jan Nieuwenhuyzen died. The sources give February 24 or 25, and Monnickendam or Amsterdam as the place. He was eighty-one. It was also the year in which the Batavian Republic gave way to the kingdom of Louis Napoleon. The general meeting of August 1806 decided to strike a memorial medal and to put up a memorial in the church of Monnickendam. Speeches were given about him in many places, and his portrait was reissued. A year later the marble memorial came to the Grote Kerk.

From savings bank to people's university

What came after is so large that it is hard to take in. From local branches, called departments, the Nut started the first savings banks around 1817 and 1818. The Frisian department of Bergum proposed relief and savings banks in 1817. The first real Nut savings bank opened in 1818 in another Frisian department, Workum, and the head board drew up general rules that year. People with little money could put a small amount aside there each week, for when unemployment or illness came. Elsewhere loan banks appeared that lent money to the poor without security. There came Nut schools, Nut reading rooms, Nut gardens and a Nut insurance. In 1829 the Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Toonkunst (the Society for the Promotion of Music) grew out of the movement.

The numbers show how far it reached. Around 1825, according to the English Wikipedia, the Nut had some twelve thousand members in the north. In 1927, according to GAMEO, there were about forty thousand. In 1956 the Nut had 205 public libraries, 45 youth

libraries and 133 savings banks. In 1913 it stood at the cradle of the volksuniversiteit, the people's university for adult education.

Not everyone was pleased. In Flanders, where branches also sprang up between 1815 and 1830, the Catholic clergy opposed the Nut. In the Netherlands itself, in the nineteenth century, there was debate about how Christian the society still was. In 1864, according to Kolle, a committee concluded: "The Nut must remain Christian." That the question had to be asked says enough. Who exactly stood against whom in that debate, my sources largely leave open. I take no side in it. The story shows how hard it is to build a school for everyone.

In 1857 a new law made the government responsible for education. Most Nut schools were handed over to the municipalities. The savings banks, libraries and insurance also largely ended up with the government or with companies in the twentieth century. The Nut had done the work that later became normal.

The society still exists. In 1918 the Nut established a chair in education at the University of Amsterdam, and in 1986 a Nut chair in the history of education came in Utrecht. Today there are about eighty-five independent departments, which organize lectures, courses and outings. In Rotterdam the department holds the Nutslezing (the Nut lecture) every year.

A small church on the Weezenland

And the Mennonite congregation itself? It stayed small. After Nieuwenhuyzen came other pastors. Reitze de Vries served it, with a break of a few years, from 1809 to 1858. In 1847 the congregation had sixty baptized members. Around 1870 there were seventy-eight Mennonites living in the town. In 1897 there were eighty-five, in 1955 seventy-four. In 1935, after almost two years

without a minister, the congregation decided to be served by the minister of Edam. In the end the two towns where the Nut began shared their minister.

According to GAMEO, the Mennonite church stood at Weezenland 15 in 1957. A national description of the protected townscape mentions a simple hall church on the Wezenland. The building dated from the nineteenth century. In that church a copper lectern from the seventeenth century was kept, probably from an earlier vermaning, as Mennonites called their church building. Whether that church is still in use as a church today, I have not been able to check.

The contrast is striking. The congregation stayed modest and almost invisible, with a few dozen members. What began in that circle touched schoolchildren, savers and readers all over the country, most of whom had never heard of Monnickendam.

Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until all of it was leavened (Matthew 13:33). The Nut was not a church and did not want to be one. But it did begin in a small congregation that had long been used to caring for others.

The marble in the Grote Kerk

So you come back to that memorial in the Grote or Sint-Nicolaaskerk. The memorial for the Mennonite minister hangs in the church of the Reformed, in the same building as the organ that was already there when he started the Nut. How the monument came to be in that very place, my sources do not say, except that the general meeting of 1806 asked for it.

Perhaps that is the most honest picture of what the Nut did. It made a small circle visible in the town. The marble still hangs there, above

a floor full of gravestones, in a town where Mennonites once had to go into hiding and where a widow was put to death for her faith in 1527.

Go there yourself

The Grote or Sint-Nicolaaskerk stands at De Zarken 2 in Monnickendam. It is a large hall church with a late Gothic tower from the sixteenth century. Inside you will see the gravestone floor, the choir screen with wood carving, the pulpit from 1695, the organ from 1781 and the memorial to Jan Nieuwenhuyzen from 1807. Check beforehand whether and when the church is open.

In 1957 the Mennonite church stood at Weezenland 15, in the old town center. Whether the building can be visited today, I have not been able to find out.

In the center there is also the Speeltoren (a carillon tower) at Noordeinde 2, with a carillon from 1595 to 1597. A few kilometers to the north lies Edam, where Martinus lived and where the Nut had its first seat. There is a Nieuwenhuyzenplein there, and the national secretariat of the Nut has been based in Edam again since 1981. The portrait of Jan Nieuwenhuyzen by Adriaan de Lelie belongs to the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Jan Nieuwenhuyzen (1724 to 1806) was a bookseller and printer in Haarlem, studied at the Mennonite seminary and was minister in Middelharnis, Aardenburg and, from 1771 to 1806, in Monnickendam; in 1784, with his son Martinus (1759 to 1793), a physician in Edam, he founded the Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen; Martinus was secretary and wrote schoolbooks; the seat was first in Edam and later moved

to Amsterdam; Martinus died in 1793; in 1795 the Nut founded the first teacher training school in Haarlem and was involved in the school law of 1806, savings banks, libraries and the people's university; in the Grote Kerk of Monnickendam hangs a memorial to Jan from 1807; the Mennonite congregation had a persecuted past in the sixteenth century and stayed small afterward. The trial, the interrogations and the execution of Wendelmoet Claesdochter in November 1527 are recorded in the martyr book *Het Offer des Heeren* (in the English translation of the *Martyrs Mirror* of 1660) and in the work of the Lutheran writer Fick; the dates (November 15, 17, 18 and 20, 1527) agree in both, and GAMEO gives the same day of her death. Her words in this chapter I follow in the English text of 1660; I have not myself opened the Dutch text of *Het Offer des Heeren*.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the words of Wendelmoet were not written down by herself. They come from the martyr book, which recorded them from 1570, and so they are the account of others. The English text calls her Weynken, the Lutheran book Wendelmut. Further resting on a single source: the ban on Jewish members and pupils (Wikipedia); the membership figures for 1825; the collections for persecuted Mennonites between 1672 and 1736 (GAMEO); the exact articles of the statutes about rank and religion (GAMEO). The society's first name is also given as Maatschappij van Konsten en Wetenschappen, tot Nut van 't Algemeen; the jubilee book gives Genoodschap. The words of Jan Nieuwenhuyzen from 1798, the names of the four other founders, the first prize question and the events around Martinus's departure from Edam in 1787 come from the jubilee book of the Nut, *Om het algemeen volksgeluk*. The six founders are named there, but the book does not say that all six sat in the parsonage that evening. That Jan was the first to

pay his entrance fee at the founding of the Waterland department in 1789 is in an article in *Literatuur*.

Unconfirmed or disputed: the exact founding date (November 16 or October 16, 1784) and place (Edam or Monnickendam); Jan's birthday (September 1 or 4, 1724) and place of death; the start of his time in Aardenburg (1759 or 1763); what exactly was going on in the conflict with the Edam town council; the present state of the Mennonite church on the Weezenland. On the openness of the statutes the sources contradict each other: GAMEO says that anyone could become a member, the jubilee book speaks of a Christian foundation (abolished in 1969 or 1970) that was understood in a moral sense in 1870, and one source says that Jews were kept out.

Interpretation: that the Mennonite experience of exclusion and mutual care played a part in the choice for a society open to everyone is an explanation based on Kolle and the congregation's history, not a statement by the founders themselves.

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Enschede: the parish where the workers held their own meetings

"Men, you are right, but you are going about it the wrong way."

So a young curate shouted in the middle of the street in Enschede, to a crowd that was angry. It was 1890, the year of the first big strike in Twente. Soldiers stood ready with loaded rifles. That is how the writer Gerard Brom told it later in a tribute to Alphons Ariëns. Brom describes how the curate then jumped onto a platform, among the furious socialists, and spoke to the people. He risked his reputation and perhaps his life. The strike was called off, and the workers went back to work that afternoon.

What that meant for the people on that street depends on who tells it. I will come back to that. First, a square.

A square with two churches

In the middle of the Oude Markt (the Old Market) in Enschede, a city in the east of the Netherlands near the German border, stands the Grote Kerk, an old sandstone church with a pointed tower. It is Protestant. On the northeast side of the square stands a building

with a theater and movie screens, Concordia. Next to the entrance is a stone with the name Ariëns. Diagonally across from it stands the Brandmonument (the Fire Monument) from 1912, which commemorates the town fire of 1862. At number 1 stands a Catholic church with two copper domes, the Sint-Jacobuskerk.

On the facades around the square you see little of the factory town Enschede once was. Here something began that was felt across the whole of the Netherlands until well into the twentieth century.

On Sunday, November 24, 1889, Catholic workers met in a room of the elementary school on the Markt. There they founded a society, the R.K. Werkliedenvereniging (the Roman Catholic Workingmen's Association). It was the first of its kind in the Netherlands. Concordia would later rise on that spot.

A town that began again after the fire

In the nineteenth century Enschede was a textile town. As early as the eighteenth century people there wove bombazine, a sturdy fabric. After 1830, when Belgium had broken away, the government designated Twente, the region around Enschede, as an area where the cotton industry was to grow. The factories came, and with the factories the workers.

In 1862 a large part of the town burned down. The Grote Kerk on the Oude Markt was badly damaged and then restored. In the Middle Ages this church had had Saint James the Greater as its patron saint, one of the twelve apostles. After the Reformation it had come into Protestant hands. The Catholics had their own church nearby, from 1841. That one also went up in flames in 1862. A year later a new one stood there: a neo-Gothic church with pointed arches, designed by the architect Van den Brink and dedicated to the same James.

Two churches with the same saint, on the same square. One Protestant, the other Catholic. That division shaped life in the town. You went to your own church, your own school, and later also to your own society.

"Slow child murder"

How hard was life in the factory? The sources I found describe it in broad outline. Wages were too low. Families were large and lived in houses that were far too small. Anyone who lost his job fell into deep poverty. Many workers drank, and some became addicted to jenever, Dutch gin. The town had notorious slums, neighborhoods with poor and overcrowded houses. I have not found exact working hours or numbers of working children for Enschede in a reliable source, so I do not give them.

We do know what was said about it in The Hague. In 1874 the Children's Act of Van Houten had been passed, which was meant to curb child labor in factories. In 1886 and 1887 the Tweede Kamer (the Dutch House of Representatives) held a major inquiry into conditions in factories and workshops. Child labor, long working days and bad conditions came to light. A new law followed, which limited the work of children and women and created a Labor Inspectorate.

In Twente itself resistance grew. In 1885 Enschede got a branch of the Sociaal-Democratische Bond (the Social Democratic League). Three years later, in 1888, workers in Almelo laid down their work, led by the socialist Gerrit Bennink. In March 1889 Bennink took a thirteen-year-old factory girl to The Hague. He wanted to show what he called the "slow child murder" in Twente.

A curate from Rome

In October 1886 a young priest came to the parish of Sint Jacobus de Meerdere (Saint James the Greater). His name was Alphons Ariëns, he was twenty-six and had just returned from his studies in Rome. Archbishop Snickers of Utrecht had appointed him kapelaan. A kapelaan is a curate, an assistant priest in a parish. He works under the pastoor, the parish priest and permanent spiritual leader, and does much of the ordinary work: teaching catechism, visiting the sick, hearing confession.

Ariëns came from a well-to-do family in Utrecht. His father was a lawyer, and those who describe him call him a city man. In Italy, during his studies, he had come to know the workers. In Turin he met Don Bosco, the priest who cared for boys in need. By his own account that year in Rome shaped him more than his university studies. In Enschede he saw an opportunity, not a punishment.

Ariëns did more than a curate has to do. According to what the archdiocese later wrote about him, he went to people's homes, visited them at their work and looked them up in the bar. He asked about their work and their circumstances and took notes, which he later used in articles and lectures. He taught workers to read and write. His evenings were full of meetings, and when he came home he still read stacks of newspapers, magazines and pamphlets. In this way he became the first labor pastor of the Netherlands. Those stories come from commemorative articles by his own church. Other sources confirm that he became deeply involved in what he saw in the town.

Of Jesus it is written: *And when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them*, because they were weary and scattered (Matthew 9:36). It begins there, with seeing. Ariëns too began with the people themselves: at home, at their work and in the bar.

His biographer L.J. Rogier, who wrote the entry on him in the Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland (the Biographical Dictionary of the Netherlands) in 1979, sees a development. Ariëns began his work as a protection against socialism: he wanted to prevent Catholic workers from leaving their faith behind. Gradually it became a struggle for the rights of the workers themselves. Rogier writes that the social evils and their moral consequences gripped him.

Those two motives run through this whole story. Keep an eye on both.

Three to five people is enough

How do you start on a whole city as a curate? Ariëns began small. Three to five people are enough to start an organization, he thought. Father Colson, who wrote an outline of his life in 1933, gives the method in words from a letter of Ariëns from November 1891. A friendly conversation with a few capable workers was a first requirement. Such a core had to drive itself like a wedge into the masses.

Those cores came together to talk about their own lives and work. They told each other how things were going at home and in the factory, and everyone was allowed to give his opinion. They practiced speaking. The debates followed a fixed form: a thesis, an antithesis and a conclusion. They could be fierce. Those who sat in as pupils later ended up in important places in the organizations that Ariëns founded.

Ariëns saw the societies as schools. On January 13, 1895, he said in Nijmegen that they were practice schools where workingmen learned to study their trade. He wrote everything down, in hundreds of handwritten notebooks with lectures, sermons and articles.

His starting point, as later writers summarize it, was: everything for the workers and everything by the workers.

Sunday, November 24, 1889

The society founded in November 1889 in the schoolroom on the Markt had a simple goal. According to a description by the municipality of Enschede, it wanted to reduce the abuse of drink among workers. It offered them something other than the bar: a place to meet, to learn and to relax. Later Ariëns gave courses there, so that workers could educate themselves.

Who was there that Sunday, how many men came and what was said, I have not been able to find. A document from 1890 in his archive calls Ariëns adviser and director of the society. According to an outline of his work, he did not want to become chairman of the societies he started. The curate stood behind it, but it was a society of workingmen.

For Ariëns that was the heart of the matter. In Amsterdam there was a Catholic Volksbond (People's League), set up by Passtoors, in which employers shared in the leadership. That Volksbond was protected by the conservative bishop Bottemanne. Ariëns did not want that model. He believed, Rogier writes, that the workers themselves should lead. He was convinced that they had to be trained in a society life that they carried themselves. With that idea he went further than many of his colleagues.

A society in a schoolroom: it is a small event to begin a chapter with. Out of that room a movement would grow that spread across the whole country.

Four thousand people in the street

Half a year later came the first test. In 1890 a strike broke out at Ter Kuile & Morsman, one of the textile factories in Enschede. According to a leaflet from the Stichting Vakbondshistorie (the Foundation for Trade Union History), about four thousand workers were out on the street and the army was called in. Ariëns stepped in between the parties and managed to defuse the situation with his authority. I found that number only in that one source. Other sources speak of a wave of strikes and of Ariëns's mediation, without numbers.

Brom sketches the scene I gave at the beginning, with the soldiers, the platform and the crowd. He also tells what happened afterward. The workers did not want to let the mayor, whom they hated, win. He had to leave the area around the factory. Ariëns went to tell him, and the mayor went home meekly.

In his archive lies a draft of a petition, a letter that Ariëns wanted to send to the manufacturers. In it he asked them to take workers back into employment after a strike. The date on that document is uncertain. It does show where he stood: he pleaded with the employers for the people who had lost their jobs.

The strike was lost. According to a biographical sketch, Ariëns drew a lesson from it that shaped his work: the workers had to organize themselves, and not wait for a priest to do it for them.

"Strikebreaker"

How you look at those days depends on where you stood. For many Catholics, Ariëns was the man who had prevented a bloodbath. The socialists saw it differently. They called him a strikebreaker. The socialist Vliegen wrote about it later in his book *De Dageraad der Volksbevrijding* (The Dawn of the People's Liberation). He regretted that a little curate had made the strike fail.

On May 15, 1890, the socialist paper Recht voor Allen (Justice for All) wrote that the clergy had stirred things up until the unity among the workers was broken. According to the historian Egon Wevers, who studied socialism in Twente, Ariëns had lost the socialists for good after this strike. Whatever he did for workers after that, they rejected.

I am not going to take sides here. A priest who steps between soldiers and strikers can save lives. He can also, intentionally or not, break a strike. Both can be true on the same day. What is certain: after 1890 the paths of Catholic and socialist workers in Twente drifted further and further apart. Each got its own union, its own paper and its own building.

So on April 18, 1891, the first issue appeared of Recht door Zee (Straight Ahead), the Twente weekly of the socialists. The editors addressed the reader directly and said that they supported the workers in their demand for a better place at the table of life. "We stand at their side," they wrote. In the column with letters from Almelo, Hengelo and Enschede, workers wrote about their factory.

The socialists kept feeling the competition. In 1899 the same paper warned that division among the workers would only help the confessional labor movement or the manufacturers. It wrote that socialists had nothing against Christianity as a teaching. Their objection was to what the church did in practice. In this way they also tried to win believing workers to their side. That warning shows that the Christian workers' societies in Twente counted for something by then.

A union, a newspaper and a band

On March 1, 1891, the R.K. Twentsche Fabrieksarbeidersbond (the Roman Catholic Twente Factory Workers' Union) was founded, on

Ariëns's initiative. The workingmen's society was a local club. The union wanted to unite workers throughout Twente. After 1890 a society alone was no longer enough for him. That same year *Rerum novarum* appeared in Rome, an encyclical by Pope Leo XIII on the labor question. According to the archdiocese, Ariëns paid for the translation himself and had it distributed among the textile workers in Enschede and Twente.

In 1891 the workingmen's society also got its first building of its own, Tivoli, on the Oldenzaalsestraat. The architect Jos Cuypers designed it. It was just too far from the center, and later the society looked for a place closer to the Oude Markt. Brom describes how the maid in the rectory shook her head when "Mr. Curate" came home with lime on his coat, because he had stood on the scaffolding himself while a society building was going up.

In 1893 Ariëns founded a weekly, De Katholieke Werkman (The Catholic Workingman). He wanted to teach workers to write and so form leaders from their own ranks. That same year the Leo Harmonie was founded, a music society for workers. It lives on in the Stadsharmonie Enschede (the Enschede City Band), which in 2024 still played a serenade at his statue. In 1893 the Catholic workingmen's societies of the archdiocese were also brought together in a diocesan league, under the spiritual leadership of Schaepman. In 1894 a Katoenarbeiderbond (Cotton Workers' Union) came alongside the textile union.

Around the society, savings funds and sickness funds grew up too, and cooperatives for housing. Rogier writes that Ariëns took the initiative to build workers' houses. They helped the slums of Enschede disappear.

Where the factory ended, the parish began: with a building, a newspaper, a fund for sickness, a house, music.

The gin bottle

Drink was one of the great worries in his parish, and Ariëns looked the workers up in the bar too. A leaflet from the Stichting Vakbondshistorie summarizes his disappointment around 1895: had everything he did really improved people's lives? In that connection a saying of his is quoted: it was no use "if we did not smash the gin bottle."

In 1895 a Catholic movement against drunkenness began in Enschede. According to the same leaflet, it went like this: at his priestly jubilee, three workers offered him as a gift that from then on they would not drink another drop. From that beginning grew the Kruisverbond (the League of the Cross), a society of total abstainers. Branches for women and for families were added: the Maria Society and the Anna Society. They wanted sobriety, education and protection, and they gave women a voice. From the women's branches the Katholiek Vrouwen Gilde (the Catholic Women's Guild) grew in 1913. The model spread to Hengelo, Oldenzaal, Almelo, Deventer and Utrecht. I found the story of the three workers in one source. The year 1895 and the founding itself are also in Rogier and in an article from Radboud University.

If it went that way, the first step was not taken by the curate, but by three workers from his parish. Their gift cost no money. It cost something of themselves.

The movement spread across the country and later continued as Sobriëtas. According to Radboud University, it had more than a hundred and seventy thousand members in 1921.

How do you measure what something like that means for a family? There are no figures for less hunger or fewer fights. You only know that more than a hundred and seventy thousand people made a

promise. A statue from 1936, by the sculptor Wim Harzing, shows Ariëns with his right foot on a bottle.

Too red for the manufacturers

Not everyone in the parish was happy with the curate. According to Rogier, many prominent Catholics, especially manufacturers and shopkeepers, disapproved of what he did. Some of his fellow priests felt the same. They found him too "red," too much a man of the workers. Archbishop Snickers did support him, with understanding and encouragement.

Ariëns gave a lot. According to a commemorative article from the archdiocese, he went so far in helping poor workers that he ran up large debts. To pay them he sold the chalice he had received from his family at his ordination. At the commemoration in the Sint-Jacobuskerk in 2022, Monsignor Woorts said about this that for a priest a chalice, often a gift from his parents, stands for his whole priestly life. I found that story only in that one source.

There were failures too. With about forty workers who, according to Rogier, had been unjustly dismissed, Ariëns started a textile factory of his own in Haaksbergen, De Eendracht (Unity). It was a cooperative. The factory existed from 1894 to 1901 and went under because of its debts. At a symposium in 2024 a speaker said that the failure of De Eendracht almost became Ariëns's own financial ruin.

Asking for money was hard for him. Brom writes that he found ringing a doorbell with an expectation more painful than coming back with a disappointment, and that he once admitted he had stood in front of a house without daring to go in. A biographical sketch also names weaknesses: he was too honest, too much a pastor and too little a strategist, trusted people quickly and sometimes began new projects before the previous ones stood. Brom adds a small note.

When Ariëns spoke fervently, the workers in Twente often answered dryly: "'t Kan wel wèze," a Twente way of saying "It could well be." That dryness he had to overcome with love.

And the Protestants? Enschede was not a Catholic town only. The oldest church on the square was Protestant. Ariëns looked for cooperation across that line. In 1895, on his initiative, Unitas came into being, a league in which Catholic and Protestant workers' societies worked together. The Katoenarbeiderbond merged into it that year. Rogier writes that he aimed for peaceful cooperation with non-Catholics. The bishops later forbade the mixed form. About the work of Protestant workers' societies in Enschede itself I found too few reliable sources for this chapter. That part of the story deserves its own research.

A remote village in Gelderland

In 1901 Ariëns was appointed parish priest of Steenderen, a village in the Achterhoek, a rural area in the province of Gelderland. He was forty-one and had worked in Enschede for fifteen years. The parish held a farewell tribute. Papers from it are kept in his archive.

Why he left is nowhere written in black and white. According to a chronicle in the Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren (the Digital Library of Dutch Literature), many people saw the transfer as an attempt to remove the labor movement from his influence. Whether the bishop intended that, I do not know. It remains a suspicion of people at the time. A biographical sketch adds that he himself was glad about the village.

In Steenderen he remained himself. A commemorative booklet from the archdiocese preserves a story about a new bicycle that he gave away to the postman, because the postman needed it

more than he did. In 1903 he sat on the state commission that investigated the condition of railway workers.

The movement stayed in Enschede. In 1902 the workingmen's society got a building on the Oude Markt, designed by A.L. Clemens, on the spot where it had all begun. On Christmas Eve 1909 it burned down. The Sint-Jacobus parish commissioned a new building, designed by the Amsterdam architect Jacques van Straaten. It opened in 1911. It was called Concordia, unity.

The word unity came back more than once in this story: in the factory De Eendracht, in Unitas and now in Concordia. Psalm 133 says: *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!* (Psalm 133:1) That unity was not easy. The factory went under because of its debts, and with the socialists Ariëns had lost for good.

What he did afterward

From 1908 to 1926 Ariëns was parish priest in Maarssen. There he stood in the middle of the national Catholic movement: the women's movement, the Geert Grote Society that published cheap short writings, and mission work. Between 1910 and 1914 he himself was attacked by conservative Catholics, the integralists, who accused him of modernism. In 1919 Archbishop Van de Wetering restored his name by arranging for him the honorary title of papal chamberlain.

What drove him? In a sermon on the Eucharist from 1908 he said: "In the Holy Mass Jesus appears before the heavenly Father, offered as the Lamb of God." According to the sermon that quotes his words, he drew from the daily Mass the strength to open heaven for others.

His last two years he was physically weak. He was cared for in a monastery in Amersfoort. There he died on August 7, 1928. He was buried in Maarssen, where he had been parish priest from 1908 to 1926. Many people came to his funeral. Two weeks later, on August 21, 1928, prominent Catholics set up a committee to honor him. They had three goals: a grave monument in Maarssen, a statue in Enschede and a memorial church. The grave monument was ready in the summer of 1930.

A stone next to the entrance

What has remained of all this work, outside the church? From the local societies grew the national Rooms-Katholiek Werkliedenverbond (Roman Catholic Workingmen's Federation) of 1925. Out of that came the Katholieke Arbeidersbeweging (the Catholic Workers' Movement), the KAB, and later the Nederlands Katholiek Vakverbond (the Dutch Catholic Trade Union Federation). Rogier calls the society of November 1889 the beginning of those later organizations.

On June 16, 1934, a bronze statue of him was unveiled in Enschede, about three meters (ten feet) tall, made by the sculptor Hein Maessen in the studio of August Falise. Jonkheer Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck, chairman of the committee, unveiled it. In 1954 the city got an Ariëns memorial church, on the Hogelandsingel. Between 1958 and 1965 a process was under way in the diocese with a view to his canonization, and in 1965 the file went to Rome.

In the parish itself he has not been forgotten. In 2015 the parish of Sint Jacobus de Meerdere was given a statue of him, which found a place in the Maria-Ariëns chapel. On June 16, 2024, ninety years after the unveiling of the statue, the Stadsharmonie played a serenade at the statue. In the afternoon the Ariëns Committee held a sympo-

sium at De Museumfabriek in Enschede, where the failed factory De Eendracht was also discussed.

Concordia remained a community center for about forty years. In the 1950s it fell out of use. In 1962 the municipality bought the building, and in 1977 a movie theater came. Now films are shown there and performances staged.

By the 1920s the old Sint-Jacobuskerk of 1863 was worn out. In 1932 the first stone was laid for the church that stands there now, and on June 29, 1933, it was consecrated. His silver adviser's chain is kept in that church.

His motto is still quoted: "As long as Christ is preached." The words are like what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, that *in every way … Christ is preached* (Philippians 1:18), in whatever form. Ariëns did it with a newspaper, a brass band and a schoolroom full of workingmen.

If you walk across the Oude Markt today, you pass the two churches of James, the Protestant one in the middle and the Catholic one with the domes at the edge. Between them stands Concordia, with the stone next to the door. The people who go in now come for a film. In 1889 workingmen looked for a shelter on that spot other than the bar.

Go there yourself

The Oude Markt is in the center of Enschede. In the middle of the square stands the Grote Kerk, the medieval church that is now Protestant. The Sint-Jacobuskerk stands at Oude Markt 1, a national monument with two copper domes. For services and opening hours, check the website of the parish of Sint Jacobus de Meerdere.

Concordia stands at Oude Markt 15, on the northeast side of the square. Next to the entrance is the stone with Ariëns's name. The building is now a film and theater house with a café and restaurant. Check the Concordia website for opening hours. Diagonally across from Concordia stands the Brandmonument from 1912.

The bronze statue of Ariëns from 1934 stands in Enschede, but I have not been able to get its exact location from a reliable source. Ask around in the city if you want to see it.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Ariëns became curate in the parish of Sint Jacobus de Meerdere in Enschede in October 1886; the R.K. Werkliedenvereniging was founded in November 1889 (November 24, in a schoolroom on the Markt); Ariëns mediated in the wave of strikes of 1890 and was then sharply criticized by socialists; the R.K. Twentsche Fabrieksarbeidersbond was founded in 1891; De Katholieke Werkman (1893); the fight against drink from 1895; Unitas as cooperation with Protestant societies; the factory De Eendracht (1894 to 1901); criticism from manufacturers and colleagues that he was too "red"; departure to Steenderen in 1901; the building of Concordia (1910 to 1911) commissioned by the parish; his death on August 7, 1928; the new Sint-Jacobuskerk (1932 to 1933); the statue of 1934.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: Ariëns's home visits and bar visits and the distribution of *Rerum novarum* (commemorative literature from the archdiocese); the sale of his chalice to pay debts (one source, repeated in a sermon of 2022); the three workers who promised total abstinence at his priestly jubilee (one source); his saying about the gin bottle. The scenes around the strike, the mayor, the scaffolding with lime, the doorbell and "'t Kan wel wèze" come from one tribute by Gerard Brom on DBNL, whose publica-

tion date I have not been able to establish; Brom does not name his source for Ariëns's words during the strike and quotes the socialist Vliegen. The method with the cores and the words from the letter of November 1891 and the speech of January 13, 1895 come from an article in *Op Tocht* (March 2025), which relies on Colson (1933) and Deems (2011). His words from 1908 come from a homily that quotes him. The saying "everything for the workers and everything by the workers" appears in a commemorative booklet of 2016 as a summary of his starting point, not as a literal quotation. The sketch of his weaknesses comes from the website of a student society named after him. The anecdote about the postman's bicycle appears in that same booklet of 2016 and was not found elsewhere.

Unconfirmed: the number of about four thousand strikers and the use of the army in 1890 (the number comes from one source, the soldiers also from Brom); whether the strike was "called off" (Brom) or "lost" (Wevers); the reason for his transfer in 1901 (a suspicion of people at the time); whether Ariëns himself was chairman (his archive calls him adviser and director in 1890; a sketch says he did not want to be chairman); the exact present location of the statue. The building that Brom describes with the scaffolding and the lime I cannot link to one building.

Interpretation: whether Ariëns prevented a bloodbath in 1890 or broke a strike depends on who tells it. Catholic and socialist sources see the same moment very differently.

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Heeswijk: a monk with a plow on the tower

On the Abdijstraat in Heeswijk-Dinther, a village in the southern province of Noord-Brabant, stands a church made of two parts. At the back is the neo-Gothic choir from 1881. In front of it stands an almost square building of machine-made brick, from 1927, with a bell tower in the southwest corner. In that tower is a sandstone statue, about four meters (thirteen feet) tall. It comes only halfway out of the wall. You see a monk with a rosary. Beside him hangs a shield with the coat of arms of the abbey, and also a plow with a cross on it.

That plow with the cross was the emblem of the Noordbrabantsche Christelijke Boerenbond, the North Brabant Christian Farmers' Union. The monk is Father Gerlacus van den Elsen. And the part of the church he stands in was paid for by farmers. After his death in 1925, the farming families of Brabant, at the initiative of their union, raised the money to enlarge the abbey church. The architect H.W. Valk designed the extension, and the Belgian sculptor Jozef Cantré made the statue. That is what the Rijksmonumentenregister (the national register of monuments) says, where the church has been listed since 2002.

Farmers who together pay for a church for a monastery: there is a history behind that. It is the history of a small community of priests and of the villages on the poor sandy soils of Brabant. And it is the beginning of a bank that grew out of those villages: the Rabobank.

An abbey that moved

The community of Berne is much older than its place in Heeswijk. Norbertines, also called Premonstratensians or White Canons, are priests who live together in an abbey. The Berne website lists the work in the parishes and in the abbey church as their fixed tasks. The abbey of Berne was founded in 1134 in the hamlet of Berne on the Maas river, near Heusden. The abbey now calls itself the oldest continuously existing monastic community in the Netherlands.

In the Eighty Years' War, the Dutch revolt against Spain, things went wrong. In 1579 the abbey was set on fire. After the siege of 's-Hertogenbosch in 1629 the canons scattered, and the abbot settled in Vilvoorde in Flanders. Only in 1857 did the abbey get a permanent place in Brabant again, in Heeswijk. What rose there in the years that followed was, as the abbey itself writes, a jumble of buildings in very different sizes and styles. In 1881 the new monastery chapel was finished, the part that now forms the choir of the abbey church.

A community that had gone more than two hundred years without a permanent home and now lived in a jumble of buildings: that is what the monastery looked like when a boy knocked at the door in 1869.

A boy of sixteen from Gemert

His name was Gerlacus van den Elsen. He was born on April 13, 1853, in Gemert, into a farming family, in a langgevelboerderij,

a long Brabant farmhouse with living quarters and stable under one roof. At the Latin school of his village he had learned what a farmer's son could learn there. In October 1869 he entered the abbey. On November 10 of that year he took the name Gerlacus. He was sixteen. On June 24, 1876, he was ordained a priest.

He gave his first sermons as kapelaan in Berlicum, an assistant priest alongside the parish priest of a village parish. That lasted from 1878 to 1880. He was already writing in those years too: for the first five years of his priestly life he supplied articles to the Zondagsblad van de H. Familie (the Sunday paper of the Holy Family), and these later appeared as books.

In April 1880 the abbey called him back to teach the Bible. He had been allowed to do that since 1875. In 1884 church history was added, in 1886 the ancient languages and literature. He wrote a booklet about Saint Kunera (1883), a history of the Latin school of Gemert (1887) and a booklet about Our Lady of Handel (1887). In the flyleaves of a book from Cologne dated 1538 he found pieces of a medieval romance of chivalry, *Der Borchgrave van Couchi*. A scholar later published them in a journal for language and literature.

In 1886 he started a gymnasium, a classical secondary school, in the abbey, the Sint-Norbertus. It began small, in one room. Out of that room grew Gymnasium Bernrode, the abbey's magazine wrote in 2021. He became its first rector and remained so until 1902. In 1887 the abbey made him subprior, the deputy of the prior, who led daily life in the house.

A teacher and historian in a monastery. His life could have stayed like that. But outside the abbey walls, the people he had grown up among were doing badly.

Grain from America

From the end of the 1870s, cheap grain came from America to Europe. Prices fell, and with the prices the value of land fell. A local historian from Wouw summed it up briefly in 1990: the farmers became poor. The historian Rolf van der Woude speaks of a severe European agricultural crisis around 1880.

That hit Brabant hard. The farmers on the sandy soils had small farms on poor ground. In the standard work *In vrijheid herboren* (Reborn in Freedom) by L.J. Rogier and N. de Rooy, it says that the years between 1875 and 1914 were very hard, above all for the farmers on the sandy soils. Many farmers could no longer pay a farmhand, and so farm laborers were without work, year after year. Many Brabant working families moved away to Rotterdam. The government left it to the market. There was hardly any help from the state.

Anyone who needed money to improve the farm had nowhere good to go. The Rabobank says it plainly in its own history: the farmers wanted to modernize, but found it hard to get credit. Van den Elsen wanted to protect his farmers against usurious loans, the biography on Erfgoed Brabant tells us.

Sermons that no longer fit

In 1892 he prepared a second edition of the sermons he had given in Berlicum. He reread his own words and saw that they no longer fit. The position of the farmers had grown worse since the first printing. Other articles he read confirmed that picture. So Erik Sengers writes in 2019, and he does not say which sermon theme it was.

I find that a strong moment. He had stood in a pulpit before people he knew. A second printing asked him to lay his own words next to their lives once more, and they no longer fit.

"Like the dumb sheep"

In January 1892 an article appeared in a Brabant newspaper with the title "De geduldige landman" (The Patient Countryman). The writer was Van den Elsen. According to Erfgoed Brabant it was the first time the idea of a farmers' union was brought into a Brabant daily newspaper. He described a farmer who let everything wash over him. The farmer is patient, he wrote, he keeps silent and lets himself be "shorn and flayed like the dumb sheep." Then came the question that mattered to him: was there no one, then, who could offer help and rescue?

His answer was a trade union for farmers. By organizing, the patient countryman was to develop his strength and free himself from the pressure under which he lived.

Proverbs says: *Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die.* (Proverbs 31:8) Van den Elsen himself used the image of the dumb sheep. With his article he opened his mouth for the farmer whom he described as silent.

Rogier calls the article a fierce attack on the capitalism of the middle classes, which in Van den Elsen's view was crushing the farmer. He called on the priests, for in his eyes they were the natural leaders of those who were weak and helpless. They had to help the farmers shed their passive timidity. He also looked across the border. His examples were the Belgian Boerenbond, which had existed since 1890, and the German Bauernvereine, the farmers' associations.

The call came from an abbey, from a man who was no longer a farmer himself. Can a monk in a study know what a farmer on the sandy soil needs? Van den Elsen had been born on a farm. And what happened four years later was the work of many more people than him alone.

August 1896, 's-Hertogenbosch

On January 31, 1896, the Nederlandsche Boerenbond (the Dutch Farmers' Union) was founded, a Christian union deliberately open to Catholics and Protestants. According to Rogier, the initiative came mainly from Overijssel and Gelderland, with L. ridder de van der Schueren from Overijssel as its real father. The statutes asked of a member the acknowledgment of God, the family and property. The membership fee was fifty cents a year. Every municipality could have a branch.

Van den Elsen did not stand at the front at that founding. In Brabant they wanted something different. In August 1896 the Noordbrabantsche Christelijke Boerenbond, the NCB, was founded in 's-Hertogenbosch, the capital of the province. The new union was meant to be a counterweight to the Maatschappij van Landbouw voor Noord-Brabant (the Agricultural Society for North Brabant), an organization supported by the government in which the farmers themselves were not represented. Van den Elsen was there. He became editor of the new union's weekly, and a year later editor in chief.

His role in those first months is less clear-cut than the later tributes suggest. The historian Mari Smits writes that at first he kept some distance from the other organizers. A few months after the founding he began to work for local farmers' associations and village banks. Together with H.M. Thijssen of the newspaper De Noordbrabanter he campaigned, and he founded local unions himself.

Then there was the question of the adviser's post. A union with a spiritual adviser got a priest who guided it. But the union was mixed, Catholic and Protestant, and according to Sengers Van den Elsen thought such a post was typically Catholic. In 1897 he first refused. When the members chose him unanimously and the bishop

wished him success, he accepted after all. With him it became much more than a title.

There was friction too. The Brabanders wanted the Christian principle first and a union of their own, independent. The national union refused that independence. In 1899 the Nederlandsche Boerenbond was turned into a federation of independent regional unions. In 1918 Protestant farmers founded a union of their own. Catholics and Protestants working together, with which the national union had begun, did not last.

An officer's post in the farmers' army

What did such a union look like in a village? About Heeswijk itself I found no source. About Duizel I did.

Jozef Wintermans lived there, the eldest son of a farming family, born in 1877. Becoming a farmer was not an option because of the agricultural crisis, so he trained as a schoolteacher. In 1894 he helped set up the hand-butter factory Kempenland in Duizel. Later he criticized the fact that the money the dairy brought in was spent on cheap beer.

Then he heard Van den Elsen speak. A lecture awakened his interest in the union. In November 1896, three months after the founding of the NCB, he founded a farmers' union in Duizel as a branch of the NCB. He became its secretary and administrator. He was nineteen. Later he called that step an officer's post in the farmers' army.

Paul wrote to the young Timothy: *Let no one despise your youth* (1 Timothy 4:12). In Duizel a schoolteacher of nineteen took on the work. The movement ran on such people from the village itself too.

Wintermans became dairy adviser for North Brabant, from 1906 to 1918. He trained factory staff and wrote a handbook for members

and employees of butter factories. From 1918 to 1929 he sat in the Tweede Kamer (the Dutch House of Representatives) on behalf of the farmers' organizations. When Van den Elsen stepped down as editor in chief of the union's weekly, Wintermans took over from him. In 1945 a V2 rocket destroyed his family's house. He died in 1955 and is buried in Duizel.

That is how the movement worked. A priest gave a lecture, and in the village someone took up the work. The biography of Wintermans mentions that the boards of the cooperatives and farmers' loan banks consisted almost entirely of people from farming itself. Van der Woude adds that a great deal was achieved, especially locally, through the active support of the clergy. The priests supported, the farmers themselves sat on the boards.

One big Christian family

A boerenleenbank, a farmers' loan bank, was a cooperative, a business owned by its members. The bank worked in its own village, and the members could borrow there at a reasonable interest rate. At the end of the nineteenth century Dutch farmers and market gardeners started such banks.

Van den Elsen saw in the cooperative the answer to the farmers' biggest problem: they had no money for buildings, machines and better methods. He took over the idea from the German F.W. Raiffeisen. These were local banks, run by volunteers from the village itself. According to Sengers, he hoped that such banks would turn a community into "one big Christian family." The farmers would look out for each other and help each other.

Such a bank did not stand on its own. The local banks needed the support of a central bank, the Rabobank writes. In 1898 two came: the Coöperatieve Centrale Raiffeisen-Bank in Utrecht and

the Coöperatieve Centrale Boerenleenbank in Eindhoven. Van den Elsen was one of the founders of the one in Eindhoven. According to the biography on Erfgoed Brabant, almost all the farmers' loan banks founded in North Brabant at that time go back to his work.

In 1900, 67 farmers' loan banks were affiliated with one of the two central banks. Ten years after the founding, the Catholic farmers' unions had more than fifty thousand members, Van der Woude writes, and seventy percent of them lived in North Brabant and Limburg. The small farmers on the sandy soils, who had been hit so hard, gained better access to the market through the farmers' loan banks and the cooperatives. The network kept growing, with a mortgage bank, insurance companies and dairy cooperatives.

In the cooperatives the farmers bought and sold together. That way they could negotiate better prices, buy new technology together and share the risk. In 1898 a fire insurance came too. It sounds ordinary now. For a farmer who could hardly borrow around 1890, it was a new world.

Paul wrote to the Galatians: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2) In a cooperative that became very concrete. What one sandy-soil farmer could not carry alone, the price, the machine and the risk, the farmers carried together.

Seventy-four years later, in 1972, the two central banks merged. Out of that merger came Rabobank Nederland. In fairness I have to say that the Rabobank does not mention the name Van den Elsen in its own short history. Its site does have a page about him, but I could not open it.

Four priests and a weekly

It is tempting to make this the story of one man. The abbey of Berne was more than Van den Elsen. In 2019 Erik Sengers wrote a book

about what he calls the priests of social action. He describes four Norbertines of Berne who, between 1895 and 1940, helped build Catholic social organizations. Van den Elsen set the farmers in motion. Jos Nouwens and Julius van Beurden were at the foundation of the middenstand movement, the organization of shopkeepers and craftsmen. Pius van Aken laid the foundation for employers' organizations. They were active nationally, sometimes beyond.

Nouwens began in December 1901 with consultations in the abbey itself. In February 1902 the Hanze came, the organization for the middenstand, and he became its spiritual adviser. His motto was: *Begin with courage under God's blessing.* It is a sentence that also fits what his fellow monk did among the farmers.

Sengers asks how a monastic community came to so much social commitment. In the abbey the priests received a training in which thinking about society had a place. Some of them taught sociology courses there themselves. Sengers finds it striking that through all those years the abbey kept revolving around the liturgy, preaching and pastoral care. The priests sat on boards and wrote advice, and they remained monks of their abbey.

Van den Elsen also worked with the pen. From 1897 he was editor in chief of the union's weekly, which he largely wrote himself. He edited more than a thousand issues of it. He organized social courses and lectures for farmers, and priests who explained his ideas in courses, using material that he wrote, received a contribution from the union for it. From 1902 to 1917 he was also secretary of the national union. What was at stake for a priest who took sides so openly? That became clear in the years that followed.

Butter, grain and a controversial article

Van den Elsen did not avoid conflict. In what is called the Boterstrijd (the Butter Battle), he published the names of the main butter dealers who kept the price low. He called on the farmers to avoid their shops and inns. "Now the farmers know who they are dealing with," he wrote. The farmers won.

He could be harsh. In his weekly he called opponents swindlers, bloodsuckers and Judases, and also "woekerjoden" ("usurious Jews"). That last word was an ugly insult of his time, and you cannot read it now without a shock. Erfgoed Brabant calls his style demagogic and persuasive, and it struck a chord with his readers. It belongs to the man as he was, and I will not hide it from you.

In 1906 he traveled to the United States. He wanted to see whether Brabant farmers had a future there. He came back with the conclusion that emigration carried above all spiritual and economic risks, and argued for an organization that could guide emigrants. It came only after 1945. Pius van Aken took his place in the farmers' organizations for the time being.

In the First World War he turned against the government's requisitioning of grain. He called the seizure of grain robbery and called on the farmers to sow no more grain. He wrote that their joint cry of distress would rush and roar "like a hailstorm." The union organized a protest, according to Erfgoed Brabant with some 25,000 Brabant farmers. The minister raised the grain price, and the union withdrew its threat of a strike.

"The end of the war"

In 1915 he wrote an article with the title "Het einde van den oorlog" (The End of the War). He argued that God did nothing against the horrors of the war, because otherwise man would not learn his

lesson. One passage was clearly a bridge too far: he quoted someone who thought that the Belgians, after ten years under German rule, would become decent, respectable Catholic people. Above all Belgians who had fled to the Netherlands were shocked. The article also caused an uproar in *De Telegraaf* and even in the London *Times*.

Van den Elsen said his arguments had been misread. He stuck to his position. "We pray for peace," he said, but if it did not come, he did not want to reproach Divine Providence. I do not know who was right in that exchange. But here you see the other side of a priest with a loud voice: what he wrote was widely read, also by people who took it differently than he meant.

The man who wrote so much began to wear out. His diary speaks in the last war years of exhaustion and nervous strain. Around 1918 he stopped as editor. On the year the sources differ: one gives 1918, the other 1919. In 1920 he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and laid down most of his duties. After the union's silver jubilee in 1921 he stepped down as spiritual adviser. A photo of that jubilee has been preserved of the executive board in the abbey garden. Father Van den Elsen sits in the middle.

"Far from the bustle"

Van den Elsen died in April 1925 in the abbey in Heeswijk. He was seventy-two. He was buried in the old pandhof of the abbey, the inner garden between the cloisters, right in front of the crucifix. He still lies there, the abbey magazine wrote in October 2025.

A Brabant newspaper wrote about that grave at the time. It lay "far from the bustle" in which the farmers' apostle had moved for decades, and the farmers would hardly be able to visit it. His farmers lived scattered across the whole province. In Brabant he was known as the boerenpater, the farmers' priest.

Perhaps that is why they brought him close in another way. In 1926 a new reclamation village was consecrated in the Peel near Gemert, a former peat bog that was being turned into farmland. Pastor Lambert Poell proposed naming it after him. "Van den Elsendorp" was too long. It became Elsendorp. In about fifty Brabant villages a street was named after him, Mari Smits writes. Schools were named after him, and even a variety of apple. In Gemert a bust was placed against the wall of the church.

A gift from the farmers

In 1927, two years after his death, came the farmers' gift. At the initiative of the NCB, the farming population raised money to extend the abbey church of Berne in his memory. The new part was built at right angles to the old chapel, with a wooden barrel vault, a gallery and a balcony. Cantré's statue went into the tower.

It is an unusual memorial: farming families who gave money for the church of a monastery. What would you give for someone who helped your village get its own bank? I think the farmers knew what had changed in thirty years. In 1892 a priest asked in the newspaper whether there was no one who could help. In 1927 the villages had their own unions and banks, with farmers on the boards.

That the union kept a church tie shows in a sentence spoken much later. In 1982 A.J. Merkx, the last spiritual adviser who still held that title, said: "An NCB family, that is what church really is." One big Christian family: Van den Elsen had wanted it that way.

There is another side too. Van der Woude calls his chapter on the Catholic farmers' organizations "Het Boerenbolwerk" (The Farmers' Stronghold). The union became a Catholic world of its own, separate from the Protestant farmers and separate from the Maatschappij van Landbouw. This was part of what the Dutch

call verzuiling (pillarization), a society divided into separate Catholic, Protestant and other worlds. How much weight you give that depends on where you stand yourself. For the small sandy-soil farmer of 1890, that world of his own did mean a loan at a reasonable interest rate.

An abbey of thirteen

In September 2025 a play about the farmers' apostle was performed at the Boerenbondsmuseum (the Farmers' Union Museum) in Gemert. More than four thousand people came, the abbey magazine reports. A delegation of Norbertines from Heeswijk went to see it and was full of praise.

There are not many of them left. The abbey now has thirteen Norbertines, the youngest almost fifty, the oldest over ninety. With staff and volunteers they keep the services, the guesthouse, the library and the shop open.

In Gemert stands the farm where he was born. A provincial road was to be built over it, and then, Omroep Brabant tells, an alderman lay down in front of it. The house stayed standing. Now it is an open-air museum where visitors see a Brabant village around 1900, with a school, a small shop and a dairy factory.

On the Abdijstraat the tower of 1927 still stands. The monk with the rosary stands halfway in the wall. Beside him lies the plow with the cross, carved in stone by a Belgian, paid for by Brabant farmers.

Go there yourself

The Abdij van Berne (Berne Abbey) is at Abdijstraat 49 in Heeswijk-Dinther, in the municipality of Bernheze. The abbey church is a national monument. The statue of Van den Elsen is in the tower on

the southwest corner of the church, on the outside. The abbey asks visitors to view the complex only from the front.

If you want to see more, you can enter the abbey during a service or a guided tour. On the tour you walk across the grounds, through the gardens and the abbey church, and you end in the tasting room of Berne Abdijbier, the abbey beer. Check the website of the Abdij van Berne for services, tours and opening hours. There is also an abbey shop and a guesthouse.

Combine the visit with the Boerenbondsmuseum at Pandelaar 106 in Gemert, near the house where Van den Elsen was born. Check the website of the Boerenbondsmuseum for opening hours.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the founding of the abbey in 1134 and its settlement in Heeswijk in 1857; Van den Elsen's birth in Gemert on April 13, 1853, and his entry into Berne in 1869; his ordination in 1876; the gymnasium of 1886; the hard years for the Brabant farmers on the sandy soils after the agricultural crisis; his newspaper article of January 1892; the founding of the NCB in August 1896 in 's-Hertogenbosch; the founding of the two central farmers' loan banks in 1898; 67 affiliated banks in 1900; his role as spiritual adviser until 1921; the extension of the abbey church in 1927 with money from the farmers and the statue by Jozef Cantré; Elsendorp (1926).

Only from own testimony or later tradition: Van den Elsen's own statement that his article of 1915 was misread; his words in the Butter Battle, about the grain requisitions and about peace, as the biography on Erfgoed Brabant reports them from his own newspaper articles (I have not seen the original articles); the words of Wintermans about the officer's post in the farmers' army; the story that

an alderman lay down in front of the bulldozers to save the house where he was born (Omroep Brabant reports it with reservations).

Unconfirmed: resting on one source: the exact date of August 17, 1896, the Butter Battle and how it ended (without a year), the protest by about 25,000 farmers in the First World War, the uproar over the article of 1915, the founding of the Duizel branch in November 1896, the words "one big Christian family" (Sengers, after the abbey archives), his refusal and acceptance of the adviser's post in 1897, the cerebral hemorrhage of 1920, his diary with the nervous strain, and his terms for opponents. The adviser's post begins at the KDC in 1896 and at Erfgoed Brabant in 1897.

Disputed: the date of death (April 20 or 24, 1925: the biography on Erfgoed Brabant gives both, Sengers April 20, the Boerenbondsmuseum April 24); the year he stepped down as editor (1918 or 1919); the place and date of the founding of the Nederlandsche Boerenbond (January 31, 1896, according to the statutes, Arnhem according to Rogier, another source gives June 10 in Utrecht); whether he was prior, subprior or even abbot (some sites call him abbot, which is not correct; the biographical dictionary calls him subprior); which farmers' loan bank in Brabant was the first; the reason for the trip to America in 1906 (Smits: research into emigration, Sengers calls it a vacation); the spelling of his name at his monastic baptism (the baptismal record writes Elzen, Omroep Brabant wrongly calls him Godefridus).

Gap: about Heeswijk itself (the farmers' union or farmers' loan bank in that village) I found no source, and about the poverty there around 1890 neither; the sources describe the Brabant sandy soils as a whole. I have not seen the book by Duffhues (1996) and that of Sengers (2019) myself, only the description and an article by Sengers from 2019.

Corrected compared to the first version: the article of 1915 is called "Het einde van den oorlog." The first version only called it an article about God and the war, without a title and without the passage about the Belgians.

Interpretation: how large Van den Elsen's personal share was in the founding of the NCB and the Rabobank differs from source to source. Celebratory texts call him the founder; historians such as Mari Smits describe a man who first kept his distance and then became the driving force in the villages. The pillarization of the farming community is a disputed legacy in historical writing. His language about opponents too, with words that we now read as antisemitic, belongs to an honest picture.

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Bovenknijpe: the village that put a woman in the pulpit

"The miracle has come." That is how a letter begins that the painter Jan Mankes wrote to his family, sometime in the years he lived in the Frisian village of Boven-Knijpe. He had news. "I am engaged," it said. And then the sentence that comes back in almost every source about her: "My girl is the dominee of Boven-Knijpe."

That dominee, that Protestant minister, was Anne Zernike. In most books she is called Anne. On the plaque in the church wall it says Anna.

On the north side of the canal in De Knipe, just east of Heerenveen in the province of Friesland, stands a simple little church. The village used to be called Bovenknijpe. The houses lie in a long row along the water, and among those houses stands the Mennonite church, recognizable by a round window in the front wall. Since 2002 there has been a plaque in the outside wall. It says that here, on November 5, 1911, Anna Zernike was installed as minister.

If you cross the road, you will find a small sitting area with two benches on the corner of the Dominee Veenweg and the Jan

Jonkmanweg. Plaatselijk Belang, the village association, named them after Jan Mankes and Anna Zernike. A small sign tells her life in a few sentences.

It is a quiet place for such a big moment. In this little church, for the first time in the Netherlands, a woman was installed as a minister. It did not happen in any city church or in any large church. It happened in a Frisian village, in a congregation that had asked her itself.

How did that congregation come to do it? And what did it cost?

Ninety members and no minutes

The Mennonite church of Bovenknijpe was built in 1751. Mennonites, in Dutch doopsgezinden, in Friesland also called menisten after Menno Simons, do not baptize babies. They baptize people who confess their faith for themselves. Each congregation chooses its own pastor. There is no bishop or synod that decides who stands in the pulpit. That freedom plays a big part in this story.

In the nineteenth century the congregation got a minister who stayed for almost half a century. Pieter Hendriks Veen arrived on November 18, 1832. According to the Mennonite lexicon of ministers, he found a neglected congregation, with about ninety members. There was no membership register and there were no minutes of the church council. When he left in 1877, the congregation had 246 members and the archive was in order.

Paul wrote: *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.* (1 Corinthians 4:2) With Veen you can see that in a membership register, in minutes and in forty-five years in the same village. In this way a neglected congregation grew into a congregation that could manage its own affairs.

Veen looked beyond the church door. In 1835 he founded a reading society in the village, "Tot nut en vermaak" (For profit and pleasure), which he led for some sixty years. He also sat on the board of the Vredesbond, the peace league. In 1856 the church got a new front. The road past the church now bears his name.

His grandson, also called Pieter Hendriks Veen, became minister in the same village in 1893. In 1907 he left for Middelburg. In 1911 the congregation was looking for a pastor again.

A girl who wanted to become a minister

Far from Friesland, in Amsterdam, a girl was growing up in those years who had wanted to become a minister as a child. Anne Zernike was born on April 30, 1887, the eldest of six children. Her father Fritz was a schoolteacher and taught his children at the table too. If he did not know something, he looked it up in the dictionary or the encyclopedia. The children were given a lot of freedom. Her brother Frits would later win the Nobel Prize in Physics, and her sister Elisabeth became a writer.

It was a house where people talked. Fritz Zernike had become a teacher himself at thirteen, and Anne's mother Antje came from a family of bakers with ministers among the ancestors. The children were not allowed to leave the table during the meal, Elisabeth wrote later, and so a great deal was learned at the table. Once a year the family ate out, at Krasnapolsky, a grand Amsterdam hotel. Anne was drawn to socialism, and her father, a liberal, saw in it the end of orderly society. They argued fiercely. In the end Father left it at the remark that she herself would know best what she was doing.

At fifteen Anne told her parents that she wanted to become a minister. That seemed impossible, for there were as yet no women ministers in the Netherlands. Her father did not believe that a woman

would be accepted as a minister, but her parents did not stop her. Her mother was a member of the Vrije Gemeente (the Free Congregation) in Amsterdam, and there Anne received religious instruction from Jacoba Mossel. Mossel was the first woman with a diploma as a religion teacher, and as early as 1898 she argued that women should be admitted to the study of theology and to the ministry. Her sister Elisabeth said later that Anne went to study theology because she admired Mossel so much. Another teacher, Professor De Bussy, saw talent in her. Anne wrote about him that she could not do justice in words to what he had meant to her.

Once she took part in a theological prize competition. Her brother Frits won a prize in the same round with an essay in physics, and what was left for Anne, her father looked for in her lack of imagination. That is how Pitstra tells it in the first chapter of her biography.

In her autobiography she herself said why she had wanted to become a minister: to deepen and strengthen the joy she knew. She told it so in the memoirs she published in 1956, *Een vrouw in het wondere ambt* (A Woman in the Wondrous Office).

In 1905 the Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit, the national body of the Mennonite congregations, decided to open the ministry to women. It was the first church body in the Netherlands to take that step. Anne and her sister were walking into the services of the Singelkerk at that time. At twenty-two Anne had herself baptized. She went to study theology in Amsterdam.

But a decision on paper is not yet a woman in a pulpit. Someone had to call her. In the Mennonite tradition the local congregation does that itself: the members or the church council invite a minister and ask whether he or she is willing to come.

"Behold, here I am!"

On November 24, 1910, Anne Zernike stood in a pulpit for the first time, in the Mennonite church of Stadskanaal. She spoke there still as a teacher, because her training was not finished. According to the historian Marjet Derks, who draws on the work of the biographer Froukje Pitstra, she opened with the words "Behold, here I am!" They are the words that the young Samuel answers in the Bible when the LORD calls him (1 Samuel 3:4). The churches filled up. According to a newspaper of the time, her words were followed with great approval.

On June 29, 1911, she became a proponent: someone who has completed the training and may be called to a congregation. That summer she traveled through villages and towns to preach. According to Pitstra, there was a report about her in the newspaper almost every week. In Utrecht the police had to be called in to keep the people who wanted to see her under control.

There were doubts too, and they were openly spoken. Could a woman physically lead a congregation? Did she have enough voice to fill a church? Opponents pointed to a supposed female nature, Derks writes. They cited the book *Psychologie der vrouwen* (The Psychology of Women) by the Groningen professor Gerard Heymans, which appeared in 1911. He wrote that a woman's calling lay in the family, and found her intellectual achievements little independent. And they pointed to the words of the apostle Paul that women should keep silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34).

According to Pitstra, many objections disappeared as soon as people heard her preach.

Asked twice

In the summer of 1911, calls came. The Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon (the Digital Women's Lexicon of the Netherlands) names the Mennonite congregations of Baard in Friesland and Mensingewier in Groningen. She turned them down. Bovenknijpe asked her too, and there too she said no at first.

Something of her own voice about her doubt has been preserved. She told later how her self-confidence slipped away from her, and that she feared her faith was not strong enough. She also doubted whether she would be given room within the Mennonite Brotherhood for her own views on Christ, on art and on other religions.

Then something happened that I find the most beautiful detail of this story. Bovenknijpe did not give up. The congregation got in touch again, and at that second request Anne Zernike said yes.

Why did the members of Bovenknijpe want her in particular? The sources I read do not say. What is certain: a small country congregation took the initiative, was told no and asked once more. According to a report in the *Groene Amsterdammer*, a Dutch weekly, she first preached in Boven-Knijpe in July 1911.

What would you have done, as a member of such a congregation? The church body allowed it, but no one had done it yet. Someone had to be the first, with the newspapers on the doorstep.

Sunday, November 5, 1911

On Sunday, November 5, 1911, Anne Zernike was installed as minister in the little church by the canal. Installing means that a minister is officially placed in office and joined to the congregation. She was twenty-four. Pitstra portrays her in 1911 as young and sometimes

unsure. The image that remained of her later was that of a steadfast, strict woman.

Sjoerd Wartena installed her, an older Mennonite minister who had once served in Bovenknijpe himself. He had been minister there from 1880 to 1884 and had served afterward in Workum, Akkrum and, until 1910, Hallum. Wartena was one of the first ministers to preach in Frisian, and his nickname was "lange Sjoerd" (tall Sjoerd). In 1908 he had celebrated his fortieth anniversary in the ministry with a commemorative sermon that bore the title: *Ik heb geloofd, daarom heb ik gesproken* (I believed, therefore I spoke). So a former minister of the village itself placed her in office.

According to the English-language Wikipedia, which draws on Pitstra, Zernike preached that day on Jeremiah 31, the chapter about a new covenant that God will write on the hearts of His people. *I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts*, it says in verse 33.

The installation drew national attention. A reporter from the *Leeuwarder Courant*, according to the *Groene Amsterdammer*, called her "a worthy pastor and pioneer." He praised her calm, dignified delivery and her carefully spoken word.

What the churches said

Outside Bovenknijpe a conversation got going. According to the volume *Honderd jaar vrouwen op de kansel* (A Hundred Years of Women in the Pulpit) from 2011, her appointment set off a discussion in Protestant circles that ran "a not all too smooth course." That is how the reviewer Willy Fransen puts it.

Here I have to be honest about something that also divides my readers. Christians read the Bible differently on this point. For some of the churches, the office of minister or priest is reserved for men.

They read words like those from 1 Corinthians 14 as a command for all times, or they see it as an order God has laid down in creation. Other churches read the same texts as aimed at the situation in the first congregations, and see in the gifts God gives to women a calling to preach as well. Both groups take the Bible seriously. I am not going to decide for you here who is right. I am telling what happened in Bovenknijpe.

Anne Zernike herself did not want to make it a point of contention. People had to listen to her sermon, not to her sex. About the installation in her first congregation she told the minister: "You absolutely do not have to pay any attention to it." She would not let herself be harnessed to the feminist cart. Her biographer sees that as a deliberate choice, comparable to that of the first female professors: opening a place for later generations without making a fight of it.

Lonelier than ever

How did things go after that, in the congregation itself? Here the sources are the most honest, and the least festive.

Anne Zernike was a city person from Amsterdam. She liked village life, the Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon writes, but it took getting used to. Making contact with the villagers was hard for her. She did not speak Frisian. She found no connection with the other Frisian ministers, and there was no one who could help her with the dissertation she was working on. She was homesick for the cultural life of the city. That did not make her quiet. In 1913 she was vice-chair of the subcommittee for religion of the exhibition *De Vrouw 1813 tot 1913* (Woman 1813 to 1913), and according to Pitstra she in fact did the organizing work. She also read critically what others wrote about the ministry for women. The dissertation of Constance Gerlings she found too little scholarly, and for the church discussion too thin, be-

cause it contained no solid arguments for opening the ministry in her own church.

There was more. Anne Zernike was a pacifist and a liberal in theology, and according to the *Groene* her ideas went too far for many Frisian Mennonites. About the threat of war in 1914 she wrote later that her hearers had no use for it: in Friesland everything was peace and quiet. About that time she also wrote that she felt lonelier there than ever. We know that from her own memoirs, *Een vrouw in het wondere ambt*.

How the members experienced it, we know much less well. Their voice can hardly be heard in the sources. I find that a pity, because the story has two sides.

What is certain is that she stayed. For almost four years she was the minister of the little church by the canal.

Whoever stands first somewhere often stands there alone. Anne Zernike did not speak the language of the village and found no connection among her colleagues. She stayed until her marriage in 1915.

"My girl is the dominee of Boven-Knijpe"

In those lonely years she got to know the painter Jan Mankes, who lived not far away. He lived with his parents on the Schoterlandse Compagnonsvaart. He was born in Meppel and grew up in Delft, and was two years younger than she was. The press had at first taken him for a simple farmer's son, but he was well read and sociable. Mankes believed that God was to be found in the simplest phenomena of nature. That was a thought Anne herself was looking for.

The couple became engaged. Then Mankes wrote the letter to his family with which this chapter began: *the miracle has come*, and then the sentence about his girl, the dominee.

I like to read that sentence aloud. There is pride in it, and wonder. In those years almost no one in the Netherlands found it normal for a woman to be a dominee.

After his death Anne wrote what he had taught her: with inexhaustible patience he had taught her to recognize birds by their song. She called that the reason she knew a deeper joy in spring. Mankes painted her several times. The Rijksmuseum owns portraits of her, from 1914 and from 1915 or 1916.

On September 30, 1915, they married, and that brought her work in Bovenknijpe to an end. In those days a married woman was expected to give up her profession, and that is what she did. Her ministry ended on October 1, 1915. The young couple moved to The Hague, where they ended up in the circle of artists.

The congregation of Bovenknijpe had lost its minister again.

After the village

Jan Mankes had tuberculosis. For his health the couple moved to Eerbeek on the Veluwe, a wooded area in the middle of the country. Their son was born there in 1918, and in that same year, on October 3, Anne Zernike earned her doctorate with a dissertation on ethics and socialism. On April 23, 1920, Jan Mankes died. He was thirty.

After that Anne Zernike made herself available for a call among the Mennonites again. She was thirty-three. No call came. The Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon puts it dryly: the Brotherhood kept quiet. According to several sources, many Mennonites found her too liberal. A second congregation like Bovenknijpe, which had asked her

twice in 1911, did not come. It grieved her greatly, the University of Groningen writes on the occasion of her biographer's doctorate. For one winter she substituted in Almelo and Arnhem for the minister P.M. Heringa, from autumn to spring.

Then a vacancy came up in Rotterdam, in the garden village of Vreewijk. Pitstra writes that it seemed to her like a gift from heaven. In 1921 she became pastor of the Nederlandse Protestantenbond in Rotterdam, a liberal Protestant association. She stayed there until 1948, and her congregation grew there from forty to almost five hundred members.

According to the *Groene Amsterdammer* she brought art, music and theater into the congregation. The Rijksmuseum, which owns portraits of her by Mankes, says that she founded a church choir and a theater group and went to museums with members of the congregation. A sentence of hers later became the motto of a preaching contest for women: "Yes, all art is holy." All roads that rise above the everyday, she continued, lead to God.

Two people who had still known her in Rotterdam told the University of Groningen in 2011 how they saw her. One called her modest and certainly not a noisy dominee. The other said she was determined: what she wanted, she carried through. What stayed with them was her emphasis on listening and on conversations between equals.

She preached on tolerance and turned against militarism. According to Pitstra she thought people should seek their own spiritual path, also outside the church. For some Mennonites that was too liberal, and for some members of the Protestantenbond too modern. She wrote books, among them *De mensch en zijn godsdienst* (Man and His Religion, 1920), *Opvoedingsproblemen* (Problems of Upbringing, 1924) and a book about Jan Mankes (1928), and pieces in the *Nieuwe*

Rotterdamsche Courant and *De Groene Amsterdammer*. On March 6, 1972, she died in Amersfoort. She was buried in Eerbeek, beside her husband.

What changed outside the church

What did that one Sunday in Bovenknijpe mean for the rest of the country? The volume *Honderd jaar vrouwen op de kansel* describes a movement in waves. First it was mainly small, liberal churches that opened the ministry to women. In the 1960s the large Protestant churches followed. Since the 1990s churches such as the Unie van Baptistengemeenten (the Union of Baptist Churches) and the Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken (a smaller Reformed denomination) have also taken that step. Some churches did not, and do not to this day. That too belongs to an honest picture.

What the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) or the Baptists decided later was not determined by a congregation in Bovenknijpe. Each church body had its own reasons and its own conversations. But from November 5, 1911, there was something that had not been there before: an example. A woman had been installed as a minister in the Netherlands, and a congregation had chosen her for it itself. The question whether a woman had enough voice to fill a church had been answered in Bovenknijpe.

Outside the church it meant something too. The newspapers reported on it all over the country, and a Frisian newspaper called her a pioneer. Here a woman held a public office, at a time when that happened almost nowhere. Anne Zernike herself did not want to be a figurehead. She became one all the same.

In 2014 the Bijbels Museum (the Bible Museum) in Amsterdam held an exhibition about her, titled *De eerste predikante* (The First Woman Minister). That same year Froukje Pitstra's biography ap-

peared, *Ontelbare enkelvouden* (Countless Singulars). According to the publisher, Anne Zernike moved across all the boundaries of the pillarized society, in political and social movements of every color. She became a well-known voice in newspapers and magazines, far beyond her own church.

The worldwide Mennonite church has not forgotten her. On November 6, 2011, a hundred years and one day after the installation, the Anne Zernike Fund was established. It supports women Mennonite ministers all over the world, and rewards congregations that install a woman as pastor for the first time. That same year Korneel Roosma-de Vries, a woman Mennonite minister from Friesland, wrote a play about her. It premiered on September 25, 2011, in Holwerd and was then performed in churches in the province. In the play Anne sits in her living room in the early 1950s and writes down her memories. A visitor in Leeuwarden saw the audience watching and listening breathlessly.

Coffee and cake by the round window

In 2011 a group of Mennonites from abroad came to De Knipe. One of them was the Canadian writer Dora Dueck. On her blog she described the village as a row of houses along a canal, with a church you recognize by its round window. In the church hung an exhibition about Anne Zernike, with portraits that Mankes made of her as a young woman. The minister translated the panels for the visitors, and members of the congregation served coffee and cake in a room next to the vestibule. Dueck found it the most delicious cake and coffee. She added that she would like to learn Dutch so that she could read the memoirs and the biography.

The letter to the Hebrews says: *Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.* (Hebrews 13:2) Coffee and cake for guests from abroad is a small form of that. It fits

a congregation that a century earlier had also brought in someone from outside.

I find that a beautiful picture to end with. A hundred years earlier, other members of that same congregation had twice asked a young woman from Amsterdam to become their minister. She did not have it easy there. The congregation kept the story all the same, with a plaque in the wall and an exhibition in the church. Across the road stand two benches by the water, with her name and that of the painter who called her his girl.

Go there yourself

The Mennonite church stands in De Knipe, the former Bovenknijpe, a few kilometers east of Heerenveen. It lies on the north side of the canal, along the Dominee Veenweg. In the outside wall is the plaque from 2002 about the installation of Anne Zernike.

At the crossing of the Dominee Veenweg and the Jan Jonkmanweg, across from the church, is the sitting area of Plaatselijk Belang with the benches for Jan Mankes and Anna Zernike and a small information sign.

If you would like to see the inside of the church too, look for information on the village website of De Knipe or contact the Mennonite congregation. A little further on, in Benedenknijpe, stands the white Reformed church from 1661, a national monument on the Meyerweg.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): in 1905 the Mennonite brotherhood was the first church body to open the ministry to women; Anne Zernike became a proponent on June 29, 1911, at first turned down calls (including from Bovenknijpe) and accepted

a second call from Bovenknijpe; on November 5, 1911, she was installed there by Sjoerd Wartena, as the first woman minister in the Netherlands; she stayed until October 1, 1915, and gave up the office when she married Jan Mankes; she found it hard to connect in the village and among the ministers; after 1920 she received no further Mennonite call; the years in Rotterdam from 1921 to 1948; the plaque from 2002 on the church; the terms of office of Veen Sr. (1832 to 1877) and Veen Jr. (1893 to 1907); the Anne Zernike Fund of November 6, 2011.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: her feeling of loneliness and homesickness, her doubt and her words about the joy she wanted to deepen (from her own memoirs *Een vrouw in het wondere ambt*, 1956, via her biographer and the lexicons; I have not read the book itself, but I have read a fragment of Pitstra's biography); her remark about her hearers in 1914 and what Mankes taught her about birds (via the *Groene Amsterdammer*); the opening words in Stadskanaal; the visit of 2011 with exhibition and coffee (blog of a visitor); the memories of two people who knew her in Rotterdam (RUG, 2011).

Unconfirmed: that she preached on Jeremiah 31 on November 5 (one source, the English Wikipedia); the quotation from the *Leeuwarder Courant* (only via the *Groene Amsterdammer*, the newspaper report itself not seen); that she first preached in Bovenknijpe in July 1911 (one source); that Anne had herself baptized at twenty-two (two sources, one of which names the Singelkerk); Mankes's letter (the words come from two sources, I did not find a date).

Disputed: the birth year of her son (1915 according to the lexicon of ministers, 1918 according to other sources); the year the couple moved to Eerbeek (1916 or 1917); the place where Zernike first preached: Ons Amsterdam names November 5, 1911, in the "quiet

Boven-Knijpe in Groningen," which does not agree with the other sources (Stadskanaal, November 24, 1910, and Bovenknijpe lies in Friesland).

Not found: why the congregation called her in particular, how the vote went and what the members said. That may be in the biography by Froukje Pitstra (2014) or in the old congregational history by P. Veen. I also do not know who stood in the pulpit between 1907 and 1911.

Corrected and supplemented compared to the first version: Wartena's own years in Bovenknijpe (1880 to 1884) and his retirement in 1910 have been added, the source criticism about the son now stands here, and the two witnesses from Rotterdam appear without names in the text.

Interpretation: whether women may be ministers is a question to which churches give different answers from their reading of the Bible. This chapter describes what happened, and leaves that judgment to the reader.

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Afterword

Eight congregations, from a meadow near Hoorn in 1566 to a little church in Friesland in 1911. A field where no one walked away. A village where everyone was allowed to speak. Four hundred little rooms on the Amstel. A refugee church that took in refugees itself. A small congregation that wanted to teach a country to read. A parish where the workers held their own meetings. A monk with a plow on the tower. And a village that put a woman in the pulpit.

What they have in common is that they saw something others left lying. Poor old women without family. People who were on the run. Children who could not read. Workers with long days in the textile factories. Farmers who saw prices falling and who found it hard to borrow money.

Not everything they did was good. Anyone who drank, fought or cursed could be taken off the deacons' list. A society that said it was open to everyone did not admit Jews, according to one source. That is in this book too, because it belongs to the story.

While writing I noticed how little we often know about the ordinary members. We know the names of ministers, priests and founders. But who cooked the soup, carried the collection around or sat in a

schoolroom on the first evening is seldom in an archive. Yet they were the ones who made a congregation visible.

In the next volume we go on, from the end of the nineteenth century to today. To the first soldiers of the Leger des Heils (the Salvation Army), a village in the war, an island in the great flood, a church in Rotterdam that opened its doors and a chapel in The Hague where the service was not allowed to stop.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. (Matthew 5:14)