CHURCHES THAT CHANGED THE NETHERLANDS

VOLUME 2

A City on a Hill

Eight congregations, from the Salvation Army to the church asylum in The Hague

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 2

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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: an open door

In the first volume of this series we followed eight congregations from 1566 to 1911. They cared for old women, took in refugees, taught a country to read and helped workers and farmers. This second volume goes further, from the end of the nineteenth century until now.

These are times that lie closer to us. Some of the people in this book are still alive. Some of the events you may know from the news, or from the stories your parents told.

Eight congregations, from 1887 until now

We begin in a small hall in De Pijp, a working-class district of Amsterdam, in 1887, where the first soldiers of the Leger des Heils (the Salvation Army) in the Netherlands began to sing. Then we go to Putten, a village where in October 1944 hundreds of men were taken away and the church became a place for the widows. To Stavenisse, where the water came in February 1953. To Staphorst in 1971, a village where many believers did not have their children vaccinated for reasons of conscience, and the whole country watched when polio broke out.

After that comes an old hidden church in Amsterdam, where in 1975 about a hundred Moroccan men without papers went on hunger strike. A church in Rotterdam that opened its doors to addicts and homeless people. A parish in Volendam that carried a village after the New Year's fire of 2001. And a chapel in The Hague where in 2018 a church service went on day and night for more than three months.

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.

Sensitive stories

A few stories in this volume are about grief that is not yet over. About war, about disasters, about children who died. That is why I do not name victims or their surviving relatives, unless they spoke openly about their story themselves and have since died.

Other stories are about choices on which Christians do not agree among themselves. Should a congregation have its children vaccinated? May a church protect a family against a decision of the government? May a church make room for people who use drugs? I do not take sides. I show what happened, what the people in the congregation said themselves and what others thought of it.

Facts first

Here too I hold to the facts. Where a story comes from only one source, or from the words of someone who was involved, I say so. For many of these events the numbers differ. I show those differences. After each chapter there is a short overview of what is certain and what is not, and a list of sources.

People about whom I already wrote a whole chapter in other books only pass by briefly here.

Amsterdam: the army that began to sing in De Pijp

On Sunday evening, May 8, 1887, the hall on the Gerard Doustraat filled to overflowing. Women screamed and tried to reach the platform. The police sent extra men. That is how Commander G.S. Railton described the evening himself, in the first issue of the weekly *De Heilssoldaat* (The Salvation Soldier). It was a hard fight, he wrote. And still he closed with: "I never saw a more glorious victory in any opening whatsoever."

It was the first meeting of the Leger des Heils (the Salvation Army) in the Netherlands. At the front stood a man of twenty-one who had already lost his job: Gerrit Govaars.

Walk through the Gerard Doustraat today and you will see nothing that makes you think of an army. The street, in De Pijp, is a street for eating and drinking, with terraces, bars and small restaurants, and in the evenings especially there are many students. It is named after a seventeenth-century painter, like almost every street in this neighborhood. How the Army began here, and how it grew from a noisy hall into work that changed the way Amsterdam looked at its homeless, is the story of this chapter.

A teacher without a class

Gerrit Juriaan Govaars was born in Amsterdam on April 19, 1866. He became a schoolteacher. He was a member of the Vrije Evangelische Gemeente (the Free Evangelical Congregation), a small Protestant congregation outside the large churches, and of the evangelization society Emmanuel. Evangelization means bringing the gospel to people who no longer go to church.

In London a movement had existed since 1865 that did exactly that. William Booth, born in 1829 in Nottingham, came to faith at the age of fifteen and became a Methodist minister. He left his denomination so that he could evangelize more freely. Together with his wife Catherine he started the East London Christian Mission in 1865 in Whitechapel, in the east of London. In 1877 their work took on a military form, with a flag, uniforms and ranks. The motto became "Blood and Fire". From then on it was called The Salvation Army, in Dutch the Leger des Heils.

Govaars felt drawn to it. According to the Canon Sociaal Werk (a Dutch overview of the history of social work), it was a French edition of the Army's paper that won him over. Another source tells that he was already wearing an S on his collar before there was any Army in the Netherlands, a badge he had received from a friend in France. That S is still the badge of the salvation soldiers. As an explanation, the source mentions the Army's English slogan: "Soup, Soap and Salvation".

In 1885 his sympathy cost him his job as a teacher. He left for the headquarters in London. There he helped translate songs, and at an international congress in 1886 he became an officer. In London he was known as the "Hallelujah Dutchman". All his life he would go on writing songs for the Army. The sources do not mention any titles.

What would you do if your faith cost you your job? Govaars went abroad and came back as an officer.

An officer who had to wait

He had an ally. C. Ferdinand Schoch was a well-to-do former officer, according to the Army's own history a retired artillery officer. He was a co-founder of the same society Emmanuel. In 1884 and 1885 he visited the Army in London, and he wanted to join at once. Booth advised him to wait until there was a branch in the Netherlands.

Schoch waited. Booth did not want separate groups: only officers he appointed himself could work under the Army's name.

There had already been voices for and against in the Netherlands. In 1882 P. Huet, a minister of the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) in Goes, defended the Army in his paper. That same year he traveled with the minister Andrew Murray to the London headquarters. A year later, on May 18, 1883, at a conference in Delft, J. van Golverdinge Jr. gave a critical talk. He saw errors in the Army's teaching and found its strict organization suspicious.

In September 1886 an evangelist, Jan van Petegem, wanted to start his own "Rescue Army" in the Netherlands. Booth refused. Shortly afterward London sent a man of its own.

A sailor from the Harwich boat

In March 1887 the newspapers reported the arrival of John K. Tyler. He had been a sailor on the boats between Harwich and Hoek van Holland. In the Army he was a captain. He came with his wife, about whom the sources say little, except that she was there.

Tyler spoke a little Dutch. Reporters could hardly understand him. A former officer who later wrote a sharp book about the Army called Tyler and his first successors men of little ability. That

judgment comes from someone who had broken with the Army. It deserves a place, but not the last word.

A week before the first meeting a small advertisement appeared in the Algemeen Handelsblad, an Amsterdam newspaper. Amsterdam had been warned.

Sunday, May 8, 1887

The hall of the society Emmanuel was on the Gerard Doustraat. De Pijp was a working-class neighborhood, and the street plan of this part of the district had been drawn around 1870. On Sunday, May 8, 1887, the Leger des Heils held its first meeting in the Netherlands there.

Captain Tyler stood at the front of the hall, with Lieutenant Govaars and Mr. and Mrs. Schoch beside him. Commander Railton from London was there too. About the street, the date and the crowds, all the sources agree.

According to the Army, sixteen people knelt that day at the penitent form, an ordinary bench at the front of the hall. Whoever knelt there showed that he wanted to give his life to God. People prayed with him, and within two weeks someone from the Army visited him at home twice.

Sixteen people on their knees, in a hall where that evening women were shouting and the police were sent extra men. With that picture the Army began in the Netherlands.

"A more glorious victory"

Railton's report in the first issue of *De Heilssoldaat*, in June 1887, is the only eyewitness account of that evening that I found. He saw no failure in the riots. In the Army, the start of work in a new country

is called an opening, and that is how he looked at the evening too: as the first step in the Netherlands.

We have that evening only through his eyes. What the people in the neighborhood thought, and what the police officers wrote in their report, we do not know from these sources. Railton wrote for his own people, and he wrote to give courage. I read his report as a testimony: honest about the unrest, and full of what he believed God was doing.

A prayer meeting, a song of praise and a bench at the front

Anyone who went to the Army for a week in those years entered a fixed rhythm. C. van der Laan describes it in his article about the founding of the Army. There was a prayer meeting. There was a holiness meeting, meant for those who had already come to faith and wanted to grow. There was a meeting full of praise and thanks. And there was the salvation meeting, for those who were still outside.

In that last one the audience was called to come to the penitent form. The salvation soldiers did not stay on the platform. They walked into the hall, among the people, to talk with them. According to the Canon Sociaal Werk, bystanders watched this with distrust. A church service that cared little for the fixed forms, with people who spoke to you in the hall: they did not know that.

The Army also wrote. After the first issue of *De Heilssoldaat*, the circulation grew within a year to fourteen thousand, according to the Army's own figures. In 1888 it got its own printing press, and H.C. Hodder came as national commander. In 1890 the paper was called *De Oorlogskreet* (The War Cry), and the circulation was twenty-two thousand. By then there were thirty corps and more than a hun-

dred officers. From 1894 a paper for children was added, *De Jonge Strijder* (The Young Soldier).

In the first year alone the Army counted more than half a million visits to its meetings. These were probably visits and not separate people. Whoever came every evening was counted every evening.

Stones, mockery and a flag

The unrest of that first evening stayed. In the summer of 1887 rioters regularly disrupted the meetings, and sometimes the police had to step in. Salvation soldiers, as the members of the Army are called, were beaten. Van der Laan notes that these very clashes made the Army known, and gave it the name of a movement with courage.

On July 17, 1887, Commissioner Frank Smith came from London and presented the Army flag. With that the corps Amsterdam 1 became official. A corps is what the Army calls what elsewhere is a congregation: a local group of believers with its own hall and its own officers. According to Van der Laan, by then about four hundred people had knelt, of whom a quarter had become salvation soldiers.

Anyone who went to a meeting that summer knew there might be rioters. In a few months about four hundred people knelt. The mockery did not keep them away.

Outside Amsterdam things were rougher. In 1889 the Army's building in Kampen was pelted with stones. Windows were broken and members were beaten. According to the Army's canon, the unrest went on for days, until a state of siege was declared.

A view from Utrecht

A booklet from the same year shows that the Army was also being watched from outside church circles. In 1887 the publisher Breijer in

Utrecht brought out an offprint from the journal *Bouwsteenen* (Building Stones), the paper for Inner Mission. The author, Dr. Pronsveld, looked at the Army critically. He tells about Booth and his early years in London and about the military organization. He describes the meetings: drums, singing, prayer and the penitent bench. He quotes a salvation soldier who says he has been saved because he no longer goes to dog fights. About Amsterdam he writes only briefly: the Army had been active there for some months.

What a critic already saw in 1887 was the striking thing about this work. Whoever wanted to be called saved left behind something he did every week, and a bench at the front became the place where that became visible.

Why the churches had doubts

In those first years the churches looked on mainly with suspicion. Van der Laan lists the objections. The Army was noisy. Women stood at the front and preached, and many church circles objected to that. The military form bothered many ministers. And the teaching was different: in 1882 Booth had abolished the sacraments in the Army, that is, baptism and the Lord's Supper. He also did not believe in the doctrine of election, which carried great weight in Reformed circles.

The minister S.D. van Veen wrote that the Army made an impression only on people without education and refinement. Did he mean it as criticism or as a plain statement? From Van der Laan's article you cannot tell. For the Army it was no objection. It sought those people out on purpose.

Jesus said of Himself: *For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.* (Luke 19:10). To seek is something other than waiting for someone to come. The salvation soldiers walked into

the hall, among the people, and visited whoever had knelt at home twice afterward.

There were other voices too. Seven former officers asked the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) in an open letter to set up its own "Church Army". That did not happen. But appreciation did grow, slowly.

Criticism also came from the other side. The socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis wrote in 1891 that Booth left capitalism alone, and he called that a quack's method. He did praise the Army for the people it reached. A former officer, Tom le Clerq, published a protest against the Army in 1892. W. van Nes, also a former officer, wrote a sharp book in 1896. In his view the Army at its core was about saving souls, and not about changing society. The standard study of the Army from 2005 sees evangelism and care in the Army as one whole.

A horse in London

Booth himself wrote about the question of whether the Army wanted to save souls or bodies. In 1890 *In Darkest England and the Way Out* appeared, in Dutch as *In Engelands donkerste wildernissen en de weg ter ontkoming*. He begins his plan with a horse. A cab horse in London, he writes, is given shelter for the night, food for its stomach and enough work to earn that food. He calls this a low standard. Millions of people in England did not reach it. For a human being, he thought, the same standard could apply.

In the preface he makes clear what moves him. His first aim remains to save the soul. But even if he does not reach that aim, he wants to relieve people's bodily need. He sees that help as a way toward the renewal of the whole person.

In Amsterdam it began smaller than his plan. It began with a cold winter.

The winter the doors opened

That winter it became extremely cold. In Amsterdam many people had no roof over their heads.

The Army opened its halls as night shelters. The building on the Rapenburg, the Vrede-Ark (the Ark of Peace), became a refuge for people without a home. There was also an emergency shelter on the Lijnbaansgracht. Homeless people got hot soup and breakfast there. According to Van der Laan, many people were saved from freezing this way. That same year the Army's first night shelter opened on the Haarlemmerhouttuinen, a permanent place to sleep.

All the sources I read call this winter the beginning of the social work of the Leger des Heils in the Netherlands. They also call it the moment the city began to look differently. People who had first mocked the singing soldiers from De Pijp now saw the same people handing out soup in the freezing cold.

I think this may be the most beautiful part of the whole story. The Army made no big plans. It had a hall, it was cold, and the door opened.

In the prophet Isaiah, God says what kind of fast He chooses: *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out* (Isaiah 58:7). That winter the Army did not have to explain what it believed. The people in the night shelters received it in a bowl of hot soup.

A queen, a colonel and a general

In 1891 Colonel W. Elwin Oliphant and his wife Célestine came to the Netherlands to lead the work. Célestine was a daughter of Fer-

dinand Schoch, the former officer who had had to wait in 1884. According to Van der Laan, she won many people for the Army, among them Queen Regent Emma.

So the daughter of the man who had had to wait came to stand at the head of the work. Under the Oliphants it grew quickly.

In 1892 the Army got a headquarters on the Prins Hendrikkade, number 131. It took the place of the Vrede-Ark on the Rapenburg. That same year General Booth himself came. According to the Army's annual report, which Van der Laan quotes, fifteen thousand people stood at the Central Station and another fifty thousand in the streets. Those numbers come from the Army itself. They do show how great the interest had become by then. Booth came more than once. In 1895 he spoke to an audience of rich and influential people about his book on darkest England. In June 1896 Commissioner A.S. Booth-Clibburn took over the leadership from the Oliphants. That year the Army in the Netherlands also became a foundation.

A retired officer, H.L.V.E. Salomon, former commander of a prison for young male convicts, wrote in those years a plea for the Army, dedicated to the Queen Regent. The year of his booklet is not given. He mentions the Dutch headquarters as being under the leadership of Colonel and Mrs. Oliphant. According to him the Army rescued people from bodily and spiritual misery, and former drunkards, thieves and brawlers had become respectable citizens. He names no concrete names. He wanted officers of the Army to be allowed into the prisons. That is how someone who had worked with convicts for years wrote about an army he admired.

The Army kept opening new places. The guide of the Huygens Institute mentions a mixed shelter on the Prinseneiland and a stuivertoevlucht from 1892, a shelter for a few cents for people who

could not work. A man who came alone paid ten cents for a bed, with coffee and bread. Men, women and children could spend the night for a stuiver (a five-cent coin) in a heated room. In the Warmoesstraat, at number 134, came a lodging house with a restaurant, the Metropool, where you could spend the night for ten cents. It also got the nickname "Palace for the Poor Man". Workshops were attached to the shelters, so that whoever slept there could also earn something. Between 1892 and 1896 a winter shelter that worked as a labor exchange stood on the grounds of the old Rasphuis (a former prison), where two hundred men were helped into work. When the building had to make way for a municipal swimming pool, the Army received the property in the Warmoesstraat as compensation. There it provided about 175,000 portions of food a year, and 16,306 people slept there for ten cents. In 1893 the Army in the Netherlands counted almost a hundred thousand overnight stays.

At Christmas 1897 about five thousand people came to the Paleis voor Volksvlijt (the Palace of Industry) in Amsterdam, for an evening with a magic lantern. The Army owned two lanterns with limelight and used them to show stories, such as *The Little Match Girl*. The report of that evening says the commander asked the hall whether they were ready to die.

A house on the Prinsengracht

The Army also sought out women. From December 1894 it had a post for prostitutes in the Wallen, Amsterdam's red-light district. Female officers went from the posts into the back streets to visit people at home. In 1895 it opened a rescue home for women on the Prinsengracht, number 866, with room for sixty women. The first rescue home for women and girls in the Netherlands had started a year earlier in Hillegersberg. What life in the house on the Prinsen-

gracht was like, and who the women were, the sources I read do not say. That is why I leave it at the address and the number of places.

Care was also given to the children, and to adoption if the mother chose it. That same year the Army in Amsterdam began nursing the sick on a small scale. In Lunteren it bought an old farm, Groot Batelaar. It became a land colony, a place where people could recover and start again.

Meanwhile the work reached beyond the Netherlands. In November 1894 Staff Captain Brouwer and Ensign Van Emmerik left for Poerworedjo on Java. It was the beginning of the Army in what was then called the Dutch East Indies. Leprosy colonies, among other things, followed later.

From mockery to respect

Around 1900, according to Van der Laan, the Army had eighty-eight corps and outposts and eighteen social institutions. The Army's own website speaks of sixty corps. The difference probably lies in the outposts. The census of 1899 counted 283 people who called themselves members. Ten years later there were 3,868. The number of visitors was many times higher.

According to Van der Laan, the mockery had made way for a growing respect. Joris van Eijnatten says it in his own way in a review of the standard study of the Army: the Army helped homeless people, alcoholics and prostitutes, and with that slowly won respect. He does add that this study was written by someone who is himself involved with the Army. An outsider might have told a different story.

That goes for more in this chapter. Most of the numbers come from the Army itself: its annual reports, its paper, its canon. Nobody made them up, and nobody else has counted them again.

A girl who knelt

One woman you can follow from the penitent bench to the Wallen. Alida Bosshardt was born in Utrecht on June 8, 1913. She was not religious. Around 1930 Wil Dillen invited her to come along to the Army. She knelt at the penitent bench and, as a biographical article sums it up, consciously turned to God. During her training at the Army's training college, in the early thirties, she said that this was God's purpose for her life.

From 1934 she worked in a children's home in Amsterdam. During the occupation she cared for children whose parents had placed them there, mostly Jewish children. In 2004 Yad Vashem recognized her as Righteous Among the Nations.

After the war she discovered that the Army was doing nothing in the red-light district. She received permission to work there with prostitutes. In her diary she wrote in 1948 that the Army belonged there, with the message of Jesus. She said she could not wipe out prostitution, and wanted to help the women as they were. About her own place she said: "In essence, I could have been sitting there too."

She became known nationally in 1959, when she appeared in the VARA program *Anders dan anderen* (Different from the Others). In 1965 she led Princess Beatrix incognito through the Wallen. In 1978 she retired as lieutenant colonel, but to everyone she remained Major Bosshardt. She died on June 25, 2007, in Amsterdam, at the age of ninety-four. Near her statue stands a little bench with her rule for life: serving God is serving people, and serving people is serving God. On June 8, 2022, Queen Máxima opened the Majoor Bosshardthuis on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal, the building where she took in vulnerable people.

It began with a bench at the front of a hall in De Pijp. There in 1887 sixteen people knelt. Around 1930 a girl of eighteen knelt there.

The violin of Govaars

Gerrit Govaars stayed with the Army all his life. He wrote songs that the Army sang, he became a colonel, and in 1947 he received the Order of the Founder. He died in Soest on October 22, 1954, at eighty-eight years old. His grandson became the English composer Robert Simpson. William Booth came to Amsterdam once more in 1906. The work went on.

In 2012 the Army celebrated its one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary. At the end of a Saturday afternoon a relay of brass bands began on the Gerard Doustraat, in front of the building where the Army held its first meeting on May 8, 1887. Thousands of spectators stood along the route over the Dam. A day later, on Sunday, people prayed at the penitent bench of today, which the Army calls the mercy seat, and those who wanted to become officers were called to the platform. General Linda Bond urged the Dutch salvation soldiers in those days above all to be a praying army. That evening a violinist from Almere played on the violin of the man who had stood at the front in 1887. Robert Paul Fennema of the Army summed up the work at that anniversary: "A hungry stomach has no ears."

I stand in the Gerard Doustraat again. There is no plaque. There are terraces and restaurants. The same violin had sounded here one hundred twenty-five years earlier, on that first day, in a small hall where sixteen people went down on their knees.

Go there yourself

The Gerard Doustraat is in De Pijp in Amsterdam. It crosses the Frans Halsstraat and the Quellijnstraat, among others; on those cor-

ners there are information signs about the painter Gerard Dou and about the pointed houses of the street. It is a lively street with terraces and restaurants. I did not find a memorial plaque for the beginning of the Leger des Heils there, and I could not establish whether the original hall of the society Emmanuel still exists.

The other addresses in this chapter are in and around the city center: the Rapenburg, the Haarlemmerhouttuinen, Warmoesstraat 134, Prinsengracht 866 and Prins Hendrikkade 131. I did not check what is in those buildings now. They are addresses, not museums.

The Leger des Heils is still active in Amsterdam. For its places and activities in the city, see the website of the Leger des Heils.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the first meeting on Sunday, May 8, 1887, in the hall of the society Emmanuel on the Gerard Doustraat in De Pijp; the role of Gerrit Govaars, C. Ferdinand Schoch and the English captain Tyler; Govaars losing his job as a teacher in 1885 (one source, in detail); unrest and police action in the first months; the official installation of the corps Amsterdam 1 in 1887; the cold winter of 1890 to 1891 as the beginning of the social work, with night shelter on the Rapenburg and a night shelter on the Haarlemmerhouttuinen; Groot Batelaar (1895); the beginning in the Dutch East Indies (1894). From one solid source (Van der Laan or the Huygens guide): the arrival of the Oliphants in 1891; the addresses of the shelters and the rescue home on the Prinsengracht (1895); the church and socialist criticism.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the booklet of Dr. Pronsveld (1887) and the plea of Salomon (year unknown), both read through the scan of Utrecht University; Railton's report of the evening meeting of May 8, 1887; the sixteen people at

the penitent form and the four hundred in July; the crowd at Booth's visit in 1892; most of the numbers about corps, visitors and overnight stays (from annual reports and publications of the Army); the role of Célestine Oliphant with Queen Emma; the state of siege in Kampen (from the Army's canon). Bosshardt's words come from her diary and interviews, as a biographical article sums them up; the little bench with her rule for life is in that same article, without a date. The stories about the Christmas party with the magic lantern come from an article about the magic lantern in the Netherlands (Photohistorisch Tijdschrift, 2007).

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

- *House number of the first hall.* Number 69 (Van der Laan, Huygens) or number 8 (Canon Sociaal Werk).
- *Who led the first meeting.* According to the Army's canon, Captain Tyler led the meeting, with Govaars and Mr. and Mrs. Schoch as helpers. Van der Laan (1989) and the Huygens guide write that Railton led the day. I have told it so that they were all there.
- *Tyler's first name.* John (Van der Laan, Huygens, canon), Joseph (the international site of the Army) or J.F. (Wikipedia). His rank also differs between the sources.
- *Month of the flag presentation.* July 17, 1887 (Van der Laan; Huygens says July) or September (the website of the Army).
- *Number of corps.* After one year eleven (Van der Laan) or seven (Army website); around 1900 eighty-eight corps and outposts (Van der Laan) or sixty (Army website; Wikipedia also mentions sixty corps and eighteen institutions around 1900).
- *How Govaars came to the Army.* A French edition of the Army's paper (Canon Sociaal Werk, one source) or an S on his collar that he received from a friend in France (Dutch Wikipedia);

both stories come from one source each and have not been checked.

- *Visits of Booth.* The Army's annual report gives crowds at his arrival in 1892; the canon mentions a speech to an audience of rich and influential people in 1895. The Rijksmuseum has a print of his visit in 1906.
- *The headquarters.* Prins Hendrikkade 131 from October 1, 1892 (Huygens); Van der Laan gives the year 1892.

Unconfirmed: whether the original building still exists; the titles of Govaars' songs; the year of the Dutch edition of Booth's book (the translator was P.S. Adama van Scheltema, the publishers Van Looy and Gerlings in Amsterdam); whether the remark about the hungry stomach was made word for word that way, because I only have it through the Canon Sociaal Werk; whether the lantern evening at Christmas 1897 and the commander's question went exactly like that, because I only have the article about the magic lantern.

Interpretation: whether the Army mainly wanted to save souls or to change society was already disputed in the 1890s. Critics such as Domela Nieuwenhuis and Van Nes saw it differently from the Army itself. The standard study of this period was written from within the Army. That Railton's evening was a victory, and that the winter of 1890 was an act of God, is a matter of faith. I read both along with him.

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Putten: the church of the widows

On Ascension Day, May 10, 1945, Putten came together in the Oude Kerk (the Old Church) in the evening. It was three weeks after the liberation. Word had come from Germany, and no one yet knew what it said.

Rev. C.B. Holland, the old minister, went up into the pulpit with a list. An oil lamp was burning and it smoked; another account speaks of a candle. He read out the names. There were about a hundred and eighty of them. Later he said: "I had to steel myself to do it."

An eyewitness wrote down what happened in the church: bewilderment. One woman turned out to have lost four men, another a husband and two sons. The eyewitness drew one conclusion: "There is no family without mourning."

A girl who sat in that church as a child told the NOS, the Dutch public broadcaster, eighty years later what she remembered of that evening. Everyone had to cry. Her aunt, whose husband had also been taken away, lay on the floor, beside herself. Another girl, fifteen at the time, heard people sobbing behind her because their son

was dead. Everyone had hoped until the last moment that the family would come back.

This was the same church in which the same women had spent a night under force seven months earlier.

On the Dorpsstraat in Putten, a village on the Veluwe in the center of the Netherlands, there is a quiet park. If you walk in, you see a woman made of sandstone. She has a handkerchief in her hand and looks across the street at the Oude Kerk. The statue shows a grieving widow. It is known as the Vrouwtje van Putten, the Little Woman of Putten. Across the street, at number 127, is the Gedachtenisruimte (the Remembrance Room) of Stichting Oktober 44 (the October 44 Foundation). Inside, in the dome, are the names of the men who were taken away from this village in October 1944. There are hundreds of them.

The Oude Kerk itself is still simply a church. On Sundays the Hervormde Gemeente Putten holds its services there. Hervormd refers to the old Protestant national church of the Netherlands, the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church).

What does a church mean to a village when almost all its men disappear at once?

A shot at the Oldenaller bridge

In 1944 Putten was a strictly religious village on the Veluwe, as the Defensiekrant, the newspaper of the Dutch Ministry of Defense, describes it. In the first years of the war there was hardly any organized resistance. That changed in the spring and summer of 1944, when two small groups came into being. At the beginning of September a policeman, A. Witvoet, became their joint commander. On September 22 about a hundred and twenty young men met in

a youth hostel, De Instuif. The plan to attack the Germans near Arnhem was called off.

On the evening of Friday, September 29, a small group tried to stop a car at Huize Bijstein, on the road between Nijkerk and Putten. Not a single car came by. The next evening, Saturday, September 30, a second attempt followed at the Oldenallerbrug (the Oldenaller bridge), with a British paratrooper, Keith Banwell, and a Bren gun on an open van. Shortly before midnight a small German passenger car with soldiers approached from the direction of Amersfoort. Banwell opened fire. The car hit the railing of the bridge and came to a stop on the verge.

It went wrong. No order came, and when the lamps were put out, two bullets flew through the windshield. The resistance man Frans Slotboom was badly wounded and died the next morning. A German officer also died. Another officer, wounded, was taken along by the resistance and later left at a place where the Germans could find him. Two corporals fled to Harderwijk to raise the alarm.

The sources disagree about the name of the officer who was killed. About the main lines of what followed, they agree.

A white sheet from the window

Sunday morning, October 1, eight o'clock. The encirclement began. More than a thousand soldiers of the Hermann Göring regiment drew a ring around the village. The order came from General Friedrich Christiansen, the highest German commander in the Netherlands. After ten o'clock no one could get through. According to an article in the Defensiekrant, the church bells also had to be silent. It was Sunday.

Everyone had to go to the Kerkplein, the church square, supposedly for a check of identity papers. The sick, the elderly and those who

had a baby could stay at home, if a white sheet hung from the window. Anyone found in a house without a sheet could be shot as a partisan, and the house would be burned. Shots were fired everywhere. According to the foundation, seven people were killed that day. Other sources give a higher number.

About forty men were gathered at the Harderwijkerstraat as hostages, among them the town clerk. The Germans demanded ten of them. A man who tried to flee was shot, and his body was laid on a ladder. The group had to carry the ladder to the Kerkplein as a warning. Later the hostages were taken to the Eierhal, the building behind the church.

In broad lines, the women and children went into the Oude Kerk and the men into the school next to it. The witnesses do not all tell the same story about exactly where each person was held. Here I tell mostly what they saw themselves.

"We are not going to church"

A girl of almost fifteen, who had moved to Putten with her family from Eibergen in 1938, told on the foundation's website in 2018 how that Sunday went for her. The family lived on the Harderwijkerstraat, diagonally across from the Roman Catholic church, where good acquaintances of theirs came. When the raid began, they went there. There were also evacuees from Arnhem. A little later a German and a policeman came to say that they had to go to the Reformed church. Her mother, her youngest sister and her brother were allowed to stay at home, like the evacuees. The housekeeper hung white sheets from the window.

The girl, her oldest sister and one other woman did have to go. That other woman nearly sent the German and the policeman out the door. She told them they would come, but that they were not going

to church and would stay where they were. They spent that night in the attic of the parsonage, the house by the church where the minister lives.

The next day the women heard that they had to bring food to the men who were still in the church and in the old school. By four o'clock the village had to be empty, or everyone would be arrested or the village would be set on fire. On the Telgterweg she saw a woman with a black cat and thought it was her own cat, which had been stolen. She got off her man's bicycle with the suitcase on the back and asked whether the cat was hers. It was not the right one. A little old man in a black cap held her bicycle so that she could get on again and catch up with the others. In the night they watched the flames. The next day she walked back to Putten with her little sister. The whole village smelled of smoke, and many houses were burned down. Their house was still standing. The black cat was there too.

She carried it with her all her life. Her husband was a farmer, and two of his brothers had been taken away in the raid. They talked about it little, she said, because you would rather forget. It had always left its mark on her.

An officer in the pulpit

Not everyone came in through the front door of the church. A young woman from Emst, who worked at the tea house Schaveren and brought food to people in hiding, was on her way to Amsterdam that Sunday morning with a father and his son when the Germans stopped the wagons at the Oldenallerbrug. They were placed against a tree. The men were herded into a meadow, and anyone who tried to flee was shot. In the chaos of the late afternoon the woman ran to a house and hid in a barn.

On Monday she went with a daughter of another family to bring food. A German took them inside at the school, and after that they were pushed into the church. There was great panic. At one point, she told, a high German officer stood in the pulpit, the raised place from which the sermon is preached on Sunday. He said the church would be set on fire later that day. That did not happen. She climbed up with her friend and saw through a window rows of people standing outside, old and young, some still in pajamas. According to her, the intention at first was to shoot these people. Toward noon a German said the church doors would open at one o'clock. That happened. The men were taken to the station. She saw how the father of her traveling companion brought the bags of food to his son and said goodbye to him. The son did not come back: he died on March 14, 1945, in a subcamp of Neuengamme, in Hamburg.

Later she called it "very, very sad." Her story we know only from her own testimony.

What a child saw

A girl of nine, an only child, went along with her parents that Sunday to show her identity card. Anyone who stayed at home would be shot. Her father was a garage owner in Putten and often sang while he repaired cars. "It was a good family," she said eighty years later.

The men were put in the school, the women and children in the church next to it. Soldiers with machine guns walked between the crying children and women. When she was separated from her parents, a soldier pushed her away with the butt of his rifle. She did not understand German. Everything was frightening.

In the evening the women and children were allowed to go home, on the condition that they would bring food for the men the next morning at ten o'clock. Men over fifty and under eighteen were allowed to go with them. For the others the church now became a cell. Jannes Priem, one of the few who later came back, described it like this: first they stood against the church wall, then they sat in the school, then in the church.

The next day the women had to stand in a large circle on the Kerkplein. There they heard that the village had to be empty before four o'clock.

I have looked at that order for a long time. A building where you were baptized as a child and where on Sundays you sit next to your father in the pew. And then you have to spend a night there wondering whether you will ever come home again.

Psalms before leaving

At four o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday it was announced what had happened at the bridge. The attackers had to report. No one reported.

On Monday morning, October 2, the men had to stand in a U on the Kerkplein, with machine guns aimed at them. Everyone thought there would be shooting. It lasted until about eleven o'clock. Children who called out to their fathers were pushed back. The women were kept at a distance. A few who gave little information were released, and so were those who were members of the NSB (the Dutch Nazi party) or had family in the SS or the Wehrmacht: a few dozen together.

At one o'clock the men were taken to the station and placed in a small wood along the railway, beside pits that Russian prisoners of

war had dug earlier. Many men thought this would be their mass grave.

Priem later wrote how that morning went. Rev. Holland told the men what had happened. The men sang a few psalms. After that the German colonel Fullriede announced that they were being taken to Kamp Amersfoort, a German camp in the Netherlands. Priem does not say which psalms they sang. In Putten the church sang the rhymed psalms: the hundred and fifty psalms of the Bible, set in rhyme to sing together. Men who had known those songs since childhood did not need a book.

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom* (Colossians 3:16), and in the same sentence he mentions psalms. What the men of Putten had sung together on Sunday, they knew by heart. On the Kerkplein, with machine guns aimed at them, they still had those words with them.

In later stories about the raid, Psalm 84 is named as the song the men sang as they left. That psalm begins by saying how lovely the dwelling place of the LORD of hosts is (Psalm 84:1). It is about longing for the house of God. In the sources I could read, I did not find it confirmed that it was this psalm. It may be true. It stands here as tradition.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the sentence was read to the women in the church. Putten would be razed to the ground. Only the houses of the sick, the elderly, mothers with small children, municipal staff, police, members of the NSB and Germans would be spared. By four o'clock the village had to be empty.

By that time the men were being loaded into freight cars, on their way to Kamp Amersfoort. At twenty past five the first houses were set on fire. According to the foundation, about a hundred and ten

were destroyed. On Tuesday the Germans were gone. The people returned and helped the homeless find shelter and clothes.

A note from the train

What was said in those freight cars we know partly from notes. A schoolteacher from Putten threw notes out of the train for his wife during the transport to Germany. He wrote that the whole camp was on its way to Hamburg, that they were hungry and thirsty, and that he trusted in God and in prayer.

A garage owner threw a note out of the train near Oldenzaal for his nine-year-old daughter. He asked her to stay with mama. He ended with: "because I will be home again soon." Mother and daughter received it only after the liberation. He died on December 19, 1944, in Neuengamme, at the age of thirty-three, of pneumonia.

And two brothers wrote a letter together to the wife of one of them, dated October 14, 1944, when the train was on its way to Hamburg. The father wrote that they were healthy and that the Germans were good to them. He asked her to decide for herself whether to go home or stay at home, and not to worry too much. He sent kisses to his children and asked her to talk about papa to his little son now and then. She was to keep her courage up, pray together and take care of the pig and the chickens. He signed with "your husband". The letter had probably been thrown from the train and stayed hidden for more than seventy years. In 2014 a niece found it in the archive of her mother, the aunt, and passed it on to the son.

A camp near the Danish border

In Amersfoort fifty-eight men were released, mainly the elderly and the sick. According to a lecture by the historian Madelon de Keizer in 1998, a Catholic man from Putten who had SS papers tried in

those days to get fathers of large families released. On October 11 eighteen men were released. After the war he was suspected of acting in his own interest and of favoring Catholics, and in 1945 he was banned from Putten. His story is still disputed. In the village it is largely forgotten.

On October 11, 1944, 601 men left for Neuengamme, a concentration camp near Hamburg. Thirteen jumped out of the train on the way. After Apeldoorn the barbed wire on the compartment doors was too tight to escape any more. In Almelo the train stood still for a whole day, and the men were given only a few turnips from a field to eat. On Saturday, October 14, they arrived in Neuengamme.

Priem, nineteen years old, described in his own account how they arrived there. A band played "Alte Kameraden", a song he would never forget. They were shaved bald and given clothes that did not fit, and a number.

From Neuengamme groups were sent to subcamps. Many ended up in Ladelund, close to the Danish border, where they had to work in anti-tank ditches that were full of water. They worked in ice-cold groundwater, wearing wooden clogs. The camp existed for only six weeks, from November 1 to December 16, 1944. There were more than two thousand prisoners, in barracks meant for 250 people. About three hundred died there. A hundred and ten of them were from Putten.

Priem spent six weeks in Ladelund. He was beaten up by SS men and lost three teeth. After that came Neuengamme, clearing rubble in Hamburg, Versen-Meppen, a brick factory and Bergen-Belsen. At the end of April 1945 he and others were put on a ship in the Bay of Lübeck. On May 2, 1945, he arrived in Sweden. He weighed thirty kilos.

A pastor with a party card

In Ladelund, a village in Schleswig-Holstein in the north of Germany, there was a Lutheran minister, Pastor Johannes Meyer. Lutheran churches are the Protestant churches that go back to Martin Luther. According to his chronicle, which the historian Leppien has studied, the SS leader Griem contacted him on the second day of the camp about the burial of four dead. Meyer went into the camp and later wrote that the prisoners were no longer human beings. Soldiers prevented him from speaking with them.

He saw a kapo (a prisoner put in charge of other prisoners) strike a prisoner who had stepped out of the line to pick up a turnip, and he complained to the guards. He told Griem that the population felt pity for the prisoners. Griem broke off the conversation and announced thirty to forty dead in four weeks. The next day there were twelve dead instead of four.

The prisoners dug the graves in the churchyard north of the church. Meyer let only half of them work outside; the others could warm themselves in the church's furnace room. He brought bread from the bakery and food from his own household. Against the will of the SS he put up a wooden cross on the mass grave, and with the prisoners who were there he prayed the Lord's Prayer at it. In the winter of 1944 he buried the dead in nine long graves. According to the description of the graves on TracesOfWar, he did so with Christian dignity. At the end of 1944 he anonymously sent a letter of complaint about the conditions in the camp to the German Ministry of the Interior, which he dropped into a mailbox in Niebüll. Improvement for the prisoners came only when a higher SS leader inspected the camp: the sick no longer had to walk, there was a day of rest and the food got better.

Meyer also spoke with men from Putten in the camp. In his chronicle he wrote that, in his view, they were completely innocent men who were beaten to death while he stood by powerless.

Shortly after the war he wrote letters to the families of the dead. Many answers came, most of them from Putten. From Berend Bakker, who lost two sons of twenty and twenty-one in Ladelund. From a father who lost three sons, in Ladelund, Meppen-Versen and Neuengamme. From Rikje van den Brink, a widow, who lost four sons: two in Ladelund, one in Neuengamme and one in Malchow.

The story of Meyer is beautiful and it is complicated. He was a member of the NSDAP, Hitler's party, and earlier he had written enthusiastically about the regime in the chronicle of his parish. After the war the purge committee of his own church proposed in 1947 to dismiss him. The British reversed that in 1948, partly because of his care for the graves.

For a long time it was told that Meyer had forced the SS, after a fierce argument, to give him the names of the dead, so that they would not remain numbers. Leppien doubted this in 2014. According to him, other camps also simply passed on the names, and Meyer's chronicle text was probably written later than the date above it. Other German researchers hold on to the importance of his work with the names, even if the story around it has been made too beautiful. Whatever you think of it: the names were recorded. Families in Putten could know where their husband or son lay.

A list by oil lamp

On April 18, 1945, Canadian soldiers liberated Putten. Young people climbed on the tanks and the soldiers handed out cigarettes and chocolate.

On the night of the liberation a young woman gave birth to her first child in a shelter at the neighbors'. The child would never know his father. The father was the schoolteacher who had thrown the notes out of the train.

No one knew anything about the men. Captain Walt van Praag, a man from Putten who worked as a liaison officer with the British army, was asked on April 20 to find out what had happened to them. In Sandbostel he found men from Putten who had survived the camps. They told him that a large part had died. He came back with a long list.

On Ascension Day Rev. Holland read the list, as the beginning of this chapter tells. On Ascension Day Christians remember that Jesus went up to heaven. For a minister there was little to fall back on on such an evening. There was no funeral, no coffin, no grave nearby. There was a list, a pulpit and a church full of people listening to hear whether the name of their husband or son would pass.

Paul wrote: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep* (Romans 12:15). Three weeks after the feast of the liberation the village sat together in church again, now to hear the names. No one had to listen alone that evening.

The village of widows and orphans

Of the 659 men who according to Stichting Oktober 44 had been taken away, 48 came back. Five of them died shortly after coming home from what the camps had done to them. The foundation comes to 552 dead in total, counting the people who were shot on October 1. Other counts differ by a few. Behind each of those numbers is a name.

Priem came home at the end of August or the beginning of September 1945, weighing sixty-five kilos. In Putten everything looked the

same. He had to answer many questions, and because another man who had returned had still seen someone in another camp whom he had thought dead, he was called a liar. He withdrew into himself. Only with a fellow villager whom he had met again and again in the camps did he talk about what they had been through.

Putten got a nickname that stayed: the village of widows and orphans.

On July 4, 1945, Queen Wilhelmina came. She spoke with men who had returned and visited a widow who lived with three small children in a barn, the only thing of their property that had been spared. Her house was one of the hundred and ten that the Germans had burned down. The queen asked at length how they were living.

Help came from all over the country and from abroad. People in the English town of Stroud collected money for the widows and children. A community center in Putten still bears the name Stroud. A group of surviving relatives, who call themselves Lotgenoten (fellow sufferers), meets there every two months.

A son who was born in 1941 told decades later on the foundation's website what it was like to grow up without a father. His father and his father's brother were taken away that day. His mother never remarried. In the winter of 1945 to 1946 she became seriously ill, and the children had to live with their father's parents for a time. He remembers that as a boy he ran inside when he saw Dutch soldiers, because he thought they were Germans. He knew his father only from stories: a hard worker with a sense of humor. A year before her death his mother still wondered why her husband had been taken, when he had done nothing. That his father had been burned in Neuengamme was hard for her to bear. He looks back with gratitude on her care.

He went looking himself. According to Pastor Richter of Ladelund, it was ninety percent certain that his father had also been in Ladelund or Husum. Father and uncle died in January 1945, a week apart, in Neuengamme.

A daughter who was nine in 1944 told the NOS eighty years later that October is still a hard month for her. Her father has no grave of his own. When her mother died, she had his name put on the family grave.

In Psalm 68 God is called this: *A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, Is God in His holy habitation* (Psalm 68:5). The nickname of Putten stands almost word for word in that old song of Israel. There the widows and orphans are seen.

"I now ask the congregation to rise"

On October 2, 1945, a year after the raid, the new minister, Rev. L. Kievit, held the first memorial service. He was Holland's successor. His sermon was later printed in the kerkbode, the congregation's paper. The text was Job 5:8-9, where Job says that he would seek God himself and bring his cause to Him, who does great things that no one can fathom, wonders without number. He spoke about the suffering of those who were taken away and about the nearness of God. The congregation sang a psalm. And at one moment he asked the people to stand: "I now ask the congregation to rise from their seats." That is how they remembered their dead.

Here perhaps lies the most important thing this church did for the village, though it is hard to measure. The congregation had no answer to the question why. But it did have a place, a fixed day and a form. The woman who could not bury her husband could stand in the church where he had spent his last night, and be silent there with the others.

In the years that followed, a question lived in Putten that could not be asked out loud and that was there all the same. Had the attack at the bridge been wise? Had the resistance brought this on the village? Madelon de Keizer describes those questions in her lecture, alongside the name Putten had as a zwartekousengemeente, a "black stocking" community of conservative, strict Protestants. Some laid the blame on the Germans and on no one else. Others thought differently. I do not take sides in this. Both thoughts lived side by side in the same village, sometimes in the same family.

A woman looking at the church

A year before the unveiling of the monument, the Germans responsible had been tried. General Christiansen was sentenced in 1948 in Arnhem to twelve years in prison. In December 1951 he was free. The colonel who had been given the order to burn Putten to the ground, Fullriede, got two and a half years. What the widows thought of those sentences is not in the sources I read.

On October 1, 1949, Queen Juliana unveiled the monument. Professor Jan Bijhouwer designed the memorial garden, and the sculptor Mari Andriessen made the statue. In the garden in front of it are hedges that suggest six hundred and sixty graves, one for each man.

Andriessen made a widow with a handkerchief, looking at the church from which the men were taken. Her gaze rests on the place where the congregation came together, in those days themselves and in all the years after.

A chalice with two churches

In 1950 about a hundred and thirty people from Putten traveled to Ladelund for the dedication of the memorial site at the graves. They did not sleep in Germany. They spent the night across the border,

in Tønder in Denmark. That detail says a lot. They wanted to see the graves. A night in the land of those who had done this was too much.

A year later, in 1951, Meyer came to Putten by invitation. Mayor Van Ufford gave him a crystal chalice. On it are the Oude Kerk of Putten, the St. Petri church of Ladelund, the monument and the graves. There is also a Latin text on it from the last book of the Bible. In English it reads: *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death* (Revelation 21:4).

The German source speaks of a first step toward a wonderful reconciliation. What the people of Putten themselves felt about that chalice, I do not know. The chalice still stands on the altar in Ladelund on Volkstrauertag, the German day for the war dead, and during other visits from Putten.

Meyer's successor, Harald Richter, was the minister there from 1958 to 1992. He started a youth exchange between the church congregations of both villages. Since then groups of young people take turns visiting each other and looking at the Vrouwtje and the graves. Guests now sleep with host families. In the spring of 2015 more than seventy people from Putten ran a relay of more than seven hundred kilometers (about 435 miles) to Ladelund in five days. In June 2016 about forty people from Ladelund came to Putten to play sports together.

It is tempting to stop here, with a beautiful story of reconciliation. That would be dishonest.

The sources I read mostly tell about the people who did go. About those who stayed at home and why, they are silent. The night in Denmark shows how close the pain still was, even for those who went. Jannes Priem, who had worked in the mud at Ladelund for six weeks, first went in 1992 with a group to Neuengamme. Others

had urged him to. He said he also still wanted to see Ladelund. In 1993 he went. The welcome from the residents touched him deeply. After that he could talk about his experiences for the first time. After fifty years he felt, as he wrote it himself, "liberated." Fifty years.

He became the last survivor of Ladelund. On Volkstrauertag he laid wreaths at the graves. In 2004 he stands in a photo at the commemoration in Ladelund, next to his brother-in-law, whose father had died in Ladelund. Priem died in 2013.

In 1982 people from Putten founded Stichting Oktober 44, to preserve the history and to keep in touch with surviving relatives and with the places in Europe where the men died. The foundation wants to do this in a spirit of reconciliation, as the Bible teaches it, so it says in its statement of purpose. In 1992 Mayor A.J. Berkhout opened the Gedachtenisruimte at Dorpsstraat 127, opposite the Vrouwtje. In 2017 the foundation helped with a new exhibition in Ladelund. So in Putten reconciliation was not an event of a single day. It was a road, on which some walked a long way and others did not.

That this memory is fragile too became clear around New Year 2023 to 2024. Someone defaced the Gedachtenisruimte with the date of the Hamas attack on Israel and a Star of David. The foundation reported it to the police.

Every year on October 2

Every year on October 2 hundreds of people come to the monument on the Dorpsstraat. The municipality, the foundation and schoolchildren lay wreaths there. Until 2013 men who had come back themselves still came too. According to an English-language description of the commemoration, no speeches are given and a choir sings verses from Psalm 84, as the men did when they left.

Around that day the pupils of groep 8, the last year of primary school, get a series of lessons about what happened in their village.

How would you remember if your father had no grave?

In Putten the village came back every year to the same place, on the same day.

If you stand in the park on an ordinary day, you see the sandstone woman with her handkerchief. She is still looking at the church across the street. On Sunday morning its doors open.

Go there yourself

The Vrouwtje van Putten stands in the Gedenkpark (Memorial Park) on the Dorpsstraat in Putten, on the Veluwe. The statue looks toward the Oude Kerk, on the corner of the Dorpsstraat and the Kerkstraat. The park with the memorial garden is by Jan Bijhouwer, the statue by Mari Andriessen.

Opposite the statue, at Dorpsstraat 127, is the Gedachtenisruimte of Stichting Oktober 44, with an exhibition about October 1 and 2, 1944, and the names of the men who were taken away in the dome. For opening hours, see the website of Stichting Oktober 44.

The Oude Kerk is used by the Hervormde Gemeente Putten. You can attend a church service there; for the services, see the website of the Hervormde Gemeente Putten. If you want to go further, you can visit the graves and the memorial site in the churchyard of Ladelund in Germany, close to the Danish border.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the attack at the Oldenallerbrug in the night of September 30 to October 1, 1944; the encirclement on Sunday, October 1, on Christiansen's orders; the

gathering on the Kerkplein; women and children in the Oude Kerk, men in the school and afterward also in the church; the reading of the sentence to the women in the church on October 2; the transport to Amersfoort and the burning of more than a hundred houses; the transport of October 11 to Neuengamme; the hundred and ten dead from Putten in Ladelund; the reading of the list of the dead by Rev. Holland on May 10, 1945; 48 who returned and more than 550 dead; the unveiling of the monument on October 1, 1949; the visit from Putten to Ladelund in 1950 and Meyer's visit with the chalice in 1951; the yearly commemoration on October 2.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the German officer in the pulpit and the story of the young woman from Emst (her own account on the foundation's site); the story of the girl of almost fifteen with the sheets and the black cat (her own story, 2018); the story of the girl of nine and her father (NOS, 2024); the singing of psalms before leaving (Priem, own account); everything Priem tells about Neuengamme, Ladelund and his return (own account); the notes from the train by the schoolteacher, the garage owner and the two brothers (the family stories on the foundation's site and the NOS); the rescue attempt by a Catholic man from Putten and the suspicions afterward (one reading); the questions in the village about the role of the resistance (one reading); the stories of surviving relatives about their youth; the conversation with Griem, the kapo, the cross, the prayer at the grave and the letter from Niebüll (Meyer's own chronicle, via Leppien; Leppien doubts the dating of that chronicle); the sermon of Rev. Kievit and the text Job 5:8-9 (via the foundation's site; I have not read the full sermon).

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

- *Number of men taken away.* 659 (Stichting Oktober 44, Liberation Route), 660 (another page of the foundation), 661

(Defensiekrant) or 602 on October 1 with 661 in Amersfoort (Wikipedia). The same goes for those who returned: 48 or 49.

- *Number of dead on October 1.* Seven (foundation, Liberation Route), twelve (Defensiekrant), six men and a woman (Wikipedia).
- *Number of houses destroyed.* A hundred and ten (foundation, Liberation Route), eighty-four (Defensiekrant), more than a hundred (others).
- *Name of the German officer who was killed.* Otto Sommer (Wikipedia) or Otto Fabian (Defensiekrant).
- *Where the men were held.* In broad lines the school; Priem mentions the church wall, the school and the church. About the order and about who was where when, the testimonies differ.
- *When the church doors opened.* According to the foundation, the women and children were allowed to leave on October 1 at nine o'clock in the evening; the woman from Emst tells of an opening around one o'clock, on Monday. Her timing does not fit the foundation's reconstruction, so her story stands apart.
- *Number released in Amersfoort.* 58 (foundation) or 59 (Wikipedia, Defensiekrant).
- *Psalm 84.* Wikipedia, Liberation Route and an English-language description name it as the song at the departure; Priem mentions only "a few psalms"; I found no Dutch witness.
- *No speeches at the commemoration.* Only an English-language description.
- *The story of Meyer and the names.* Disputed by Leppien (2014).

Unconfirmed: that it was Psalm 84 the men sang; whether the list of the dead was read by oil lamp or by candle (the foundation and the NOS differ); the role of the text Job 5:8-9 in Kievit's sermon

beyond what the foundation reports; the spelling of Captain Van Praag's name (the foundation writes Van Walt van Praag, the NOS Van Praag).

Interpretation: what the reconciliation with Ladelund meant differed from family to family. The sources describe the steps, not what each person felt about them.

Sources for this chapter

1. Stichting Oktober 44, "Razzia"
2. Stichting Oktober 44, "Het bevrijdingsjaar 1945 in Putten"
3. Stichting Oktober 44, "Monument"
4. Stichting Oktober 44, "Gedachtenisruimte"
5. Stichting Oktober 44, "Doelstelling"
6. Stichting Oktober 44, "Het verhaal van Jannes Priem"
7. Stichting Oktober 44, "Ooggetuigen razzia"
8. Stichting Oktober 44, "We gaan niet naar de kerk"
9. Stichting Oktober 44, "Opgroeien zonder vader"
10. Stichting Oktober 44, lezing Madelon de Keizer, 20 mei 1998
11. NOS, "Lot Puttenaren bekend: Er is geen familie zonder rouw"
12. NOS, 1 oktober 2024, tachtig jaar na de razzia
13. Defensiekrant, editie 36, 2026, "Terugkijker"
14. Liberation Route Europe, "The raid"
15. Liberation Route Europe, "A village of widows"
16. Wikipedia, "Putten raid" (starting point)
17. Amicale Internationale Neuengamme, "Putten"
18. Nordkirche nach 45, "Ladelund, lokales Fenster"
19. Arne Hansen, over pastor Meyer en Ladelund (AKENS)
20. TracesOfWar, "Graves victims camp Ladelund"
21. TracesOfWar, "Herdenkingsruimte razzia van Putten beklad"
22. Fietsnetwerk, "Gedachtenisruimte oktober 1944"

23. Hervormde Gemeente Putten
24. KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, Ladelund
25. DutchReview, “The Putten raid”
26. Bible.com, Job 5:8-9 (NKJV)
27. Bible.com, Psalm 84:2 (NKJV)
28. Bible.com, Romeinen 12:15 (NKJV)

Stavenisse: the bell that rang for help

On Sunday evening, January 25, 1953, the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente (the Old Reformed Congregation) of Stavenisse sat together in its little church. Elder J.W. Slager had prepared a sermon about Simeon and Anna for that evening. But he read something else: a sermon for a day of prayer by the minister Smytegelt, on Psalm 119:120. In that verse the psalmist says that his hair stood on end for fear of God, and that he feared His judgments (Psalm 119:120).

Why he did that, he did not know himself. Later he wrote that he felt urged, and that something terrible was about to happen. After the sermon he spoke to the congregation once more with a word of his own. The judgment was near, he said.

In the pew sat Elder Leendert Johannes Potappel, seventy years old. That afternoon he had read a catechism sermon aloud. It was the last time he took his place. That is how A.J. Smits told it three years later, in his book about the disaster in his village.

A week later the village was under water.

In the Koning Haakonstraat in Stavenisse there are wooden houses you do not expect in Zeeland, the low-lying province in the southwest of the Netherlands. They come from Norway. They were built for winters of fifteen to twenty-five degrees below zero Celsius, with glass wool in the walls and double windows. In 2020 seventeen of them were still standing in their original place in this village: eleven in the Koning Haakonstraat, five in the Kerkstraat and one in the Prinses Beatrixstraat. They have no protected status. Whoever lives there now lives in a gift.

A few streets further, on the Voorstraat, is the old town hall. It is now called the Watersnoodhuis, the Flood House, and it keeps the stories of the disaster on Tholen and Sint-Philipsland. In front of the door is a flood monument. And if you look at the Reformed church, you can still see on its walls the line up to which the salt water came: four meters (about thirteen feet) high.

That line is from one night. From Saturday, January 31, to Sunday, February 1, 1953.

A small church on the Achterweg

Stavenisse lies on the north side of the island of Tholen, on the Oosterschelde, a wide arm of the sea. The village came into being in the seventeenth century, with a main street from the harbor to the church. That Reformed church dates from 1617. The tower was added in 1672. In 1952 about seventeen hundred and fifty people lived there, a fellow villager wrote later.

Besides the Reformed church, the village had a smaller congregation: the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente. It belongs to the bevindelijk gereformeerde wing, the experiential Reformed movement that puts great weight on conversion, humility and the personal experience of faith. Congregations like this often had no minister

of their own. An elder, an elected member of the church council, would then read aloud on Sunday a sermon by an old writer. From 1855 the congregation met in a small church on the Achterweg, the street that was later named Wilhelminastraat.

Around 1906 things were going badly for that congregation. It had fewer than twenty-five members. According to the account of his life that appeared after the disaster, it had fallen into decline through the conduct of a former leader. The congregation then chose a young man of about twenty-four as elder: Leendert Johannes Potappel.

A boy who wanted to let himself fall

Potappel was born in Stavenisse on March 27, 1882, the oldest of five children of Marinus Potappel and Johanna Suurland. He was baptized in the Reformed church of the village. The account of his life, which appeared in his own circle after his death, tells how early it began.

At the age of four he heard his grandmother talk about eternal things, and after that he hardly played children's games anymore. At the fair, when he was six, he began to cry as his parents came closer to the carousel with the horses. He saw a judgment in it and warned his grandmother.

At eight he had stolen garden carrots and cursed once. He wanted to let himself fall into the water, he told later, and felt an invisible hand pushing him back. At school he cried out: "Lost! O God, lost forever!" Classmates teased him and even set his clothes on fire. At ten he saw his guilt as a letter that testified against him, and he felt like the greatest sinner.

Around his eleventh year a teacher pointed him to the Mediator. He experienced peace with God, though he kept doubting whether

that peace was also for him. In April 1894 a woman of the congregation died, and the loss weighed heavily on him. On the sea dike he experienced, so it says in his account, a court session in which Christ became his Surety and the Father acquitted him. He got to know an older man, Kees van Oeveren, on the Dirksdreef. He became his friend of the soul. A woman in Sint-Maartensdijk, who had never seen him, became his spiritual mother. Around his seventeenth year came a second conversion, because he lived too much with God's benefits and too little with God Himself. His love for God was so great, wrote his biographer, that his body gave way under it. Sometimes he was unconscious for hours.

Breda and a letter

In 1902 he had to go into military service. He had said he would not draw lots, but he was drafted anyway, into the field artillery in Breda. There he rebuked a corporal who cursed. After a talk with the captain he received protection. A corporal had him groom a dangerous horse, and when the major heard of it, the horse did not kick. He refused to be vaccinated, out of conviction, and his comrades mocked him.

His letters from Breda have been kept. They are addressed to his father, sisters and brother, and to friends. He begs his family to repent and points to the judgment. About himself he is hard: he writes: "A spoiler of everything, that is my true name." He writes about the fatherland above, for which he longs, and about the pain of horseback riding. He found Christian friends in Breda, and when his captain suddenly died in March 1903, he wrote about the fleeting nature of life.

To a friend, Grietje van Drune, he described his conversion on February 24, 1904: a youth full of fear of death and judgment, a time of certainty that disappeared again, and finally comfort in Christ.

In December 1914 he wrote from Stavenisse to a friend, Krijn, and prayed for him that the Lord would let him look up, in spite of everything.

"The weighty office"

When the small congregation called him, at first he did not want to. He was planning to move to Lisse. For four weeks he wrestled with it, according to his account. He received, he said, a command to stay. Then he accepted.

He would carry the office for forty-six years. From 1913 he lived on the Molenpad. A year later his body gave out and he could no longer work, after he had prayed for four weeks, day and night, for the Netherlands. He expected that the country would not enter the war, and that is how it turned out. He read sermons, gave the children catechism classes, the church's teaching in the doctrines of the faith, and sat on the church council. Under his leadership the congregation grew to "a large membership," wrote his fellow elder J.W. Slager. He gives no exact number.

The small church on the Achterweg became too small. A new building came, designed by J.C. Waverijn from Yerseke and put up in just over three months by the builder L. Roozemond. The year is not given; probably it was in the 1930s. A memorial stone was ordered with Potappel's full name. He refused. His name did not belong on a building, he felt. A stone came with only the letters of his name, without his office.

I find that a beautiful detail. A man who carries a congregation for almost half a century, and then does not want his name in the wall.

John the Baptist said of Jesus: *He must increase, but I must decrease.* (John 3:30). On the memorial stone only the letters of his name

appeared. Potappel read the Word aloud to others; his own name did not need to be in the wall.

These stories all come from one book, written within the congregation's own circle after his death. I have not found other sources about his life.

The brawler and the elder

One of the boys he took under his wing would later become an elder beside him. Johannes Willem Slager was born in Sint-Maartensdijk on February 8, 1901, and moved to Stavenisse at the age of thirteen. As a young man he was known as a brawler. On Friday, January 26, 1917, when he was sixteen, he became convinced of his guilt. He read *The Pilgrim's Progress* by Bunyan. When he spoke with Leen Potappel, he heard a sentence from the book of Job that touched him: who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.

At eighteen he found peace. He said that everything was new and that everything was peace. In 1923 he made public profession of faith, after catechism classes with Potappel. In 1928 he became a deacon, in 1936 an elder. He called Potappel his friend of the soul.

A week before the disaster

Sunday, January 25, 1953, began, as always, with two services. What happened that day we know from A.J. Smits. He lived in the white house on the Stoofdijk and in 1956 wrote a book about the disaster in his village: *Stavenisse door storm en vloed verwoest* (Stavenisse destroyed by storm and flood).

In the afternoon Potappel read a catechism sermon by Justus Vermeer, on Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism. That Catechism is a sixteenth-century book of teaching that Reformed churches go

through in fifty-two Sundays. Lord's Day 4 is about God's justice and His judgment on sin.

In the evening followed the sermon for a day of prayer by Smytegelt and the word of Slager, as stated at the beginning of this chapter. The hymn that was sung afterward, Smits describes without giving its words. Many did not sing along.

How should you read a story like that? Whoever wrote it down after the disaster knew how it ended, and that colors things. It also appears nowhere except in the books of people from the congregation itself. What is certain is that these people remembered it this way and that it took on a serious meaning for them.

On Saturday evening, January 31, around eleven o'clock, Potappel was still looking for a sermon for the next morning. Slager said there would surely be one. A few hours later Potappel had drowned.

One hour

On Saturday the wind grew heavy in the course of the day. The water stood on the harbor quay, which happened more often in winter. The oldest residents remembered the high water of 1906 and the September storm of 1911. Dike breaches with deaths they had never experienced. The water dropped again and evening came, so most people stayed inside by the stove. A few men set the flood boards in the harbor and threw sandbags against them, but the current carried them off.

In the night of January 31 to February 1 a heavy storm drove the water into the Oosterschelde. Around midnight the howl of the fire brigade's siren sounded from the tower. Many thought of fire. It was an alarm for water, and according to the reconstruction by the journalist Kees Slager it came only an hour before the flood wave reached the village.

First the harbor dike gave way, on the east side. Then the Stoofdijk by the sluice. The water poured into the Margarethapolder and into the village, in a few minutes. West and south of Stavenisse the sea dikes broke over a total length of eighteen hundred meters (more than a mile). On the Stoofdijk, where people had taken refuge, forty-two people drowned. In the Kerkstraat houses collapsed. In the village the water stood about three and a half meters above the street. A hundred and forty houses were destroyed.

People climbed onto roofs, crawled through skylights, walked along gutters. Old people and children did it too. A man later told Kees Slager that he shouted: "Up on the roof, boys, because soon the house will collapse!" Another family sat in the attic without anything to make light. A boy of ten was woken by his father and sent to the attic, and when the water kept rising, to the roof. It was the beginning of February and the temperature was just above freezing. Later they were taken off the roof and brought to a house on the dike. All the residents who were able to sat that night in such a house on the dike or in the town hall, the highest points of the village.

The old Reformed church was flooded too. Inside, the water stood three meters twenty high, and the salt rose up to four meters into the walls. The building where the village had worshiped for three hundred years stood that Sunday in the middle of the sea.

On the Molenpad Potappel was in the attic, with his brother-in-law, his sister and their daughter. Of the four houses on the path, two were swept away. His was one of them. His body was found later under the roof, close to the mill. He was first buried in Bergen op Zoom and later moved to the mass grave in his own village.

The number of dead in Stavenisse is around a hundred and fifty. Wikipedia and the VVV, the Dutch tourist office, give a hundred and

fifty-three; cycling routes in the area put it at a hundred and fifty-six. Of the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente eighty-eight members drowned, Slager wrote, among them fourteen catechism pupils. If that is correct, this one congregation lost more than half of all the dead in the village.

The bell in the tower

Sunday morning at eight o'clock daylight broke through and the wild expanse of water lay before them. A few men saw four people on a small roof and a man on a haystack. A raft was made from doors, but it drifted the wrong way. A skipper with a rowboat and a helper brought one man safely ashore. The four on the small roof they could not reach. Later it worked: a boat was guided along a loose power line. The four were so stiff that they could hardly get into the boat.

In a house where people sat together, a man asked if he could read. He opened the Bible at Isaiah 2. That chapter is about the day on which the pride of man is brought low and the idols disappear. It ends with the call to stop trusting in man (Isaiah 2:22). People thought of Jonah and the sailors, who in their distress cried out to the true God. Smits thought it a fitting text. He does not give the man's name.

Around noon the people in attics and on roofs heard the bell ringing. It was not a call to come to church. Smits writes that the bronze voice sounded fearful in the storm. Only later did it become clear why. People had fled into the tower and were trying to call for help that way. "Many remembered only now that it was Sunday," Smits writes.

At low tide, at half past one, they came back to the harbor in boots.

I have read that passage a few times. People in a village under water, who open the Bible at a moment like that. You can think many things about it. But it does say something about what lived in these houses.

Fishermen, airplanes and the Crescendo

On Monday, February 2, the rescuers came. Fishing boats and rowboats from other villages on Tholen, from Yerseke and from further away came into the village. A skipper from Yerseke was, according to the reconstruction by Kees Slager, the first to arrive in Stavenisse by ship. According to the text he rescued a hundred and sixty people. A family of six adults was given a rubber boat and drifted for hours until it ran aground at a dike. Airplanes dropped food and drinking water on the mudflat that had fallen dry by the harbor. The ship Le bonne espoir left for Dordrecht with about a hundred people. The Crescendo took about four hundred.

Smits describes a walk along the dike. Everywhere lay pieces of furniture and the belongings of people who were no longer there. Among the wreckage an old Statenbijbel, the classic Dutch Bible translation of 1637, stood against a sack of grain.

On Wednesday, February 4, a navy commander gave the order: everyone had to leave. Only about twenty people were allowed to stay, to save the records and to recover the dead. Twelve cattle and fourteen pigs went by ship to Bergen op Zoom. The horses were hoisted aboard with an improvised sling; one horse fell into the water, swam to shore and was shipped later after all. Around that time helicopters also landed on the harbor plateau. Smits himself left on Thursday, February 5, at four o'clock, on a ship that had to be towed, with four others. The tugboat took them to Wemeldinge. After that Stavenisse was emptied.

"Unsearchable"

For the people of the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente the meaning of the disaster was not open to discussion. Slager, who wrote the account of Potappel's life, saw the flood as a judgment of God on those who had died unreconciled to Him. About Potappel himself he wrote something else: for him death was gain, a passage to eternal rest.

Smits thought in the same direction, but he was more careful than you might expect. He saw the flood as a judgment. He also saw people who had been saved in wonderful ways. Why one died and another did not, no human being could say, in his view. He called God's judgments in letting some perish "unsearchable." About Potappel he wrote that the righteous too had perished with the wicked in the judgment.

It is a hard thought. An old man who read the Word aloud for forty-six years dies in the same night as everyone else. Smits let that tension stand.

That tension is in the Bible itself. In Ecclesiastes it says that the same fate comes to all, the righteous and the wicked alike (Ecclesiastes 9:2). Smits wrote almost the same about Potappel, and did not resolve it.

If you read this in another church, or outside the church, you may be inclined to judge at once. I would ask you to hold that off for a moment. In one night this congregation lost, by its own count, eighty-eight members, among them its old elder. They reached for the words they knew. Those were words about judgment and grace.

A funeral service and a letter

In the weeks that followed, the dead were found in ditches, rubble and wreckage. First they were buried in Bergen op Zoom and in other places in the region. In the last week of June 1953 the bodies were dug up in two nights and reburied in the burial field in Stavenisse, a mass grave. The men of the village did the work themselves, out of love for their dear dead. A hundred and twenty-eight of the hundred and fifty-three victims rest there.

Elder Slager held a funeral service for the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente. "For that reason we may rightly call this gathering a service of mourning," he said. Whoever spoke of a natural disaster, in his view, did not want to know about God's almighty power. He referred to Jacob and the mourning in Egypt. About Potappel he said that he had learned to pray and had been a man of prayer. The congregation sang from Psalm 39, about the fleeting nature of earthly possessions. Slager asked it to become "spiritual mourners."

On Saturday, July 4, 1953, Stavenisse held a memorial service. The visiting minister Rev. D.J. van Dijk spoke about the widow of Nain. About her the Bible says that when the Lord saw her, He was moved with compassion for her and told her not to weep (Luke 7:13). He pointed those present to the Comforter in their sorrow. At the grave Mayor L.A. Verburg defended the reburial and thanked those who had worked. Minister Beel expressed the government's sympathy and spoke about the recovery of Stavenisse. Acting Commissioner C. Philipse and the former minister Rev. G. Enkelaar also spoke. Enkelaar based himself on the shortest text in the Bible, which says that Jesus wept (John 11:35).

Slager wrote letters to a friend in those weeks. He and his wife were staying with his parents in Scherpenisse. Almost daily he had to

lead funerals, sometimes six at once. He wrote that he saw the judgment as sealed, and that the Lord is right and good. About Potappel he wrote: "I am quite often jealous of him." He hoped, he wrote, to receive a place there one day too.

Not complaining, but bearing

The question whether the disaster was a punishment from God lived all over Zeeland. Inge Duine describes Zeeland as a deeply religious province, where many of those affected saw the flood as punishment for their sins. They carried their grief in silence. Others saw a natural disaster that no one could have foreseen. In the early period there were no official commemorations. The attitude, as a teaching guide to the television series *Het water komt* (The water is coming) sums it up, was: "Not complaining but bearing, and praying for help."

Another question surfaced much more slowly. Had the dikes really been good enough? Many dikes were poorly maintained and too low. The engineer Johan van Veen had already given warnings in the 1930s. In the whole country 1836 people died. Kees Slager, who was born on Tholen and lived through the disaster as a boy of fourteen, wrote later that it was said in parliament that it was no time for questions of blame. They would be dealt with at a suitable moment. According to him, that moment never came.

So two ways of looking stood side by side. One asked what God was saying with this disaster. The other asked what people had failed to do. They do not exclude each other, but in 1953 it was mainly the first question that was asked out loud, in churches and living rooms. The first books about the disaster were often written from above, according to Duine, by people who had not lived through it themselves. Only much later did researchers such as Kees Slager and Selma Leydesdorff collect the stories of survivors. Besides na-

ture, their stories also showed human mistakes and technical failure. About forty years after the disaster, Duine writes, the story had shifted from an act of God to failing dikes, widespread suffering and trauma.

The book by Smits falls outside that. He wrote from the inside, as a fellow villager, three years after the disaster. He named the streets and dikes, counted the pigs that left by boat, and wrote down what had been read in church. At the end of his book he sees the village rising again. Sixty percent of the houses had been completely destroyed and seventy percent of the rest had to be repaired. He asked himself why this happened, warned against setting up idols again and wrote that material recovery alone was not enough. Because of that we now know how the disaster looked from the inside, in a congregation that did not let go of its faith.

In 1973, twenty years after the disaster, Kees Slager wrote a report on Stavenisse for the weekly *Vrij Nederland*. According to his own foreword, some residents "did not take it kindly." It shows how sensitive it was when an outsider wrote about the village and its faith.

A king in the Koning Haakonstraat

While the discussion went on in silence, the village had to be lived in again. Help came from far away. Norway gave a total of three hundred and twenty-six wooden houses to the Netherlands, more than any other country. The first prefabricated kits arrived about a month after the disaster. The initiative came from the League of Red Cross Societies and the Netherlands Red Cross. The Ministry of Reconstruction decided where they would stand. Some of them came to Stavenisse.

On August 13, 1954, King Haakon of Norway walked through the new street together with Queen Juliana. A photo of that visit shows four of the Norwegian houses. The street was named after the king who gave them: Koning Haakonstraat, King Haakon Street.

For families who had lost everything, a house like that was a new beginning. The book by Smits had a second printing in 1993, with a chapter on the commemoration and the reburial of the victims.

The congregation went on. From 1953 Slager preached as a teaching elder; his first funeral service as a preacher, on May 27, 1953, was about Psalm 93. In 1956 he called himself "Teaching Elder at Stavenisse": an elder who was also allowed to preach himself. On October 13, 1954, he had received permission to preach. On January 30, 1962, the members' meeting decided to call him, and on February 23, 1962, he was installed by Rev. Joh. van der Poel as shepherd and teacher. His life sketch counts for his work in Stavenisse 1832 sermons, 54 members confirmed, 47 children baptized and almost three hundred funerals. In 1965 he left for Rijssen, in 1975 for Werkendam. On February 1, 1978, exactly twenty-five years after the disaster, he held a memorial sermon there. He died on January 4, 1982, in Werkendam.

A week before the disaster Slager had read the evening sermon. Afterward he served a congregation that by its own count had lost eighty-eight members, among them his old fellow elder. Paul wrote to Timothy to preach the Word and to persevere in it, in season and out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). Slager carried on, and later became a minister.

What stayed in the village

Stavenisse was rebuilt. A monument came. On the edge of the village, on the Bos, is the cemetery where many victims of the dis-

aster are buried. The old town hall became an information center. One Norwegian house, which stood at Koning Haakonstraat 9, was rebuilt in 2003 at Museum De Meestoof in Sint-Annaland. It now stands there as a museum piece.

In the Watersnoodhuis the stories, images and records of the disaster in the village are collected. Outside the museum, too, the stories go on. On the website of the HZ, the university of applied sciences in Zeeland, there is the story of a grandfather who lived through the flood in Stavenisse as a boy of ten, written down by his grandchild. With the piece is a photo of him by the village church. That is how memory passes from one generation to the next.

In November 2025 the minister announced that forty-five gift houses in the Netherlands could become national monuments. Those in Stavenisse are not among them. They simply stand there, lived in, among other houses.

On the walls of the Reformed church the salt line is still there, four meters high. A little further on, in the Koning Haakonstraat, stand the wooden houses that came as kits from Norway. People still live in them.

Go there yourself

Stavenisse lies on the north side of Tholen, on the Oosterschelde. Start at the Watersnoodhuis at Voorstraat 42, in the old town hall. There you will find the stories and images of the disaster on Tholen and Sint-Philipsland, and in front of the door is a flood monument. For opening hours, see the website of the Watersnoodhuis Stavenisse.

Then walk to the Reformed church from 1617 and look for the salt line on the walls. The Norwegian houses are in the Koning Haakon-

straat and the Kerkstraat. They are homes: look from the street. The cemetery with the graves of the victims is on the Bos.

In the surrounding area you can look for the monument De Vis (The Fish) by the sculptor Gerrit Bolhuis; sources differ about its exact location. Between Stavenisse and Sint-Maartensdijk stands the artwork Het Zeemonster (The Sea Monster). In Sint-Annaland, at Museum De Meestoof, stands the Norwegian house that came from Stavenisse. The grain mill from 1801 stands by the marina.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the dike breaches at Stavenisse in the night of January 31 to February 1, 1953, over a total of about 1800 meters; about a hundred and fifty dead in the village; the evacuation by ship in the days after; the gift of Norwegian houses, the visit of King Haakon and Queen Juliana on August 13, 1954, and the seventeen Norwegian houses still standing in the village in 2020; the rebuilding of one house in Sint-Annaland in 2003; the death of the elder L.J. Potappel in the flood; the national picture of a religious Zeeland where many saw the disaster as a punishment from God, and the absence of an inquiry into blame.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the history of the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente, Potappel's calling, his youth and conversion, the events in Breda and the memorial stone (account of his life from the congregation's own circle, with the letters from Breda printed in it); the conversion of Slager and his friendship with Potappel (Slager about himself); the services of January 25, 1953, and Slager's word of warning; the search for a sermon on Saturday evening (Slager); the ringing of the bell by people in the tower; the man who read Isaiah 2; the Statenbijbel against the sack of grain (all from the book by Smits); the funeral service, the

reburial and the memorial service of July 4 (Smits); the letters of Slager to a friend; the eyewitnesses from the book by Kees Slager (whom I leave anonymous) and the boy of ten who later wrote his story (HZ); the number of 88 drowned members of the congregation (Slager); the reception of Kees Slager's report in 1973 (his own foreword).

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

- *Number of dead.* 153 (Wikipedia, VVV, Smits), 156 (cycling routes), 152 (Slager about himself).
- *Number of drowned members of the congregation.* 88, among them 14 catechism pupils (Slager in the account of Potappel's life); more than 80 (Slager in his own life sketch).
- *The siren.* One hour before the flood wave (Kees Slager, via an excerpt), three hours before high water (the Gihon edition, p. 4), around midnight (Smits).
- *The date of the reburial.* The last week of June 1953 (Smits). Slager writes in his life sketch that Potappel was found on February 10, was buried on February 14 in Bergen op Zoom and was reburied in October 1953 in Stavenisse.
- *The Norwegian houses.* Seventeen in 2020 (Province of Zuid-Holland), nineteen (Wikipedia).
- *How many people the village had.* About 1750 (Smits), 1737 (Wikipedia), 1500 (the story on the HZ site).
- *Potappel's age in January 1953.* Seventy, derived from his date of birth, March 27, 1882; the sources do not mention his age.

Unconfirmed: the exact number of dead; the year the church building of the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente was built; the exact location of the monument De Vis; how the Reformed congregation and any other churches in the village interpreted the disaster and supported the residents; official responses from national churches;

church life in the weeks of the evacuation; the name of the man who read Isaiah 2 (Smits does not give it).

Interpretation: whether the disaster was a judgment of God is a question of faith that the sources answer differently. The congregation itself saw it that way; others saw a natural disaster and human failure in the dikes. This chapter leaves both standing.

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Staphorst: a sugar cube and a conscience

On the Gemeenteweg in Staphorst, a village in the province of Overijssel in the east of the Netherlands, stands a brick tower with a pointed slate roof. Above the entrance is a keystone with a sentence from 1763: Magdalena Maria van Dam laid the first stone here. On the green next to the church stands an old bell, cast by G. van Wou and J. Schonenborch. The register of monuments does not know exactly whether that was in 1512 or 1525.

Behind the tower is the Dorpskerk, the Village Church, with room for 2300 people. In 2020 the congregation held three services on Sunday, spread over the church and two other buildings. Visitors cannot go into the church. Across the road is a drop-in center run by the congregation, where volunteers explain what happens inside. There is a church pew, there are Bibles in thirty languages, and on the panels you can read about the faith and about the customs of the village. The congregation wants to show that it is less closed than outsiders think.

If you walk around here, you see a quiet village with farms along the road. Fifty-five years ago reporters and photographers from news-

papers at home and abroad walked here. They came for a disease that everyone thought had disappeared from the Netherlands.

A tropical disease in Overijssel

Polio is a viral disease that mainly strikes children. Most people who are infected notice little. About one in a thousand develops acute paralysis, as the polio researcher Erwin Duizer explained in 2021. Such paralysis can be permanent, and the disease can be fatal.

In 1956 the Netherlands had had its last big epidemic, with more than two thousand two hundred infections. A year later the vaccine entered the national vaccination program, the Rijksvaccinatieprogramma. After that the disease seemed like something from the history books. The father of the pediatrician Joan van Lookeren Campagne, himself also a doctor, had asked his Swiss teacher for advice. The answer: polio was a tropical disease, which no longer occurred in Switzerland.

On Sunday, February 28, 1971, the telephone rang for Inspector T. Landheer of the health service. A neurologist in Zwolle had a boy of seventeen from Staphorst in front of him who probably had polio. A little later Van Lookeren Campagne called. He worked in Groningen and had shortly before admitted a girl of six from the same village.

He had thought of meningitis. There was also a mumps epidemic in that region, and a child with fever and a stiff neck fits that picture. Only in a conversation with a head nurse did he think of polio. The girl had not been vaccinated. She was brought to Groningen.

A day later Landheer and H. Bijkerk of the RIVM, the national institute for public health, confirmed the diagnosis. By then there were six patients, aged three to sixteen. Four of them were already paralyzed.

A village that did not have its children vaccinated

Why here of all places? According to the Nederlands Dagblad, 61 percent of the young people in Staphorst had been vaccinated. The chief medical inspectorate found that too little: it should be at least seventy percent. In the rest of Overijssel the average was around ninety percent.

Mayor Piet Nawijn said that most parents had religious objections. The population could not be forced to be vaccinated, he added.

To understand those objections, you need to know where you are. Staphorst is one of the most church-going places in the Netherlands. Many residents are bevindelijk gereformeerd (experiential Reformed). That word means that faith is above all something you must experience in your heart: your sin, your dependence on God, and His grace. You read about it, but you have to live it yourself. In 1971 the large church on the Gemeenteweg belonged to the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church), the old Protestant national church of the Netherlands.

The faith of these congregations includes a strong sense of God's providence. Believers mean by that that nothing in life happens by chance. Sickness and health, life and death: everything comes from God's hand. For some it follows that you must not hold back a disease that has not yet come. Their reasoning: whoever vaccinates steps in before God has spoken.

What the parents themselves said

It is easy to talk about these people. Listening to them is harder. Very few statements by ordinary villagers have been kept from the months of 1971. What there is comes from people who were there as children, and from researchers who later sat down at the kitchen table.

After the next polio epidemic, in 1978, the sociologists J. Veenman and L.G. Jansma interviewed parents who had not had their children vaccinated. One view they noted was: "Protecting yourself against polio is interfering with God's Providence." The sociologists Ellen Webbink and Wout Ultee, who cited that research in 2004, also describe the idea that God can send a disease. They showed that the group was not of one mind. Members of the Gereformeerde Bond (the Reformed Alliance), the orthodox wing within the Dutch Reformed Church, were more positive toward vaccination than members of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (the Reformed Congregations), a smaller and stricter denomination.

In 1971 the objection was already old. The historian Fred van Lieburg shows that hesitation about vaccination in the nineteenth century became a conscious religious choice among orthodox Protestant leaders. That choice was linked to personal freedom, especially around the school. After the compulsory vaccination of 1871, it was mainly strictly believing Protestants who went on resisting for years.

I write this down because I do not want to dismiss this objection as laziness. It was a conviction of faith, and it could cost a family a child.

A Tuesday morning in the hospital

One of the children who fell ill in those days was a girl from a strictly believing family. Her parents did not have her vaccinated. She herself tells what that meant for them, in a film that the RIVM later had made about polio: her parents were very strictly religious, and in her church it was preached from the pulpit that vaccinating was not allowed. You were not to interfere in life. Everything that happened to you had a purpose.

When children in the village already had polio, children with flu symptoms were admitted as a precaution. She thought she only had the flu. On a Tuesday morning at ten o'clock she went to the hospital. By six o'clock that evening she was in a coma.

She had visits from her parents, from family and schoolmates, and from the minister. She tells that he said to her: "After all, someone has to atone for the sins of mankind." Later she wondered why it had to be her.

Until she was sixteen she did not understand that it was permanent. Only at a pop concert did it sink in that she had a disability that would not go away. She says she would rather have run out into the world, without polio. Now she depends on others day and night. She cannot get up or shower by herself, she drives an electric wheelchair and at night she needs a ventilator.

I put this story here as she tells it, without interpreting it. It shows what a child goes through when the conviction of the adults around her and a virus meet.

A cube on Friday

In the first days of March the number of sick children rose quickly. On March 3 the newspapers reported six cases, on March 4 nine. After that thirteen more were added.

On Friday, March 5, the vaccination campaign began. Staff of the Green Cross and the Red Cross handed out sugar cubes with the vaccine of Sabin, a vaccine that you swallow and that contains a weakened virus. The authorities chose it because it was easier to arrange and easier to accept than an injection. On the first day about 2500 people came to get a cube, mostly children. According to the newspaper that was a good 56 percent of the group the doctors wanted to reach.

What was discussed in those families before they stepped outside, we do not know. We know that they came. Later the story goes around in the village and far beyond that people secretly went to other villages to be vaccinated. A family doctor told in 2021 that an older patient had told him this. There is no verifiable source.

There was also unrest about the vaccine itself. Some people who had taken a cube still fell ill. In the Tweede Kamer, the Dutch parliament, State Secretary Roelof Kruisinga was asked whether the cube was really enough. No answer came. Van Lookeren Campagne thought there was something to be said for both vaccines, the swallowed one and the injected one. "And against them too," he added.

Fifteen hundred people on a day of prayer

In the second week there were fifteen recognized cases. The village held a biddag, a day of prayer. According to De Telegraaf about fifteen hundred people came.

In these churches a day of prayer is a normal tradition. Every year in March there is a day of prayer for crops and labor, on which congregations ask God for a good year. In times of need a congregation can call an extra day of prayer.

Rev. Pieter Dorsman had opened his Bible at one verse. In the New King James Version it reads: *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.* (Matthew 9:12). Jesus says it to people who reproach Him for eating with sinners. He compares Himself to a physician.

Chris van der Heijden wrote in 2021 in De Groene Amsterdammer that the villagers clung to that verse, and that the doubt came when they saw ambulances take children away. Van der Heijden calls Dorsman the leader of most of the churches in the village.

You can picture the hall: fifteen hundred people, an open Bible, a verse about a doctor. It is a verse that can work two ways. Whoever read it could hear that the sick person needs a physician. Whoever read it could also hear that God is the only physician. What would you have prayed if you had been in the pew that day and your child was at home with a fever?

"Staphorst weeps at a glass cage"

On March 11 the first two children died: a boy of twelve and a girl of six. By then there were nineteen infections. Their names I do not give here. Their families deserve peace.

The sick children lay in a special pavilion of the hospital where Van Lookeren Campagne worked. De Telegraaf put a photo on the front page: women in black traditional dress looking through the glass at their infected children. Above it stood: "Staphorst weeps at a glass cage."

The readers of the newspaper saw women in black traditional dress. Their names were not given. In Psalm 56 David prays that God has counted his wanderings, asks Him to put his tears in His bottle, and asks whether they are not written in His book (Psalm 56:8). What was a front page for the newspaper was, for these mothers, their own child behind glass.

In those weeks the press was everywhere. De Telegraaf, Tubantia, Het Vrije Volk, the Leeuwarder Courant, Het Parool and Elsevier wrote about it. Foreign newspapers spoke of medieval conditions. In Vrij Nederland Hugo Brandt Corstius, under his writer's name Battus, wrote sharp pieces. A reader of Het Parool sent in a letter with the headline "Stop the madness in Staphorst". He called on people to send a card to Minister Carel Polak. There was even a

rumor that the village would be cut off from the outside world. That turned out not to be true.

A photographer of the news agency Anefo recorded something very ordinary that year: children playing by a school. The caption reads: "Outbreak of polio in Staphorst. Children playing by a school." The photo is now in the Nationaal Archief, the National Archives.

At the grave the word was not spoken

On March 16 the first two children were buried. Rev. Dorsman spoke at the funeral. He did not speak the word polio. He spoke about resignation and about the earthly vale of tears. With that old expression believers mean that life on earth is full of sorrow, and that the real comfort lies only in eternity.

At the funeral too there were reporters and photographers. The tension rose. Photographers were sent away, and a scuffle broke out between the press and the people at the grave.

Dorsman showed himself little to journalists in those weeks. In De Groene he does not come off mildly later. I can only tell what he did: he buried the children of his village, and toward the outside world he was silent.

In the night of March 22 to 23 someone nailed papers to the trees around his house. The police removed them the next morning. According to Van der Heijden the minister remained unmoved.

"You in the Randstad are worse off"

To a reporter of Elsevier a resident said briefly: "You in the Randstad are worse off than we are with that polio." (The Randstad is the crowded western part of the Netherlands, with Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague.)

You can read that sentence as stubbornness. You can also read it as the voice of someone who sees his village mocked by people who, in his view, have lost something themselves. Whoever looked from outside saw a village that lagged behind. Whoever looked from inside saw a village that stayed faithful.

Van Lookeren Campagne, the doctor who treated the sick children, thought the word backward unjust. Their views on vaccination he did think wrong.

Compulsion did not come; the mayor had already said it could not. In May 1971 Bijkerk and Landheer wrote a medical report in the Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde (the Dutch Journal of Medicine). The vaccination campaign had made an impression on them. According to them it had exceeded expectations.

A minister in Nieuwleusen

Not all ministers in the region thought the same. In the neighboring village of Nieuwleusen there was Rev. A. de Redelijkheid. He published a magazine, De lichtende kaars (The Shining Candle), and was chairman of the Dutch branch of the Mbuma mission, a missionary organization. He spoke out in favor of vaccination.

Thereupon the mission suspended him.

It shows that in 1971 the struggle was also fought inside the churches. It was not a block of believers against a block of doctors. There were ministers who were silent about the disease and a minister who pleaded for vaccination. There were parents who refused, and parents who came on Friday, March 5, to get a cube.

Paul wrote to a congregation where believers disagreed about questions of conscience that each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5). In Staphorst and the villages around it,

in 1971 there were convinced people on both sides. On neither side was it taken lightly.

Thirty-nine

When the epidemic was over, Van der Heijden counted thirty-nine infections. Five children had died. Fifteen people kept permanent injury. The VPRO program Andere Tijden gives the same numbers. It was about four times as many as in the smaller outbreaks of the years before.

Behind those numbers are lives. In 2021 a woman from the village told Hart van Nederland that she has been paralyzed by polio for fifty years. She said she still feels physically well. Because of the coronavirus the old memories were coming up more and more, she told. She was not afraid it would break out again. But the disease, she said, is still not completely gone from the world.

In the same article the polio researcher Erwin Duizer explained that the chance has become smaller that the virus ends up in a municipality with few vaccinated children. If it happens anyway, the consequences can, in his view, be comparable to those of 1971. He pointed out that in 2019 more than a million Dutch people traveled to countries outside Europe.

Then something changed. After the epidemic the vaccination rate in Staphorst and the villages around it rose to close to the national average of ninety percent, writes Van der Heijden. That is only possible if parents who had refused earlier also had their children vaccinated.

What stayed, and what came back

It was not completely over. In 1978 a new polio epidemic broke out among experiential Reformed believers. Two professors, W.H.

Velema and J. Douma, wrote in response the booklet *Polio, afwachten of afweren?* (Polio, wait or ward off?). They pleaded carefully but clearly for vaccination, in a world where there was still much objection to it. The journalist Andries Knevel later interviewed them several times about vaccination and God's providence. In a blog about this subject he writes: "I can still see the despair in my parents' eyes."

In 1992 and 1993 the last outbreak in the Netherlands followed, with 71 sick and 2 dead, mainly around Streefkerk. Since 1994, according to the RIVM, no polio has been diagnosed in the Netherlands.

Webbink and Ultee showed in 2004 how strongly faith and vaccination are connected in the Netherlands. In municipalities with many votes for the SGP, the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (the Reformed Political Party), the vaccination rate was lower. The World Health Organization advises at least eighty percent for polio, they wrote.

In 2013 the vaccination rate against diphtheria, tetanus and polio among schoolchildren in Staphorst was 80.6 percent, against about 95 percent in most municipalities. Mayor Joop Alssema told Binnenlands Bestuur (a Dutch magazine for local government) that year that the churches leave their members free, in this choice too. He had had his own children vaccinated. Parents who trust in God's providence he did not want to call on to do the same. "We are distinctive, but not backward," he said.

In 2004 the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk merged with two other churches into the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (the Protestant Church in the Netherlands). A part of the orthodox Reformed members did not want that merger and continued as the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk (the Restored Reformed Church). The congregation

in Staphorst is now one of the largest of that denomination. The Dorpskerk on the Gemeenteweg is its church.

What has the congregation of Staphorst changed in society? It is a strange question for a story in which children died. Yet 1971 set something in motion. All of the Netherlands talked in those weeks about the border between the conscience of parents and the health of children. Sociologists later went to talk with the parents themselves, instead of only about them. And in the village the number of vaccinated children rose sharply after that March.

I do not take sides here. I see doctors who fought for children they did not know. I see parents who did not want to get in God's way. I see a minister who at a grave did not name the disease, and another minister who was suspended after his plea for vaccination. And I see a girl who was told that someone had to atone, and who carries the consequences all her life.

In 2007 Andere Tijden made a broadcast about it, with a short title: Polio in Staphorst. The name of the village and the name of the disease had become fixed to each other.

A stone from 1763

Whoever stands on the Gemeenteweg now sees little of all that. In 1973, two years after the epidemic, the tower was entered in the register as a national monument. The keystone above the door still bears the name of the woman who laid the first stone in 1763.

Across the road, in the drop-in center, Bibles in thirty languages lie beside a church pew. Volunteers tell about the faith of their village.

Outside, on the green next to the church, stands the old bell of Van Wou and Schonenborch. It was cast long before Magdalena Maria van Dam laid the first stone of the tower. It is still there.

Go there yourself

The Dorpskerk stands on the Gemeenteweg in Staphorst, at number 52. The tower from 1763 is a national monument, like the parsonage from 1909 on the same road. Next to the church, on the green, stands the old bell. The church itself is not open to visitors.

Directly opposite the church is Kerkzicht, the drop-in center of the Hersteld Hervormde Gemeente. Volunteers tell there about the faith, the church and the customs of Staphorst. There are a church pew and a rebuilt bell frame. For opening hours, see the website of Kerkzicht.

On the same road, at number 24, stands a farm of the Staphorst type that is also a national monument. Ask permission before you photograph people.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the polio epidemic in Staphorst in February and March 1971; thirty-nine infections and five children who died (De Groene, Andere Tijden, Hart van Nederland); the low vaccination rate because of religious objections; the tower and parsonage as national monuments; the Dorpskerk as the church of the Hersteld Hervormde Gemeente; the outbreak of 1992 and 1993; the vaccination rate of 2013.

From one source (De Groene Amsterdammer, 2021): the course of events day by day; the sugar cubes on March 5 and the number of about 2500; the day of prayer with about 1500 people; the verse at which Rev. Dorsman opened his Bible; the funeral on March 16 without the word polio, with the scuffle between press and those present; the papers on the trees; the suspension of Rev. De Redelijkheid; the rise in the vaccination rate after the epidemic; fifteen people with permanent injury; the first diagnosis of meningitis, the

mumps epidemic and the conversation with the head nurse; the advice of the Swiss teacher.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: the words of the Swiss teacher, as passed on by Van Lookeren Campagne; the statements by parents about God's providence come from interviews after the epidemic of 1978, not from 1971. The story of the girl who was admitted on a Tuesday morning, her coma, the words of the minister and the pop concert comes from her own account in the RIVM film about polio; she does not name the minister, and whether it was Dorsman is stated nowhere. The story that people secretly went to other villages to be vaccinated comes from an English-language report by NL Times from 2021 and goes back to what an older patient is said to have told his family doctor; a verifiable source is missing. The words of Andries Knevel are his own memory, not those of the parents themselves. That the authorities chose the cube because it was easier to arrange and accept than an injection, I have from a summary of the article in De Groene; I could not see the full article.

Unconfirmed: to which denomination Rev. Dorsman belonged; whether the Reformed congregation was counted as part of the Gereformeerde Bond in 1971; in which church the day of prayer was held and whether it was the regular yearly day or an extra one; how Dorsman interpreted Matthew 9:12; what was written on the papers on the trees; whether an interview with Dorsman exists (I found none); what was discussed in the families before they took the cube. Hart van Nederland gives March 5 as the start of the outbreak, De Groene February 28. The share of vaccinated young people was, according to the Nederlands Dagblad, 61 percent; an English-language report gives 56 percent. About the suspension of Rev. De Redelijkheid I found only one source. The names of the first two children who died and of the woman from the film I have not used, out of respect and privacy. About Kerkzicht: one source

places the drop-in center at Gemeenteweg 53, where according to the register of monuments the parsonage stands, while its own site speaks of a restored farmhouse. That is why the story says only "across the road".

Interpretation: whether vaccination and trust in God exclude each other is an open question within the experiential Reformed congregations themselves, and the answer differs from church to church and from family to family.

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Amsterdam: the church where a hundred men refused to eat

Look at the Mozes en Aäronkerk (the Moses and Aaron Church) from the Waterlooplein, a square in the old center of Amsterdam, and you see a front that seems to belong to a temple more than to a city street. Sandstone. A portico with Ionic columns. Statues along the edge of the roof and two wooden towers. On the other side, in the Jodenbreestraat, the old little statues of Moses and Aaron still stand on the back wall. Next to the church stands a brick building from 1969, the Mozeshuis (the Moses House).

Inside, the church is a church again. Since 2014 the Community of Sant'Egidio has held Masses and prayer services there. A restaurant for homeless people has been started. There is an "altar of the poor," for poor friends who have died, with crosses from places where people suffer. At Christmas hundreds of guests sit down at the table, among them people who live on the street.

Almost no one who walks past knows that in November 1975 about a hundred Moroccan men lay on mattresses here. They did not eat. They were waiting for an answer from The Hague, the seat of the Dutch government. What began in that church put a question on

the front pages for the first time: what should the Netherlands do with people who work and live here, but have no papers?

The story of this place begins three centuries earlier, with a house that had a stone of Moses in its front wall.

"Daer Moijses inde gevel staet"

In 1641 Franciscans bought a house on the Breestraat. It was called Moyses, after the stone with Moses on it in its front wall. It was the house "daer Moijses inde gevel staet" (where Moses stands in the front wall), as an old document puts it. Franciscans are members of a religious order that goes back to Francis of Assisi. They live in poverty and travel around among the people.

In those days Catholics were not allowed to build a church openly. Since the Reformation the Reformed church had been the public church of the city. Catholics met in schuilkerken, hidden churches: rooms behind or above an ordinary house front, which everybody knew about but nobody officially saw. The Mozes was the second house church of that kind in Amsterdam.

Around 1680 the brothers also bought the house next door. It was called Aäron. That is how the church got the name it still carries, even though it is officially dedicated to Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan saint. According to the magazine Ons Amsterdam, a spacious hidden church was ready in 1686. In 2012 a guide of the church called it the largest hidden church in the city.

The high altar and the side altars from that time, from around 1700, are still in the church today. They moved along when the hidden church made way for a new building.

A cathedral that never came

In 1837 the parish priest Arnoldus van Giessen had a new church built, right over the old hidden church. In the nineteenth century Catholics were allowed to show themselves again, and they did. The architect was the Belgian Tilman-François Suys. According to Ons Amsterdam he based his design on a plan that the city architect Jan de Greef had made for an Amsterdam cathedral. That plan was never carried out. In 1841 the church was finished.

Inside came a hall church with three aisles, carried by Corinthian columns. In 1871 the Adema brothers from Leeuwarden installed an organ. It is still there, and the whole building is a national monument.

The church stood in the middle of the Jewish quarter. Between 1866 and 1895 a Franciscan worked there, Father J.J. Burgmeijer. He devoted himself to poor people, whatever their faith. In 1891 the Jewish quarter honored him. That is how Ons Amsterdam tells it. It fits a church whose front door opened onto the street of the poor.

In Proverbs we read: *He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given.* (Proverbs 19:17). Burgmeijer helped poor people, whatever their faith. That it was his Jewish neighbors who honored him says something about how they knew him.

In the Second World War that quarter became the place of suffering. In 2012 the guide of the church said that the church stood in the middle of the "Judenviertel" (the Jewish quarter), closed off with barbed wire, and that one of the first raids took place near the church. In 1941, under those circumstances, the parish celebrated its double anniversary: three hundred years of the hidden church, a hundred years of the church building. After the war most of the Jewish residents had been deported.

A house for renewal

In the 1950s and 1960s the rectory next to the church had to make way for new roads. In 1967 the old parish house was torn down. The church board sold works of art from the old house at an auction and received compensation from the city. With that money a new building went up, designed by the architect Sier van Rhijn. In 1969 it was finished: the Mozeshuis, Waterlooplein 205.

A few Franciscans lived there. But the house was meant above all as a training center. In 2012 the Reformatorisch Dagblad, a Dutch Protestant daily newspaper, described it as a center for liturgical renewal and the industrial apostolate. Liturgy is the form of the church service. After the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) many Catholics were looking for new forms. The industrial apostolate was church work among laborers, on the factory floor. In 1970 Van Rhijn received the Amsterdam architecture prize for the design. The jury felt that it fit into the street "as if it had always stood there."

In 1969 the parish also changed. The parish of Saint Anthony was dissolved, and in the city center a new organization grew up around the Citykerk. Other churches in the center closed. The Mozes was allowed to stay open. In 1971 the choir ceased to exist.

What grew there in the 1970s was something other than an ordinary parish. According to Ons Amsterdam the Mozeshuis got a tea house, courses and social work. The church itself became, as the guide later said, a center for progressive artists and action groups. The church's own website calls it an "action church." Later came peace work, integration courses, care for the homeless and help with AIDS. All these activities ran through a foundation, the stichting Mozeshuis (the Mozeshuis Foundation). The building itself remained the property of the diocese.

In November 1975 the door opened for the hunger strikers. Who opened it is not recorded anywhere. No pastor and no board member is named. The door opened, and that says enough about the house they walked into.

A passport and a statement

In 1975 the government came up with a scheme. Foreign workers who lived here without a permit could still apply for a residence permit. The scheme began on November 1, 1975. The conditions: you had to have arrived in the Netherlands before November 1, 1974, have lived and worked here without a break, and have a valid passport. About fifteen thousand people qualified.

On paper it sounded generous. For many Moroccan men it was a wall. Some had come in with false papers, and the Moroccan consulate would not give them a new passport. Others could not prove how long they had been working, because their employers had never registered them. According to several sources, some employers refused to sign a statement. They were afraid that they would then still have to pay the contributions they had dodged for years.

According to Marokkaan in Mokum (Moroccan in Amsterdam), about three hundred workers had no valid residence papers, because their employers had never officially registered them. These were the years in which factories closed and the government wanted to cut back illegal labor. Anyone without papers could be deported.

There was another pressure, less visible. The Amicales, a Moroccan association founded in Utrecht in December 1974, stood close to the regime of King Hassan II. The activists saw it as a means to keep an eye on Moroccans in the Netherlands and to intimidate them.

According to the website *Marokkaan in Mokum*, family members in Morocco were put under pressure. Anyone who took action in the Netherlands did so at a risk to the people back home.

How would you act if you could not prove your own name in the country where you had been working for years?

The seventh of November

The men found support from the Komitee Marokkaanse Arbeiders in Nederland (the Committee of Moroccan Workers in the Netherlands), the KMAN, which had just been founded. A support committee of Dutch activists helped as well. According to *Marokkaan in Mokum*, on November 1 about a hundred Moroccans first occupied the El Kabir mosque on the Van Ostadestraat, to demand passports, and then moved on to the Catholic church De Duif. According to that source, the action found little support inside the mosque, which had close ties with the consulate. In De Duif thirty men went on hunger strike. After two weeks the Moroccan government gave in, and more than a hundred workers still received a valid passport.

What all the sources do say: on November 7, 1975, a hunger strike began in churches in Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. In total 182 men took part. The largest group, about a hundred, stayed in the Mozes en Aäronkerk on the Waterlooplein. Some sources say that all 182 were there. Most keep it at a hundred in Amsterdam and the rest spread over the other two cities.

The demands were clear. A general pardon, meaning a permit for the whole group. No raids. No deportations. And protection against the Amicales.

A man who got to know the group at that time remembered, for the Zaans Museum, a sentence the men used to say. They had started together, and they wanted to "fight it out together to the bitter end."

His parents were loyal members of the CPN, the Dutch Communist Party. He became active in the party's youth organization and later sat on the municipal council of Koog aan de Zaan. In 1975 he came into contact with the church Moroccans.

Mattresses between the columns

In the church of Suys, between the Corinthian columns, mattresses were laid out. Volunteers, Dutch and Moroccan, brought blankets, food and medical help. According to Amsterdam750 the churches provided the meals. In the evenings films were shown. Banners hung on the walls. Sympathizers kept watch.

Who slept there and what they thought, we do not know firsthand. The sources give no names of the strikers, and I do not name them here either. They were men without papers, with family in a country where the regime was watching.

But we do know what the church became. Meetings were held and gatherings were organized. Partnerships arose that had not existed before: between Moroccan workers and Dutch trade unionists, between left-wing parties and church groups. The PSP and the PPR, two small left-wing parties, supported the action, as did trade unions and churches.

The press called the men the "kerk-Marokkanen," the church Moroccans. According to the magazine Ons Amsterdam, it was the first time that the legalization of foreigners in the Netherlands received such wide public attention.

As the writer, I pause here for a moment. This church had begun in 1641 as a place where Catholics were allowed to exist without the city seeing them. More than three centuries later people lay there whom the city could no longer look away from.

What the people themselves said

No words of the hunger strikers themselves have been preserved in the sources I read. But there are people who were there, or who lived through it up close.

Ineke van der Valk was involved with the KMAN from its founding. Later she spoke as a researcher about the activism of that first generation. In the episode of Andere Tijden (a Dutch television history program) about King Hassan and the Moroccans in the Netherlands, she tells about the solidarity. Dutch hunger strikers also joined in for two months, she says, and she calls that astonishing.

The man who told his story for the Zaans Museum writes that Queen Juliana asked Prime Minister Van Agt for special attention for the men. When he wrote this down, people were talking about the kinderpardon (a pardon for long-settled children of asylum seekers), and he felt that history was repeating itself. Later he worked for the Social Services in Amsterdam, where he helped Moroccan families with their papers, and he became a person many of those families trusted. He visited their relatives in Morocco. What began in 1975 went on for him through decades of contact.

One of the hunger strikers wrote a poem, which appeared in August 1978 in *De Marokkaanse Arbeider* (The Moroccan Worker), the magazine of the movement. It is on the website of Marokkaan in Mokum. I do not reproduce it here. Whoever wants to read it will find it there.

And then there is the older man who stood for a photograph with his granddaughter in the Mozes en Aäronkerk in November 2024, at the exhibition *Marokkaan in Mokum*. He said that he had never thought his story would hang in an exhibition. Now, he said, his granddaughter finally knew what it had been like when he came

here. Whether he himself lay on the mattresses, the report does not say.

The word of a state secretary

The action lasted just over a week. On November 14, 1975, Henk Zeevalking, state secretary of Justice (a junior minister), spoke with the KMAN and the support committee. He made promises: the scheme would be carried out more flexibly. The hunger strike stopped. Some sources give November 14 as the end date, others November 15. Probably the talks were on the fourteenth and the men stopped the day after.

Nothing had been solved. The men stayed in the churches, and their stay went on. According to *Marokkaan in Mokum* the Mozes en Aäronkerk was the center of the protest for three months. The KMAN worked file by file, man by man.

A general pardon is a word for a group. The work afterward was about names, one by one. Behind every file sat a man with family in Morocco. For each of those men it came down to one question: whether he would be allowed to stay.

For two years the matter stayed stuck. When the Raad van State (the Council of State, the highest administrative court) rejected the appeal of the church Moroccans, new actions followed: petitions and demonstrations in many cities. According to the television program Andere Tijden, for a time Dutch people also took part in a hunger strike, for two months.

In France a group of migrants had already gone on hunger strike in 1972 for a residence permit, which drew a lot of press attention. A later review concluded that activists who held out long enough got their way. Anyone who is honest also looks at the other side. The government wanted to cut back illegal labor, and there was support

for that in the country too. Almost fifteen thousand people without a permit did not take part in a hunger strike. The question of why these 182 should get an exception was on the table. To this day, people in the Netherlands think differently about a general pardon for a group.

Summer in De Duif

On July 16, 1978, the Moroccans went on hunger strike again. This time it was in another Catholic church in Amsterdam: De Duif on the Prinsengracht. It became big news across the whole country. In August, according to *Marokkaan in Mokum*, the strikers presented a petition with forty thousand signatures to parliament.

On October 17, 1978, the decision came. The church Moroccans received a residence permit. How many exactly, the sources disagree. Most speak of all 182. Andere Tijden gives 120 of the 182: some had left for Morocco in the meantime, and a few men did not get a permit because of a criminal record. The sources also differ on who made the decision. One source names Zeevalking. Andere Tijden names Elberta Haars, who in 1978 was state secretary of Justice in the new cabinet. That last one matches the cabinets of the time.

On August 26, 1978, there was another demonstration against the deportation of the 182. After the decision, a party was held in De Duif, as footage of the Dutch public broadcaster NOS has preserved. It had taken three years. For the men it began with a week without food between the columns of a church on the Waterlooplein.

What changed outside the walls

What did this action bring about in society? The honest answer: no new law. But it did bring a group of more than a hundred men who were allowed to stay, with everything that meant for their families.

And something that is harder to measure. According to the University of Amsterdam, the support grew into a broad solidarity movement, and partnerships arose in the church that had not existed before. An issue that at first concerned only civil servants and employers became something the whole country talked about. How far that influence later reached, in other actions by people without papers, I have not been able to trace in the sources.

Fifty years later the story is told as the beginning of something. In November 2024 the traveling exhibition *Marokkaan in Mokum* stood in the Mozes en Aäronkerk itself, with a seminar. In September 2026 Abdou Menebhi, one of the founders of the KMAN, spoke at the University of Amsterdam about "50+ years of Moroccan-Dutch citizenship." That title shows how those involved see it themselves now: as the beginning of citizenship.

The congregation itself, the parishioners, the brothers, stay in the background of that story, and that is how it should be told. The parish formally no longer existed. The choir had been disbanded. What was left was a building with a foundation next to it and a tradition of open doors. Inside, it happened.

A church without services

After 1980 no more services were held, and the church was officially withdrawn from worship. In 1990 it was restored and the pews disappeared. On January 22, 1991, the building was reopened in the presence of Queen Beatrix. It became a hall for conferences, debates and culture. In the Mozeshuis the work went on: debates about AIDS, apartheid and nuclear weapons, courses, shelter.

In 2012 the church was usually closed. Only in summer, on Tuesdays, did the doors open for tours and concerts on the Adema organ.

Then the money ran out. The city phased out its subsidy, and the Mozeshuis Foundation was in danger of going bankrupt. In 2013 the activities stopped. The complex was sold to the diocese of Haarlem.

The poor at the table

The bishop entrusted the church and the house to the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic community that works for the poor and for peace. It had been active in Amsterdam since 2000. On September 28, 2014, Bishop Jozef Punt consecrated the church again. After thirty-four years Mass was celebrated there once more.

The bishop asked the community, as the church's website says, to make the serving side of the church visible to the city. Sant'Egidio started a restaurant for homeless people and work for children and the elderly.

In the Old Testament, in the book that belongs with Moses and Aaron, there is a command about the stranger who lives among Israel: *The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* (Leviticus 19:34). Whether anyone thought of that verse in 1975 when the door opened, I do not know. It is in none of the sources.

On a few afternoons a week the door is open. You walk in past the portico of a cathedral that never came. The pews have been gone since 1990. At the front stands the altar from the time of the hidden church. And somewhere in that space, where the crosses on the altar of the poor now stand, the mattresses lay in November 1975.

Go there yourself

The Mozes en Aäronkerk stands on the Waterlooplein in the center of Amsterdam (Waterlooplein 207), with the Mozeshuis (Waterlooplein 205) next to it. You can see the back wall with the old little statues of Moses and Aaron from the Jodenbreestraat.

The church is open to visitors on set afternoons. Inside you will see the hall church of Suys, the high altar and the side altars from the hidden church, the Adema organ and the altar of the poor of Sant'Egidio. For opening hours, check the website of the Mozes en Aäronkerk or of Sant'Egidio Nederland.

The church lies in the old Jewish quarter, where Father Burgmeijer worked and where, according to the guide of the church, one of the first raids of the war took place. If you want to see the second part of this story, walk to De Duif on the Prinsengracht, where the hunger strike was taken up again in 1978.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the purchase of the house Moyses by Franciscans in 1641 and after that of the house Aäron; the new church by Suys (1837 to 1841); the Mozeshuis by Sier van Rhijn (1969) as a training center; the dissolving of the parish in 1969; the regularization scheme of November 1, 1975, and the problems with passports and employers' statements; the hunger strike from November 7, 1975, in churches in Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague with 182 participants, the largest group in the Mozes en Aäronkerk; the support of the KMAN, trade unions, parties and churches; the end after promises by State Secretary Zeevalking; the new hunger strike in De Duif in 1978; the residence permits on October 17, 1978; the end of the services around 1980; the handover to Sant'Egidio and the reconsecration in 2014.

Only from own testimony or from one source: the words of Ineke van der Valk about the Dutch hunger strikers (Andere Tijden); the story of the man for the Zaans Museum, with his memory that Queen Juliana asked Prime Minister Van Agt for attention and that he compares the kinderpardon with 1975 (his name is not given with the story); the poem of a hunger striker in *De Marokkaanse Arbeider* of August 1978 (on the website of Marokkaan in Mokum; I have not reproduced it and have not been able to find out who wrote it); the words of the older visitor to the exhibition in November 2024 (the report does not say whether he was a hunger striker himself); the thirty hunger strikers in De Duif in November 1975, the little support in the mosque and the passports after two weeks (only Marokkaan in Mokum); the approximately three hundred workers without valid papers (same source, without explanation of where that group came from); the hunger strike in France in 1972 and the conclusion in a review that holding out pays off (Andere Tijden); the party in De Duif (only the title of an NOS clip); the work of Father Burgmeijer and his honoring in 1891; the raid near the church (guide of the church); the occupation of the El Kabir mosque and the action in De Duif at the beginning of November 1975; the strikers' words about "fighting it out together" (a storyteller for the Zaans Museum); the petition with forty thousand signatures; Dutch fellow strikers; the reopening with Queen Beatrix in 1991.

Unconfirmed: who opened the church in 1975 (the Mozeshuis Foundation is the obvious choice, but no source says so; no source names a pastor or board member); whether a hundred or 182 strikers were in the Mozes en Aäronkerk itself; whether the strike ended on November 14 or 15; whether in 1978 all 182 or 120 men received a permit, and whether Zeevalking or Haars made that decision.

Interpretation: that this was the first large action by people without papers in the Netherlands is the reading of the sources from Amsterdam and of those involved themselves. Whether a general pardon is just remains a political question on which Dutch people think differently.

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Rotterdam: the church that opened its doors to the city

Walk out of Rotterdam Centraal, the main station, and head into the city. On the corner of the Mauritsweg you will see a building that looks like no other church. The front is copper-colored and broken into planes, with triangular windows. The British architect Will Alsop called his design a crystal that had fallen from a cliff. People in Rotterdam gave it other names: the Diamant (the Diamond), or the Koperen Ploert (the Copper Brute). On the outside, the bell is the only sign that this is a church.

On the ground floor is the Kerkplein, the Church Square. Anyone may walk in there for coffee or tea. On the floors above there is a shower, a hot meal, a doctor for people without insurance, a desk for people without valid papers and a limited number of beds. On Sunday there is a service, on Friday evening an evening prayer. This congregation has no members. Whoever comes, belongs.

The address is Mauritsweg 20. Until 2007 another Pauluskerk (Saint Paul's Church) stood on this spot. There, around 1980, one of the fiercest and most disputed experiments of a Dutch church in the twentieth century began. A congregation let drug users in at a mo-

ment when the city did not know what to do with them. It received thanks for it, and anger. It got the justice system in its building.

A church from 1960 and a minister from Sulawesi

The old Pauluskerk was built in a city center that was still recovering from the destruction of the war. The architect Barend van Veen designed it. In 1960 it opened, close to the station.

In 1979 a new minister came. Hans Visser was born in The Hague in 1942, according to an interview from 2000. He had worked as a chaplain at the Hoogovens steelworks and after that for about eight years in Central Sulawesi, in Indonesia. In Rotterdam he became director of the Stichting voor Kerkelijk Sociale Arbeid (the Foundation for Church Social Work), and in the Pauluskerk he started a diaconal center.

Diaconaat, diaconal work, is the church's word for caring for people in need. Every congregation has deacons who collect money and help poor people. In the Pauluskerk diaconal work became the heart of the whole church. The church's own website puts it this way: from 1979 on it grew into a place of meeting and help, with a mainly diaconal task.

How Visser stood in life, he showed that same year. According to a collection of interviews from 2000, in 1979 he supported the dockworkers in a big strike. Colleagues held it against him. Later he said about himself: "I like to choose the radical way." His support for the striking dockworkers had caused a lot of commotion in church circles. At a meeting in Schiedam about the collapse of the shipbuilding concern RSV, he said that God would not stand for this. His colleagues thought that was theologically irresponsible.

Those who interviewed him in 2000 saw a man who liked to start late. One reporter noticed that he was not ready for a conversation

until eleven o'clock. About his faith he was down to earth. In an interview from that year he said: "I don't have God in my pocket." He saw God as someone you could follow, not as someone on whose behalf you could speak. A fellow minister said of him that he stood in the mud on behalf of the church, in his boots.

The alliance of 1980

In 1980 Visser met a young man in his early twenties. His name was Nico Adriaans. He had grown up partly in children's homes, came from the world of drug users and had founded the Junkiebond, a union run by drug users themselves. Adriaans came with a proposal. He wanted an alliance between the Junkiebond and the Pauluskerk.

We know this story mainly from Visser's own words. In 1996 he wrote a memorial piece in the Rotterdams Jaarboekje, a yearbook of the city, about Adriaans, who had died a year earlier. He describes how the two of them held study conferences together and formed a broad front of organizations. He describes how an eating house came into the church. There, Visser writes, drug users had a place of their own for the first time.

More came out of that partnership: a Vredeswinkel (a Peace Shop), a night shelter, and later Perron Nul (Platform Zero). Together they also ran a methadone program that went outside the government's rules. Methadone is a drug that helps addicts get off heroin or takes away the worst need. Handing it out was strictly regulated. In the Pauluskerk it happened on the church's own authority.

Adriaans gave Visser and others lectures to teach them to understand the drug user. His motto was that drug users themselves should have the say, and he forced policymakers to listen to them.

He hated hypocrisy, bureaucracy and shady dealing. From him, Visser writes, he learned honesty, openness and reliability.

Visser writes honestly that they often disagreed. Adriaans wanted to take action, Visser preferred to talk things through. Still they worked it out, with respect for each other. Visser writes that he came to love Adriaans.

I find it a striking beginning. A minister who listens to a junkie and joins forces with him. You can think many things about it. But who actually decides in your church what the need of the city is: the people inside, or the people who ring the bell?

Soup, bread and a crowded hallway

In the 1980s heroin was a visible problem in Rotterdam, also in the station hall. The city health service handed out clean needles and provided methadone. Dutch policy saw addiction as a medical matter, writes Frank van der Hoeven of the Delft University of Technology. Where the city's rules stopped, the Pauluskerk went further. In doing so Visser appealed to the special room a church has.

Soon more people came than users alone. Homeless people came, asylum seekers, people without papers, women out of prostitution, the unemployed. They got soup, bread and someone who listened, as an interviewer described it around 2000. The hallways were busy and noisy. Visser said the church was there for everyone, including those who did not believe.

Jesus said to a host: *But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.* (Luke 14:13). In the hallways of the Pauluskerk it was not a feast, but soup and bread. Whoever came did not first have to show that he believed.

Careful language was not his style. About drugs he said in 2000 in the Utrechts Universiteitsblad, the Utrecht university paper: "It's damn stupid that we ban drugs." He wanted drugs taken out of criminal law and regulated like other substances. Many Christians in the Netherlands thought very differently about that, and that too belongs in this story.

This is how he told it in a lecture about violence and faith: a Christmas night in the church, and a man with an iron bar who threatened the churchgoers. Visser jumped at him, gown and all. The police took the man away. Then the service began, with Christmas carols.

Perron Nul, next to the station

In 1987 Visser opened a place for homeless addicts right next to the station: Perron Nul. There was supervision, there was methadone, there were clean needles. The IVO, a research institute for addiction, later called it the first drug consumption room of Rotterdam, a place where people were allowed to use their drugs under supervision.

The aim was also to keep the station hall clear. That worked. But Perron Nul drew more and more people. Van der Hoeven writes that the work was done on a scale the city had not seen yet. It became too crowded. There were incidents.

In 1992 it got out of hand. There were clashes with taxi drivers, who waited near the station, and with marines who were stationed in the city. The sources describe it differently. An article from 2013 speaks of an eviction with the help of taxi drivers and marines, an interview from 2000 of a brawl. How exactly it went, I have not been able to establish.

Things also went wrong inside the church itself. In October 1992 Visser temporarily closed the room where users were allowed to

use. The reason, the Reformatorisch Dagblad reported: there were more dealers than users.

Two house dealers and a thousand guilders for the tax office

In January 1994 the Pauluskerk did something no church in the Netherlands had done. Visser had two dealers sell hard drugs to addicts in the church. He called them house dealers. They had to sell pure drugs, at the normal street price, and hand over part of what they earned to the tax authorities. According to the newspaper report, the first thousand guilders went to the tax office in Apeldoorn.

Visser explained why. He wanted to reduce the nuisance around the church and get drug use out of the criminal corner. Whoever bought in the church did not have to buy on the street from someone who sold rubbish.

On May 25, 1994, the public prosecutor's office in Rotterdam announced that it was starting an investigation. Were crimes being committed in the church? Visser said that he had informally presented his plan to people at the police and the justice department, and that they thought it was worth a trial. The police reacted with surprise. They knew about the plans, a spokesman said, but "we certainly did not give permission for it." The acting chief public prosecutor said that he had not been informed.

The city government chose a middle course. It would rather have had Visser get in touch beforehand. But the new coalition agreement happened to include a trial with hard drugs on medical prescription for heavily addicted people. After the summer the executive would look at whether Visser's work fit into that.

I have found no source that tells how the ordinary churchgoers of the Pauluskerk thought about the house dealers. That silence is a

pity. A congregation also consists of the people who sit in the pew on Sunday, and of the volunteers who ladled the soup.

December 5, 1994

At the end of 1994 the city closed Perron Nul. The last gathering was on December 5. Mayor Bram Peper had decided it. Visser thought the city was closing a place without offering anything else. He had told Peper that you cannot close Perron Nul without an alternative, he said later. He accused Peper of working toward the closure behind his back for a year and a half. Later he said that the problems in the city grew bigger afterward.

The IVO wrote down in 2007 what happened. The dealers and the addicts went back to the neighborhoods they came from. Those who could go nowhere came to the Pauluskerk. It became crowded there, and tense situations arose. The church set up a consumption room in its own building.

Visser describes that time as painful. Adriaans had warned him, he says: "if they leave you alone and this remains the only place," then it would go wrong. That is how it went, Visser felt.

Adriaans himself had been seriously ill since December, after pneumonia, and had to be admitted to the hospital. Everyone thought he would die. Visser was deep in the troubles around Perron Nul at that moment. He told his friend that he was not allowed to die now. Adriaans recovered, and afterward said that he had kept the agreement: he was still there.

On January 21, 1995, Visser realized that the farewell was coming near. He held Adriaans's hands and gave him God's blessing. They thanked each other for their friendship. Visser cried, he writes, and Adriaans smiled at him. Two days later Nico Adriaans died, thirty-seven years old.

Visser also writes who he was. Until 1986 Adriaans led the Junkiebond. After that he worked as a field worker for the Institute for Addiction Research of Erasmus University. A treatment with ibogaine was a decisive experience for him, and afterward he was open to Hinduism. His last action was the Echoproject in Spangen, where Visser followed him in the deepest secrecy. A cactus was blooming in his living room. Visser saw a sign of hope in it.

A minister and a man from the world of drug users, who had often disagreed, said goodbye at the end with a blessing and a smile. In Proverbs we read: *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.* (Proverbs 17:17). For fifteen years they had stayed side by side, even when it got hard.

Fences, lampposts and a dissertation

The church on the Mauritsweg lay in the middle of the houses, and the neighbors noticed what happened inside. Around 2000 residents said that they did not feel safe. More lampposts came, and fences around the gardens, and bushes were removed so that no one could hide behind them. Visser said about this that little changed, but that the residents felt safer. How the residents saw it themselves does not appear in their own words in the sources I found. I have to name that gap honestly.

In February 2000 Visser received his doctorate in Utrecht. His dissertation of more than three hundred pages was about the role of the church in the modern city. The minister of the Pauluskerk had become a doctor of theology. A Rotterdam newspaper devoted a column to it and wrote that the hall in Utrecht turned out to be far too small for all the people. Visser told how his first plan had been too broad: he was building a universe that kept expanding, until his supervisor taught him to limit himself to the main line. He felt that the church should not settle for resignation. In his view the church

had let itself be pushed back into the role of first aid, and should become a social movement that builds cross-connections with other networks in the city.

Around 2001 a book by Visser appeared in which he wrote openly about the dealers in his church. He called them his friends.

A hole in the wall

In September 2003 the trade came to an end. The driehoek (the "triangle," the consultation of Mayor Ivo Opstelten, the police and the justice department) decided that the sale of drugs in the Pauluskerk had to stop. There was structured and organized dealing, said the mayor's spokesman. Use in the church would be tolerated. Dealing would not.

The Reformatorisch Dagblad described how it worked. By then there were four dealers. According to Visser they had been there for some ten years. Every morning from half past nine, drugs were sold. A buyer paid fifteen euros through a hole in the wall.

Visser disagreed. In the newspaper he said that the police and the justice department had known for years what was happening, and that the church had become the place where the city sent its addicts. He feared that they would now buy bad drugs on the street again. He sent the dealers away. "We are going back to 24 years ago," he said.

Who was right here? The mayor pointed out that the law forbids dealing, even in a church. Visser pointed to the people who came in every day. Both sides had a point. I leave the judgment to you.

Away from the Mauritsweg

Soon after, the church itself had to make way. The station area was being renewed, and on the site of the Pauluskerk, the Rijnhotel and

the Calypso cinema a new building project came. In 2006 the old church closed its doors. In 2007 it was torn down.

The work had to go somewhere else, and with that a new struggle began. The night shelter moved in 2006 to the Waalhaven, and a bus took the visitors back and forth. A day shelter opened in 2007 in the Couwenburg. Several hundred residents of the area went to court against that shelter. They lost the case. The IVO reported in 2007 that protests by residents delayed the move of the visitors. There was also a temporary place at the Westersingel.

According to an article from 2013, squatters occupied a building next to Hotel Centraal after the demolition, where homeless people could stay until the new church was ready. I found that story in only one source.

In 2008 Rev. Dick Couvée took over Visser's work. The care for addicts went to another organization, the Nico Adriaans Stichting (Nico Adriaans Foundation). In this way the name of the man from 1980 stayed attached to the work.

The Copper Brute

On Sunday, June 2, 2013, the new Pauluskerk opened, on the same spot on the Mauritsweg. The city had appointed Will Alsop as architect. The construction did not go without trouble. A developer was supposed to pay for the building in exchange for half of the land, but went bankrupt, a board member said shortly before the opening.

In the layout you could see what the congregation had learned. Downstairs the Kerkplein, for all people of Rotterdam. "This will be the space for all people of Rotterdam," said the head sexton. Above it an Open Huis (Open House) for people without a residence permit, homeless people and anyone who got stuck, with a doctor

and social workers. On the top floors a guest house for twenty-four people. Overnight stays for drug addicts were no longer part of it. About a hundred and seventy-five volunteers carried the work.

At the opening an old text got a place in the new building: Overcome evil with good. The words come from the letter to the Romans by Paul, the apostle after whom the church is named: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* (Romans 12:21)

Hans Visser was honored at that opening. In 2020 Couvée received a Rotterdam distinction, the Lof der Zotheidspeld (the Praise of Folly Pin). The committee spoke of "an exceptional combination of mercy and dignity."

"The limit has now been reached"

The old problem remained. In March 2024 residents complained on television about the nuisance around the church: people sleeping on the street, human waste in the doorways, drug use. A man who had lived there for thirty-six years put it briefly: "The limit has now been reached." Another resident told that her grandchildren no longer dared to come and visit. She also said that a few years earlier the night shelter that was open to everyone had been closed, and that afterward even more people went to the Pauluskerk. The man of thirty-six years spoke about the smell of urine and about women who no longer dared to leave their homes. He said that the alderman was going to talk with the residents, and that he himself was willing to take up the discussion, although he feared that the alderman wanted to stall. A spokesman for the alderman said that the Pauluskerk was partly responsible for the problem.

The minister-director Martijn van Leerdam said that he understood the complaints. The church tried to care for the people whom the city left out in the cold. When the frost rule applied in winter

and homeless people could sleep somewhere else, the nuisance decreased.

In July 2024 the city government wrote to the city council that it was worried about a plan of the church for permanent shelter without conditions. It was about the size, about the question of how nuisance would be prevented, and about the fact that the church wanted to take in everyone, wherever they came from. In December 2024 the church held an action under the name Recht op Rust (Right to Rest), against the closing of the basic shelter for forty-five people without papers. That year at least four visitors who lived on the street had died, Erasmus University wrote.

A researcher who was a volunteer there wrote down how visitors saw the church themselves. A man without papers could not return to his country because of a war. He waited, spent most hours of his day in the day shelter and stayed close to the church, because he did not know the city and was afraid of police checks. A Dutch visitor came mainly to shower and eat. For him the church was the only place where he did not have to deal with agencies that put a label on him. The researcher calls the church, in the words of the staff, a gray space, an in-between world.

In 2026 a statement appeared that the Pauluskerk drew up together with the Rotterdam VVD (a Dutch political party), with the Salvation Army and another shelter organization. Their joint goal: nobody has to sleep outside against their will, and the nuisance goes down. On enforcement they agreed: "Repression alone does not work, but enforcement is indispensable."

The bell on the Mauritsweg

What has this congregation changed? It is hard to measure precisely. Perron Nul was the first consumption room of the city, and in 1994 a

trial with hard drugs on prescription was in the coalition agreement. Whether the Pauluskerk cleared the way for that, or whether the city was going in that direction anyway, my sources do not say. What is certain is that the church each time offered a place where the city had none, and that the city each time had to respond to that. With support, with the police, with a judge, with a joint statement.

It cost the people in the church a great deal. The house dealers, the brawl at the station, the angry neighbors, the court cases: it is all in the newspaper. Whoever opens the door does not know who will come in.

Stand today in front of the copper building, a few minutes' walk from the station. On the Kerkplein anyone can have a coffee, someone without papers just as well as someone who happens to pass by. And on the outside hangs the bell, the only thing that says this is a church.

Go there yourself

The Pauluskerk stands at Mauritsweg 20 in Rotterdam, a few minutes' walk from Rotterdam Centraal. You recognize the building by its copper-colored front with triangular windows. On this spot the old Pauluskerk stood from 1960 to 2007.

The Kerkplein on the ground floor is an open space where anyone may walk in. The church is a working shelter. The visitors are often people in need, so come with respect and do not take photos of people without asking.

Volunteers of the church give tours for groups on request, with an explanation of how and why the work is done. On Sunday there is a service and on Friday evening an evening prayer. For times and for requesting a tour, see the website of the Pauluskerk Rotterdam.

Combine a visit with the station itself: the new Rotterdam Centraal was part of the same renewal of the station area that made the old church disappear.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the opening of the old church in 1960 (design by Barend van Veen); the arrival of Rev. Hans Visser in 1979 and the diaconal center; Perron Nul from 1987 next to the station and its closing by the city at the end of 1994; clashes at the station in 1992; the house dealers from January 1994 and the investigation by the justice department in May 1994 with the reactions of police, justice department and city government; the decision of the driehoek in September 2003 to stop the trade; the closing of the old church in 2006 and its demolition in 2007; the move of the shelter and the resistance of residents; the succession by Rev. Dick Couvée in 2008; the opening of the new church by Will Alsop on June 2, 2013; the complaints of residents and the position of city and church in 2024.

Only from own testimony or from tradition: Visser's words about God, drugs and the church from interviews in 2000 (Kerkinformatie, Utrechts Universiteitsblad, two profiles; I read them on a collection page, not in the original magazines); the story of the Christmas night with the man with the iron bar, from a lecture by Visser without a date; his accusation that Peper kept misleading him for a year and a half; Adriaans's illness in December 1994, the recovery, the blessing, the ibogaine treatment and the Echoproject (Visser's memorial piece; that piece names January 21, 1995, as a Friday, which does not match the calendar, since it was a Saturday, so I give only the date); the lectures of Adriaans and what Visser learned from him; the alliance of 1980 with Nico Adriaans, the eating house and the illegal methadone program (only from

Visser's own memorial piece); the warning of Adriaans and the farewell at his deathbed; that Visser had informally presented his plan with the house dealers to police and justice; that the dealers had been there for ten years; Visser's support for the dock strike of 1979; the squatters after the demolition; the bankruptcy of the developer.

Unconfirmed: the date of the lecture and of the meeting about RSV; the precise course of events with taxi drivers and marines in 1992; the church denomination of the congregation (not named in the sources I opened); how the ordinary churchgoers thought about the house dealers; Visser's birthplace and studies (only on one collection page, with contradictory details); whether Hans Visser is still alive could not be established in the sources I opened, and the chapter says nothing about it. The statements of visitors in the blog of Erasmus University were summarized by the researcher, not quoted literally; the visitors are anonymous. The statements of residents come from the report by Hart van Nederland of March 1, 2024; I do not name them. I could not open the article of the Reformatorisch Dagblad from 2003 again while rewriting. What comes from that newspaper was taken over from the first version of this chapter.

Interpretation: whether the Pauluskerk changed Rotterdam's drug policy, or mainly filled the gap the city let fall, cannot be said with certainty. Supporters and opponents look at it differently to this day.

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Volendam: the church where a village buried its children

On the dike along the Haven (the harbor) in Volendam stands a monument called *Water*. A Volendam artist, Jans van Baarsen, made it in 2002. It faces a building where there has not been a café since the fire. In that building was once the café De Hemel (Heaven), which everyone in the village called 't Hemeltje (Little Heaven). When the municipality bought the building, it was agreed that no café may open there for fifty years.

Farther along in the village, on the Kerkepad, stands the Sint-Vincentiuskerk (Saint Vincent's Church), a large Catholic church in neo-Baroque style, with a spire above the roofs of the old fishing village. Behind the church lies the graveyard. On January 1, 2026, municipal workers carried baskets full of flowers to fourteen graves there. People of Volendam had brought those flowers to the church that morning.

Between those two places, the café and the church, lies the story of this chapter. It is about a night that broke a village, and about a parish that in the weeks afterward became the house where everyone went. This story has no hero. There is a priest who led almost

all the funerals, there are volunteers who filled in insurance forms, there are parents who buried their children, and there is a village that years later realized how long it had been silent.

I write it with the greatest care. Most of the people it is about are still alive. I leave out their names, and I do not tell what exactly happened in those minutes.

A village that got its own church in 1860

For a long time Volendam had no Catholic church of its own. In 1860 one came, after the villagers had complained to the diocese. A hundred and forty years later, in the year 2000, the parish celebrated its anniversary.

A parish is, in the Catholic Church, the local community of faith, with its own church building and a priest who carries the responsibility for it. Volendam has two. Next to Sint-Vincentius stands the sister parish Maria Sterre der Zee (Mary, Star of the Sea). Star of the Sea is an old nickname for Mary, the mother of Jesus, especially loved by fishermen and sailors.

In January 2001 Volendam had almost twenty thousand inhabitants. About half of them went to Mass regularly on Sunday, an American news report wrote in those weeks. For the Netherlands that was a lot. The parish had also produced many priests and missionaries.

A clergyman of the parish summed it up in one sentence then, which the news agency recorded in English: “In Volendam, joy and sadness are connected to the church.”

What that meant, the village would show within a few days.

A café for eighty, with three hundred young people

On New Year's night of 2001 it was busy in the cafés along the Haven. De Hemel was on the top floor of a building with several cafés, and it was a place where many young people from the village came. According to a reconstruction by MAX, about three hundred young people were inside, while the license allowed the café to receive eighty. Many of them were teenagers. From the ceiling hung Christmas decorations made of pine branches. They were bone dry.

Around half past twelve, sparklers were handed out. A bunch of sparklers touched the decorations. The fire spread quickly over the ceiling, and burning branches fell on the young people below. Except for one, all emergency exits were blocked, the mayor stated later. The temperature rose, according to the sources, to about five hundred degrees.

The first call came in at 12:38 a.m. At 12:46 the first fire engine was there, at 12:51 the first ambulance. That night sixty-one ambulances were used, the wounded were sorted on the spot by severity, and seventy first aiders of the Sint-Willibrordusvereniging stood ready. Around five o'clock in the morning all the wounded had been taken from the site.

Hundreds of young people were hurt. The NOS spoke of more than a hundred and eighty, other sources of more than two hundred, many of them with severe burns. The Dutch burn centers were full, and the wounded were also treated in Aachen, Mechelen and Brussels. According to the news report, about eighty percent of the wounded went to the same high school in the village.

In the first hours people spoke of nine dead. Pastor Jan Berkhout of the Sint-Vincentiuskerk told ten years later that on New Year's Day nine young people died, and a tenth in the first week. In the

weeks after, the number rose, as young people died of their burns in hospitals. In the end fourteen young people from Volendam died.

How big is a disaster for a village where everybody knows each other?

"It was horror"

Berkhout was the pastor of Volendam. Ten years later, shortly before the commemoration of 2011, he looked back in a conversation with NH Nieuws on the days after the fire. "It was horror," he said. And a little later: it was very, very emotional.

He told about fathers who went from house to house, to see whether their child had been taken in. Sometimes they did not recognize their own child, because of the injuries. In the days after, he himself went into the hospitals.

The NOS wrote later that in 2001 the Sint-Vincentiuskerk was the place where the inhabitants came together to remember the victims. That is how it went in the first days too: whoever did not know where to go, walked to the church.

A vigil every evening

What does a village do when it does not know where to take its grief? In Volendam it went to church.

Volendam is a village where almost everyone is related to someone who was hit, the news agency wrote in the first week. Doctors and officials feared that the number of dead would still rise, because many young people lay in critical condition in the hospitals. From the night of the fire, vigils were held every evening. A vigil is, in the Catholic tradition, a gathering of prayer and silence around a deceased person or a disaster, often in the evening, for anyone who wants to come. Whoever could say nothing could still be there.

In Psalm 34 we read: *The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit.* (Psalm 34:18). Evening after evening people of Volendam came together for prayer and silence. In the booklet of prayers and songs was a line that the news agency took over: "In the deepest darkness, He knows to create light."

The same clergyman who had spoken about joy and sadness visited the families of the young people in those days. He said that he had no easy answers. So he read to them from the Gospel of Matthew. It is the story in which the disciples of Jesus are in a boat at night, on a lake with a headwind, and see Him coming across the water. They cry out in fear. Then He says: *Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.* (Matthew 14:27).

A fishing village knows nights on the water. In the clergyman's own family, too, there was grief.

Vacation days for the funerals

Behind the services lay a lot of practical work. In daily life the same clergyman worked as a tax adviser at the water board. He took vacation time, the news agency reported, to help volunteers. They arranged funerals, helped families with insurance and looked for help for those who needed it.

One of those volunteers, a member of the municipal council, explained why that work was needed. People of Volendam, he said, were not used to picking up the phone and asking for help. So the help came to them.

Paul wrote: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2). In Volendam that sometimes meant something very ordinary: a volunteer who helped a family with the papers of the insurance.

"The bells of New Year's night brought no joy"

On Friday, January 5, 2001, the funerals began, in the churches of the village. Among the first young people to be buried were two girls of thirteen.

De Telegraaf wrote on January 6 that the services followed each other at a rapid pace, and that the hearses drove from address to address. Berkhout told later that the church was full every time, from Friday through Monday morning. The involvement and the sympathy were enormous, he said.

In the middle of those days stood the pastor of the Sint-Vincentiuskerk. He led almost all the funerals of the victims, NH Nieuws wrote. He visited the wounded in the hospitals and stood by the parents. According to the regional broadcaster he was a support to many in the days, weeks and months after the disaster.

At one of the funerals he said a sentence that De Telegraaf recorded: "The bells of New Year's night brought no joy, they rang in a year of disaster."

I have looked at that sentence for a long time. Bells that ring in the new year, and bells that ring at a funeral. A pastor who in one weekend leads the burial of a teenager many times has to find words where there are no words. Berkhout chose not to talk the grief away.

In those months he became one of the most visible spokesmen of Volendam, NH Nieuws wrote later.

Four Sundays past the hospitals

A camera went along too. The Catholic program maker Leo Fijen of the RKK (the Catholic broadcaster) made recordings in the hospitals where people from Volendam lay. For four Sundays he went

past the hospitals with Pastor Berkhout. They were unforgettable recordings, he said later.

What he learned there, he summed up himself like this: that you can share your faith with very many people if you follow them in the hardest moments of their lives. In Volendam it came down to one thing, he said: to be near the grieving parents. He got to know many people of Volendam then.

It did not stop there. Five years later, in 2006, his book *Ouders van Volendam* (Parents of Volendam) appeared. For it he spoke with the parents of nine of the fourteen young people who died.

A hospital knows this work from the other side too. A plastic surgeon who in 2001 was still a doctor in training and worked at the Rode Kruis Ziekenhuis (Red Cross Hospital) in Beverwijk told NH Nieuws in 2026 that the hospital was the epicenter. After the chaos of the first night it went quiet, a kind of calm before the storm. After that, a full surgical program ran every day for three months. It was extremely intense, he said, but it had made him stronger as a doctor. Many colleagues, especially nurses, dropped out later with burnout symptoms. His explanation: the powerlessness.

The pastor too would find out what this work cost.

Fifteen thousand people without words

On Friday, January 12, 2001, Volendam held a silent march. According to CNN about fifteen thousand people walked along, among them Prime Minister Wim Kok and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander. A stille tocht, a silent march, is in the Netherlands a form of mourning in which people walk together through the streets without speeches and without music.

The moment shows that the grief of Volendam had become the grief of the country. The villagers shared it with people who came from far away, and at the same time held on to their own rituals in their own church.

On January 18 the twelfth young person died in a German hospital. Two more would follow.

A report with a hard conclusion

Meanwhile the investigation began. On January 15, 2001, the government set up a commission led by J.G.M. Alders, the Commissie onderzoek cafébrand Nieuwjaarsnacht 2001 (Commission of Inquiry into the Café Fire of New Year's Night 2001). On June 21 it presented its report.

The conclusion was hard. According to the commission, the café owner and the municipality of Edam-Volendam had neglected their responsibility for fire safety. The municipality and the emergency services were also insufficiently prepared for a disaster. And the commission added something that reached further than Volendam: the situation in the village was not unique. It could have happened elsewhere in the Netherlands too.

The mayor and an alderman resigned. The owner of the café was sentenced to a suspended prison sentence and community service. He paid compensation and sold the buildings to the municipality.

Hans Bulte, mayor of Edam-Volendam, later called Volendam his heaviest task. He told Trouw, a Dutch daily newspaper, how great the grief and the anger were. His first concern had been: how do you deal with that? Victims, relatives and inhabitants needed attention and recognition, he said, and that had not been easy for him. He died in 2026.

What the cabinet decided in July 2001

On July 16, 2001, State Secretary G.M. de Vries of the Interior sent the cabinet's position to the Tweede Kamer, the lower house of the Dutch parliament. The letter shows what the fire in Volendam set in motion.

All municipalities in the Netherlands were asked to draw up a fire safety action program that same year, with a catch-up drive on user permits. Such a permit determines how many people a building can safely hold and which escape routes there must be. Municipalities had to enforce more strictly. Research was started into the fire safety of decorations, and municipalities were advised to allow only non-flammable ceiling decoration. Psychosocial aftercare, the help given to people with the mental consequences of a disaster, became a fixed part of disaster response. The national government set aside 51.7 million guilders for help to the victims.

The consequences remained. The trade journal Security Management wrote in 2026 that the café fire, together with the fireworks disaster in Enschede in May 2000, led to a large investment in fire prevention by fire departments and municipalities. In the years after, cafés and restaurants were checked extra, on escape routes, on the number of visitors and on fire-safe decoration. Around Christmas this still happens extra intensively. The NOS and NL Times also wrote at the 2026 commemoration that the national rules for the hospitality industry were tightened after Volendam.

About the church, the cabinet's letter says nothing. Pastoral care is not in it. The cabinet dealt with rules, the parish with people. The pastor himself did see a connection. According to NH Nieuws, Jan Berkhout argued after the disaster for a national pastoral disaster plan, and according to Wikipedia he wanted church organizations to get a place in disaster plans. About his experiences he wrote the

book *Pastoor van Volendam* (Pastor of Volendam). In 2006 he became a knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau.

A priest who could not keep it up any longer

In 2003 Berkhout left Volendam. Combining the aftercare with the busy work in the parish had become too heavy, he told NH Nieuws later. According to Wikipedia he was ill for half a year from overload, while the psychological and social processing of the village was organized under the guidance of experts and of him. About sixteen percent of the victims later developed post-traumatic stress disorder. Without the disaster he might have stayed, he said himself, because it was the most beautiful parish he had ever had. Until 2007 he stayed in contact with the families, in a group for parents.

This too belongs honestly in the story. The parish carried the village, and the man in the middle was exhausted by it himself. You can read that as a shortcoming. You can also see in it how much was asked of one person.

Moses too was told by his father-in-law: *Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.* (Exodus 18:18). After the fire, much lay on the shoulders of one pastor in Volendam, and he too could not do it alone. That volunteers stood beside him was no side issue.

"The sense of community has grown"

On New Year's Day 2011, ten years after the fire, Berkhout came back. The committee that prepared the commemoration and the families of the fourteen young people had asked him. He was seventy. In the morning he led a special Mass in the Sint-

Vincentiuskerk. The church was full, with about four hundred people.

What he wanted to achieve, he told in the days before. People had to come into contact with their own feelings. Knowing that something has happened is different from accepting it, he said, and acceptance is needed in order not to forget.

Then the village walked to the monument on the Haven. Mayor Wim van Beek said that New Year in Volendam had been charged for ten years. He praised the strength of the victims, who were going for it again, and asked attention for those who were doing less well, because they had a very hard time. The names of the fourteen young people were read out, flowers were laid and it became quiet. In the afternoon young people came together again in the church, for a gathering with music and speeches. A father who lost his son said there: "Time never heals this wound." A year later, three years later, ten years later: it still feels the same.

In those same days the NOS broadcast a program from the village, with guests who had lived through the fire up close. A young man who had stayed in the café until the end suffered severe burns on his upper body and face and went through a long, difficult rehabilitation. A friend of his, himself unhurt, carried an invisible scar. He wrote a song about the fire and about his friend. "You tasted the fear in the air, the heat," he said about that night. A father wrote a song for his son, who was badly hurt. A young woman, who spent weeks in the hospital, wrote the book *Nieuwe Handen* (New Hands). She told that she often resisted the label victim. Most survivors, the NOS wrote, had built up their lives. Many of them carried lasting scars, but they had found their place in society, and some now had a family of their own.

Berkhout had described his impression of the families in his conversation with NH Nieuws. “The loss remains, but they have been able to give it a place,” he said. About the village he was positive: “The sense of community has grown.” He wanted to ask one question that day. How are you really doing?

The hundred and eighty wounded, in his view, did not hide. In the summer they showed themselves as they were. A plastic surgeon would add something fifteen years later that fits with this: in a village where everyone went through this together, nobody looked strangely at you if you walked down the street with burns.

He also added something that was quoted less often. A part of the village wanted, he said, to draw a line under the disaster in the very first year, while victims and relatives needed room to tell their story. The wound could not simply close. It had to be given a place, and that took time.

We don’t talk about that anymore

That warning proved right. The association of victims and relatives decided in 2011 that the fire would be commemorated less extensively from then on. In the years after, Volendam spoke less and less about it, NH Nieuws wrote in 2020. A survivor told later that he found his own problems less bad than those of others, and in the end sought help after all. A young woman who was severely injured in 2001 made a documentary in 2021 with a telling title: *Daar praten we niet meer over* (We Don’t Talk About That Anymore).

Here you see what a close community can cost. The village that took care of itself so well had trouble continuing to share its grief out loud. People did not pick up the phone, as that volunteer had already said in 2001. Twenty years after the fire, survivors started evenings of conversation under the name Volendam Spreekt (Volen-

dam Speaks). Researchers of Leiden University began interviewing those affected about the long-term consequences. The building of 't Hemeltje was opened again by appointment for those who wanted to see it, with someone of their choice beside them.

On January 1, 2021, there was another commemoration service in the Vincentiuskerk, in a private circle. The mayor said that the village and those involved themselves had to take charge. Again it happened in the church.

Jan Berkhout did not live to see that commemoration. He died on Christmas Eve 2018 in a care home in Huizen, seventy-eight years old. After Volendam he had worked in parishes in Huizen, Uitgeest, Breezand and, until shortly before his death, Tuitjenhorn.

Fourteen minutes of bells

On New Year's night of 2026, at half past twelve, the church bells rang in Volendam. They rang for fourteen minutes, one minute for every young person who died. People of Volendam and the surrounding area had been asked not to set off fireworks during those fourteen minutes.

The next morning wreaths were laid at the monument on the dike. Then the village went to the Vincentiuskerk. The NOS broadcast the service live. At the front stood portraits of the fourteen. Nephews and nieces lit candles for their deceased uncles and aunts. An extra candle burned for the parents of victims who had since died themselves, as a comfort: they are now with their child. A brother spoke on behalf of the brothers and sisters, about moments when it seems as if there is more between heaven and earth, and about gestures and facial expressions of the deceased that he sees again in the new generation. A woman who suffered severe burns at the age of four-

teen spoke about the importance of every story getting a place, also grief that has not yet been processed.

Around noon a linden tree was unveiled in a small park on the Roerstraat, close to the streets where many of the victims lived. The idea came from relatives. The municipality called the tree a symbol of togetherness, with room for remembrance and reflection. A father who lost his son hoped that the tree would become a place to remember and to celebrate life.

That same New Year's night a café burned down in Crans-Montana in Switzerland. According to the NOS, forty-one people died there. There too it was about fireworks in a crowded room. A woman from Volendam said that it made her angry that exactly the same thing happened in Switzerland. On June 8, 2026, the municipality and the Volendam hospitality businesses signed an agreement: in the cafés of the village there will be no more decorative fireworks, no sparklers and no fountains. The initiative came from two women of the village, one of whom was injured in 2001.

I think of the question Berkhout wanted to ask in 2011. How are you really doing? Perhaps after a disaster a church should keep asking exactly that question the longest, even when everyone seems to have moved on.

In the graveyard behind the Sint-Vincentiuskerk lie fourteen graves. On New Year's Day 2026 baskets of flowers stood beside them. The village had first taken them inside, into the church, and only afterward carried them outside.

Go there yourself

The Sint-Vincentiuskerk stands on the Kerkepad in Volendam. It is a large neo-Baroque church with a high spire. Behind the church lies the parish graveyard. The church is not always open: according to a

travel guide, visitors are mainly welcome on weekends. For opening hours and services, see the website of the Sint-Vincentiusparochie.

On the dike along the Haven, opposite the building where café De Hemel was, stands the monument *Water* by Jans van Baarsen from 2002. The official commemoration is held here every year on January 1. In a small park on the Roerstraat the commemoration linden has stood since January 1, 2026.

You can combine a visit with the Volendams Museum, which in 2025 and 2026 showed the exhibition *Onderbroken tijd* (Interrupted Time) about the young people who lived through the fire. Check the website of the Volendams Museum for what is on now. Whoever visits the monument and the church stands in places where people still mourn. Go quietly and with respect.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the fire in café De Hemel on New Year's night of 2001, caused by sparklers and dry Christmas decorations; fourteen dead and more than a hundred and eighty to two hundred wounded (the number differs by source; Wikipedia gives 241 admitted to a hospital, of whom about two hundred seriously); the Sint-Vincentiuskerk as the place where the village came together in 2001; Pastor Jan Berkhout led almost all the funerals, visited the wounded and stood by parents; the silent march of January 12, 2001, with Prime Minister Kok and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander; the Alders Commission and its conclusions; the cabinet's position of July 16, 2001; the tightening of fire safety and supervision in the hospitality industry; the resignation of the mayor and an alderman; Berkhout's departure in 2003, his return on January 1, 2011 and his death in 2018; the monument *Water*; the commemorations of 2011, 2021 and 2026; the agreement on decorative fireworks of June 2026.

Only from own testimony or from one source: the nightly vigils, the start date of the funerals, the visit to the families and the statements of a clergyman of the parish (one English-language news report from January 2001; the report also says that the vigils had been held every evening since the fire); the church attendance of half the village; the number of visitors the café was licensed for; Berkhout's statement at a funeral (via De Telegraaf of January 6, 2001, quoted by Rodi); everything Berkhout told about the days after the fire (NH Nieuws, December 2010: the fathers who went from house to house, the church full from Friday to Monday, his departure and his impression of the village); the recordings with Leo Fijen in the hospitals (his own story, in an interview by the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam; I read only that summary, not his book or programs); the plea for a national pastoral disaster plan and the book *Pastoor van Volendam* (NH Nieuws; I did not see the content of the book itself, nor did I read *Ouders van Volendam*); the half year of illness from overload (Wikipedia); the statements of the surgeon (NH Nieuws, 2026); the statements of Mayor Bulte (via Rodi, who quotes Trouw); the details about the first call and the ambulances (Wikipedia); the founding year 1860 (travel guide, supported by the news report).

Unconfirmed: the role of the parish Maria Sterre der Zee in the weeks of the disaster; whether the silent march began or ended at the church; whether a national pastoral disaster plan ever came; the exact house number of the church; the exact number of dead on the first day (the sources say nine or ten; Berkhout himself speaks of nine on New Year's Day and a tenth in the first week); the figure that about eighty percent of the wounded were at the same high school (one news report); whether the Mass belongs to the morning of January 1, 2011, or December 31, 2010 (a report by the NOS and one by NH Nieuws differ on this; I followed NH Nieuws).

Interpretation: that the new rules for the hospitality industry came out of Volendam is stated in the cabinet's letter and in later reporting. That the parish contributed to this, no source says. Its influence lay in the care of the village, and that is hard to measure. When Hans Bulte became mayor I did not look up; his words come from a Rodi article that quotes Trouw. The names of victims, wounded and relatives have been left out on purpose.

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The Hague: the chapel where the service could not stop

On the Thomas Schwenckestraat in The Hague lies a quiet residential street. Normally the door of the church building there is open to everyone. In the weeks after October 26, 2018, a sign hung on it saying that the church was closed because of special circumstances. Anyone who wanted to come in had to ring the bell.

Inside, a church service had been running for well over a month, and it did not stop. A changing group of ministers and visitors kept it going, day and night, Sunday and Monday, at Christmas and on New Year's Eve. The family that the service protected sometimes cooked in the building, sometimes followed the sermon and received friends. Nearly a thousand ministers ended up standing behind the lectern, the organizers counted. Media in more than thirty countries wrote about it. At the end, parliament had a scheme on the table that allowed hundreds of children in the Netherlands to stay.

The building is called Bethel. It is a neighborhood and church house, a project of Stek, a Hague foundation for city and church, in a building of the diaconate of the Protestantse Gemeente Den Haag

(the Protestant Congregation of The Hague). The diaconate is the part of a Protestant congregation that cares for people in need. There is a living room for thirty-five people, above it a small hall for children's work, and a chapel for a hundred and fifty people with a hearing loop for those who hear poorly.

How did a neighborhood house get this far?

Nine years of waiting

It began with a family from Armenia. Father, mother and three children came to the Netherlands in 2010. The father had been politically active in Armenia. He said that he had been tortured in prison there and that his life was in danger. That is how he told it himself, and on that ground the family applied for asylum.

A procedure of almost six years followed. First the family was proved right by a judge, but the state appealed. In the end the Raad van State (the Council of State), the highest court in immigration cases, rejected the residence permit. An appeal to the kinderpardon (the "children's pardon") was also rejected. The kinderpardon was a scheme from 2013 for children who had lived in the Netherlands for five years or longer and had put down roots here. In practice only a small share of applicants received a permit. In theory the family still qualified for that scheme, but it required cooperation with their own departure. That they refused, out of fear of danger in Armenia.

In 2018 the children were 21, 19 and 15 years old. By then they had lived nine years in the Netherlands, went to school and had friends. The state decided that they had to go back. Three times in those years the government tried to deport the family.

The family lived in an asylum seekers' center in Katwijk. When the deportation came close, they first found shelter in a Reformed

church in Katwijk. There they stayed four weeks. Then it became clear that the police were allowed to enter a church. Only a church service they were not allowed to interrupt.

A law from 1994 and a candle

That rule is in the Algemene wet op het binnentreden (the General Act on Entering). Article 12 provides that the government does not enter a church building as long as a religious service is going on there. The Raad van Kerken (the Council of Churches) writes in its brochure on church asylum that this is not a criminal offense and not civil disobedience either. However, a church that gives a foreigner shelter must inform the authorities.

Whoever wants to protect such a family must therefore do one thing: make sure the service never stops.

In Katwijk that was not possible. In The Hague it was. On Friday, October 26, 2018, at half past one, the Protestantse Kerk Den Haag began a continuous church service in Bethel. According to an American database of nonviolent actions, the family had been brought there two days earlier. On the altar table a candle was lit that would be put out only at the end.

Theo Hettema, minister and chairman of the Algemene Kerkenraad (General Church Council) of the Protestantse Kerk Den Haag, was one of the initiators. The General Church Council is the board above the various neighborhood congregations of the city. He told the news agency AP that there was only one thing they could do: start a church service to save the life of this family. Derk Stegeman, minister and director of the Straatpastoraat Den Haag (Street Pastorate), became coordinator of the church asylum.

The church asked for two things. State Secretary Mark Harbers of Justice and Security had a discretionary power, the right to grant a

permit anyway in cases of hardship. He should use it for this family. And the kinderpardon had to change, because according to the church about four hundred children were in a similar situation.

"It is God-impossible to do it alone"

A service that does not stop has to be organized. Someone always had to lead. There always had to be at least three people from outside the family in the chapel, so that it remained a real church service. That is in the American database. The services were divided into blocks. A couple of ministers from Almelo led, according to the NOS, a service of two hours. Other blocks lasted longer.

The Hague church paper *Kerk in Den Haag* described in December how it worked. The Protestant Congregation of The Hague made a schedule that filled the gaps. Fourteen coordinators arranged the practical side. If there were few visitors, a minister was called. By the fourth week 350 different ministers had already stood in Bethel, and there had been 1,500 visitors. Two Easter candles had burned down. The Easter candle is a large candle that in many churches is lit at Easter as a sign of the risen Christ.

"It is God-impossible to do it alone," said Rev. Karl van Klaveren of the Houtrustkerk, "24 hours a day, 7 days a week." Liesbeth Kromhout, coordinator of the diaconate of the same church, came by regularly and started a conversation group for refugees. Why did she do it? "It is simply our duty."

A few days after the start, on October 30, Rev. René de Reuver preached in the chapel. He was scriba of the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands), the highest administrative office of the national church body. He led an hour of the service and chose the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story of Jesus about a stranger who stops for a wounded man along

the road. Whoever knocks in need, he said, does not first ask about the rules. He referred to the judgment in Matthew 25: by receiving this family, we receive Christ. De Reuver also said: "For the sake of humanity we could not leave this family to their fate."

I find this the quiet part of the story. No cameras, but a schedule, a telephone and people who came at night too. For three months.

What sounded in the night

Whoever wants to know what such a service looked like has to turn to the ministers themselves. A foreign reporter spoke one evening in those weeks with two Amsterdam ministers who began at eight o'clock. At eleven a group from Voorburg took over, until the morning. What sounded differed from block to block. One minister told the story of David and Bathsheba, but from Bathsheba's side. Another combined quiet songs with sermons by Martin Luther King. One night Stegeman brought a harpist.

Often there were readings from Genesis, from the Psalms, from Ruth and from Isaiah. The Magnificat, the song of Mary, and the book of Esther also came back. Songs like *Nada te turbe*, *Dans nos obscurités* and *Ubi caritas* were heard. Stories about Anne Frank and about fleeing from one's own family came by often. One female minister deliberately chose the long first prayer at the Lord's Supper, because it contains a line that fit exactly: remember all who are present here. That is how she wrote it herself later. Another minister wrote that the praying itself had made a safe place. The hours had to be filled, said yet another, but then in prayer to a God who cares about refugees and children.

Hettema wrote later that everything became liturgy, from the conversations to eating tangerines after a long night. Journalists who came to look found it disappointing. It was as boring a church ser-

vice as they remembered from their youth. They were allowed in only if they left their equipment and statements outside and sat in silence, like everyone else.

One evening a playwright sat alone with the minister in the chapel. She had heard of the service through former minister Jan Pronk, who told her that there he had experienced the last hope. At first she felt uncomfortable. She took the place of the only other visitor. Then she understood that she did not have to do anything. She wrote later that being there was enough. Pronk himself stood at the door. He was doorkeeper, and said that hope is something you make together.

Axel Wicke, the minister of Bethel, discovered in those weeks which members of the congregation are night people. Some older members came by at night when they lay awake. Stegeman and his wife took night shifts themselves. In those months he slept with his phone under the bed, he told Canadian radio later.

In mid-December Stegeman called the service "our campfire" in a newsletter: the fire around which the community gathered to stay awake. He wrote about Jonah, who called to God from the depths. That is what prayer is like, he wrote: it comes out of the depths.

An icon from the parish

It did not stay Protestant. The Haagse Parochie Noord, a Roman Catholic parish, donated an icon to the chapel. An icon is a painted image used in prayer in the Eastern and Catholic traditions. This one was called "Madonna del Mare Nostrum": Mary of our sea, a reference to the Mediterranean, where refugees drown. In the chapel also hung a Mary with child in the form of an African refugee woman with her baby.

Christianity Today, an American evangelical magazine, described who all came: ministers of the Protestant Church, Pentecostal preachers, Baptists, orthodox Reformed and Catholics. They often handed the service over to colleagues with whom they shared little theologically or in their way of worship, the magazine wrote. The director of Missie Nederland, the cooperative network of evangelical churches and organizations, led more than once himself.

In Psalm 133 we read: *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!* (Psalm 133:1). In Bethel the ministers disagreed about many things. Still they kept handing the service to each other, hour after hour. Wicke said that the difference no longer mattered and that everyone worked together.

Over the weeks the numbers grew. On December 1 the NOS reported that five hundred ministers had signed up. The New York Times later spoke of more than 550 ministers from about twenty denominations. The Council of Churches settled afterward on nearly a thousand ministers, from many traditions and from inside and outside the Netherlands, and about twelve thousand churchgoers. There were also some hundred and fifty volunteers who brought food, cleaned and kept the schedule. These are the counts of those involved themselves, at different moments. What is certain is that hundreds of ministers came from all over the country.

Three young people behind a closed door

For the family, Bethel was a hiding place and a prison at the same time. Whoever left the building could be stopped in the street. The youngest could not go to school. According to BuzzFeed News the children received lessons and psychological support in the building, and visitors brought all kinds of things. A visitor of seventy-four

told AP that he was proud of the action and that it was sad that it was needed. We have to be hosts, he said.

The eldest daughter wrote on a blog that she often thought the church was the only place where she was safe. After a service of three hours, so the secretary general of the Protestant Church of Amsterdam told, she wrote a poem about a psalm they had sung that day. After four weeks she told the NOS: "When I realize that we have been sitting here for four weeks already, I actually get a shock."

For a minister it was a block of a few hours. For the family it was all the hours, day and night, week after week.

The story went around the world. Media in more than thirty countries ran it, often on the front page. Hettema received emails from the United States. Christianity Today placed the Hague service beside American churches where in those months people without papers also found shelter. There one of them was arrested on the way to an appointment with the immigration service.

In this kind of work a word of Jesus about the last judgment is often heard. He says there to the people who helped Him: *I was a stranger and you took Me in.* (Matthew 25:35). In Bethel in those weeks, sermons were heard about the Samaritan and about the biblical command to look after the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Not everyone in the Netherlands read that command in the same way.

"Arm wrestling" with the government

Already on November 7 the first political headwind came. The leader of the VVD group in the Hague city council wanted the church asylum to stop. He said: "A church or other religious institution may never frustrate decisions of a democratically legit-

imized government." The Netherlands, he said, had room for real refugees, and whoever was not a refugee had to go. Only in this way could the shelter stay fair. How he wanted to end the church asylum, he did not say.

In Christian circles too there was doubt. A former leader of the ChristenUnie parliamentary group told Nieuwsuur that the church should not "arm wrestle" with the government. He found it threatening to the rule of law if people did not accept a ruling of the judge. And he saw a church that children could not leave, without a plan B. According to Christianity Today, some evangelicals and theologians felt that worship and political action were being mixed up here. A service held to achieve a political goal, is that still worship?

Hettema admitted that some church members also struggled, with the foreigners or with the method. He insisted that the church stayed within the law. "We are not creating a free state," he said, "but we are looking for a way to deal humanely with each other." The police respected the law, and the church did too.

A columnist in *Kerk in Den Haag* called the service, politically speaking, "a powerless gesture." He also saw a quiet protest in it. The director of Missie Nederland wrote a blog for the critics. The service was sober, he wrote, focused on God, without banners or campaign. He referred to the prophet Amos, who speaks about justice and righteousness. Some critics went to look and changed their minds. Others kept their objection, even when they sympathized with the family. Stegeman explained the strength of the service like this: the church had protected its service and had not turned it into an action for something else.

One who came to think differently was Folkert Rinkema, the minister of the church in Katwijk where the family had first stayed. At

first he doubted the continuous service. After a visit he became convinced. He himself preached there, on Psalm 27.

What would you have done if your church council asked you to stand a night in that chapel?

Christmas without an answer

The churches did not stop at praying. At their request, Inlia, a church foundation that assists rejected asylum seekers, had the father's file in Armenia checked. According to the church, that investigation confirmed that his life was in danger. For privacy reasons the new file went only to the state secretary. We therefore cannot check it.

On December 17 a delegation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches attended a service. Three days later, on December 20, Harbers decided not to use his discretionary power. The new documents did not change his decision. The future of the family, he said, "could not lie in the Netherlands." A day later the church council decided to continue. Hettema called the grounds for the decision "so contestable that the church cannot do otherwise than continue the church asylum."

So the service went on, into Christmas night and into the new year. Afterward the church told that the nights in particular were hard. Then it was sometimes difficult to find ministers and churchgoers. The schedule held.

In Psalm 121 we read: *Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.* (Psalm 121:4). People do get tired at night. That is why in Bethel it came down to who still came in the middle of the night.

The night of January 29

Meanwhile politics was also turning in The Hague. The kinderpardon had been sensitive for some time in the governing coalition of VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie. D66 and ChristenUnie wanted a broader scheme, the VVD did not. About a week before the decision the CDA also moved, wrote the Groningen researcher Christoph Grüll. With that there was a majority within the coalition against the VVD. The Council of Churches wrote a letter to the prime minister, the minister and the party leaders.

In the night of January 29, 2019, the four parties reached a deal. It became a trade. For the roughly six hundred to seven hundred children who were already in the Netherlands, the scheme became broader: whoever had not cooperated with their own departure would no longer be rejected for that reason. In return, the kinderpardon for new cases was abolished. The state secretary lost his discretionary power; from now on the director of the IND (the immigration service) would assess cases of hardship. And the Netherlands would take in 500 refugees a year from United Nations camps instead of 750.

The next day the Tweede Kamer (the lower house of parliament) debated it. The left was glad about the broadening, but a GroenLinks member called the decision on the refugees from the camps "miserable horse-trading." The SGP spoke of a compromise in which justice was given up in the short term. The PVV spoke of a "party for the asylum industry" and said that rulings of the judge were being undone. Forum voor Democratie pointed to the families who had left and were now left out.

Whoever wants to judge Bethel has to weigh both sides of that trade.

A candle of 2,300 hours

On Wednesday, January 30, at half past one, the closing celebration began in Bethel. Continuing would now be "contrived," said Stegeman. According to him, members of parliament from the coalition had assured him that the family fell under the new agreement. The family was "very relieved and happy."

The eldest daughter spoke. She said that it was unreal to be able to go outside again at last and walk around. The church had become a home for them, with sad and beautiful moments. Hettema thanked for "a safe future for hundreds of refugee families." He also said that the church had concerns about the lower intake from the camps, and that it would keep fighting for humane reception of refugees. The church was deeply impressed, he said, by all the ministers, volunteers and others who had helped.

Then the candle on the altar table was put out. According to Christianity Today it had burned for more than 2,300 hours. The service had lasted exactly 2,306 hours and a quarter: from October 26 at half past one until January 30 at a quarter to three. On the door a sign was hung saying that the church was closed.

In an interview with Canadian radio, Stegeman said that the chapel had been cleaned, but that the walls still had to be painted because of the soot from the candles. The family had first been confused about the agreement, he told, and afterward glad. Now it was time to rest and look back. He called the outcome a miracle: it was still too big to understand, even for themselves. Hettema said at the end that they had started with nothing but their faith, and that this had proved more than enough.

The Dutch branch of the United Nations refugee organization reacted with mixed feelings. They were glad for the children. They

regretted that this came at the expense of refugees in the camps who needed protection.

Five hundred and sixty-nine children

On March 26, 2019, the family received a residence permit. The eldest daughter reported it on Twitter and thanked everyone "for your support, your prayers, little candles."

What else did the scheme produce? The IND started in March 2019 to reassess 1,070 children. In 2021 the state secretary gave figures in answer to questions from parliament. Of the 2,190 people assessed under the closing scheme, 1,071 received a permit. Among them were 569 children. 948 people were rejected, among them 439 children. The children's rights organization Defence for Children said that only half of the children they knew qualified.

Around the agreement there was also sadness. Another Armenian family had been deported a few days earlier. Their lawyer told the ANP, the Dutch news agency, that this was unjust and very painful: had the deportation been delayed a few days, they could have stayed, he said.

Hundreds of children were therefore allowed to stay who would otherwise have been deported. Hundreds of others were not. And the scheme itself disappeared. In May 2025 for the first time since 2019 a family with children rooted in the Netherlands was deported, a mother with three children, to Nigeria. The NOS wrote that there is no longer any scheme for children who have lived in the Netherlands for five years or longer. About 420 children are in a similar situation.

What you think of Bethel therefore also depends on which children you count.

"If this is church, I want to go!"

In the churches themselves Bethel left traces. In May 2019 ministers from the big cities came together in the chapel under the title "The inspiration of Bethel." In the invitation were statements by visitors. One of them: "If this is church, I want to go!" There had been people in the service who rarely or never went to church.

Wicke received messages afterward from people who wrote that they now understood why there is a church. He called the months a great gift, for his congregation and for the church in The Hague. Among sixty-five participants who later filled in a survey, nobody agreed with the claim that the liturgy had wrongly been used for a political aim. Ninety-five percent called the church asylum the church at its best.

On January 30, 2020, exactly a year after the end, a booklet about the church asylum was discussed. Kerk in Actie (Church in Action) quoted the words of those involved. Stegeman spoke of a "connecting pilgrimage." Hettema called it a "prophetic liturgy": a service that says something about the world outside the walls. In 2021 the Council of Churches rewrote its brochure on church asylum and named Bethel in it.

I find it striking that a neighborhood house could carry this, and that it took so many churches. None of them could have done it alone.

On the last day a sign hung on the door of Bethel. That door has long been open again. Whoever rings the bell on the Thomas Schwenckestraat now comes for a cup of coffee with the neighborhood, a meal or a music afternoon. The chapel where for three months someone was always leading the service is now used by faith communities who gather there to celebrate.

Go there yourself

Bethel is at Thomas Schwenckestraat 28-30 in The Hague, in the west of the city. It is a neighborhood and church house of Stek, in a building of the diaconate of the Protestantse Gemeente Den Haag. Note: the Bethelkerk on the Jurriaan Kokstraat in Scheveningen is a different church.

Inside is the chapel where the church asylum took place, with room for a hundred and fifty people. Bethel is a neighborhood house where you can walk in for a neighborhood coffee, a meal or a concert. The website lists, among other things, the neighborhood coffee, a neighborhood meal, a crafts club, an outdoor play day and help with phone, money and legal questions. This winter free classical music sounds on Sunday afternoon. I did not find a plaque about the church asylum.

Upstairs is 't Valkennest (the Falcon's Nest), the space for children's and youth work. For activities and opening hours, see the website of Bethel Den Haag.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the family came from Armenia in 2010; the procedure ended with a rejection and a rejected kinderpardon; first four weeks in a church in Katwijk; continuous service in Bethel from October 26, 2018, to January 30, 2019 (about 96 days, 2,306 hours and 15 minutes according to the Stellenbosch Theological Journal); the legal ground in the Algemene wet op het binnentreden; hundreds of ministers from many denominations; criticism from the Hague VVD and doubt within Christian circles; Harbers's decision of December 20, 2018; the coalition agreement of January 29, 2019, with broadening for existing cases, abolition for new cases and less resettlement; the residence permit for the family

in March 2019; the figures of the closing scheme; the deportation of another Armenian family just before the agreement (lawyer, via ANP and Christian Today).

Only from tradition or own testimony: the torture of the father and the danger to his life (his own story; the investigation by Inlia is not public); the numbers of ministers and churchgoers (counts by the organizers, which differ per moment: 350, 500, more than 550, 980 or nearly 1,000; about twelve thousand visitors and a hundred and fifty volunteers); that members of parliament had promised the family would fall under the scheme (so the coordinator told); the statements of visitors in the program of May 2019; the scenes in the night (Amsterdam and Voorburg ministers, the harpist, the playwright and Pronk, the tangerines) come from a scholarly article in the Stellenbosch Theological Journal (2024) and a foreign report (SBS); the translations from English are mine and give the gist, not the words; the statements of Stegeman on Canadian radio and in his newsletter of December 17, 2018; the remarks of Wicke (Christianity Today and Stellenbosch Theological Journal); what the eldest daughter wrote on her blog and what the secretary general said about her poem (via the SBS report); the survey among 65 participants.

Unconfirmed: the precise day on which the family arrived in Bethel (an American database gives October 24); the rule of at least three people present and the length of the blocks (one source); whether the service lasted 96 or 97 days; whether anything in the building now recalls the church asylum; what exactly the rules for journalists were (one source says: equipment outside, the other: film short moments); the exact date of the evening with the Amsterdam and Voorburg ministers; when the playwright and Pronk were in Bethel.

Interpretation: whether the church bypassed the rule of law or precisely gave a voice, within the law, to children, is a matter on which

Christians and politicians differ to this day. The outcome too is double: hundreds of children received a permit, while the kinderpardon disappeared and the intake from the camps went down. The names of the family have been left out on purpose.

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Afterword

Eight congregations, from a small hall in De Pijp, a neighborhood in Amsterdam, in 1887 to a chapel in The Hague in 2018. An army that began to sing. A church of widows. A bell that rang for help. A sugar cube and a conscience. A church where a hundred men refused to eat. A church that opened its doors to the city. A church where a village buried its children. And a chapel where the service could not stop.

Together with the first volume, that makes sixteen congregations in more than four centuries. They differ in almost everything. Catholic and Protestant, Mennonite and evangelical, large and small, in the city and in the countryside. Some are still standing, others have disappeared or have been given another purpose.

What they have in common is that they did not stay inside. They let themselves be seen in the society around them. Sometimes by helping, sometimes by comforting, sometimes by standing in the way. Not everyone agreed with them. Not even Christians. That is part of these stories.

What moved me most while writing this volume is how often a church building became a place where a whole village or a whole

neighborhood went. To mourn, to wait, to protest, to take shelter. Even people who rarely came into a church knew where to go.

Maybe one of these churches is near you. Go there. And then take a look at your own congregation too. What do the people on your street see of the church on the corner?

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)