True Story!

Churches That Helped

Ten churches that opened their doors

10 true stories

WIM KAMPHORST

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True Story! Churches That Helped

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Stichting (F)Luister Nederland

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The stories in this book are based on Wim Kamphorst's books for adults. The sources are listed there with each chapter.

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

For you

Do you know the best thing about the stories in this book? They all really happened.

Ten churches in the Netherlands that opened their doors to people who needed help. For old women, refugees, poor farmers and people in trouble.

Some stories are exciting. Some are sad. And some are a little bit funny too. But they are all true.

After each story there is a short part called **True story?** There you read what we know for sure, and what we only know because someone told it later themselves. Because that matters too: being honest about what you know.

Then come a few questions to talk about together, a verse from the Bible and sometimes a tip for going to see the place yourself.

Enjoy reading!

For parents and teachers

The stories are written for children of about 8 to 12 years old. You can read them aloud to children from about 6. Each story takes about eight to ten minutes.

The stories come from Wim Kamphorst's books for adults. All the sources are listed there. Nothing has been made up: no conversations, no thoughts, no details that are not in a source. Hard subjects such as war, illness and death are told honestly, but without upsetting details. Feel free to read a story yourself first, so you know what is coming.

Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

Westerblokker: the field where nobody ran away

A jump over the ditch

It is July 14, 1566. In a field near Hoorn, an old harbor town in the north of Holland, a great many people are standing together. They come from the town and from the villages around it. They stand in the open air, along a road and a ditch.

In front of them stands a man who is preaching. He is not a minister and not a priest, but a basket maker.

Behind him, on the other side of the ditch, stands a monastery. A few men come out of it. One of them is the schout. That is the man in the town who has to make sure the law is obeyed. And this sermon is against the law.

Then a monk jumps over the ditch with a loud shout. He hopes the people will get scared and run away.

But nobody runs away.

Why did all those people stay where they were? To find out, we first go back in time.

A basket maker from Alkmaar

The basket maker's name was Jan Arentsz. He worked as a helper in a workshop in Alkmaar, where he wove baskets.

According to a book about his life, Jan went as a young man to listen to a priest in Alkmaar. That priest preached in a new way. Jan began to read the Bible himself. Later he preached too, in small groups.

That was dangerous. In those days the king had strict laws. You were only allowed to go to the Roman Catholic church. Anyone who met in another way to preach could end up in prison. Or worse.

According to the same book, the rulers of Alkmaar were looking for Jan. In the night of July 2, 1566, he fled on a cart to Amsterdam. His boss and a carter helped him.

In Amsterdam, Jan and other preachers decided on something new. They would preach in the open fields, outside the towns. A sermon in the open air like that was later called a hagenpreek, a hedge sermon. A haag is a

hedge, a row of bushes, and the people gathered along hedges and ditches.

Two monasteries by the road

The field they chose was in Westerblokker, just outside Hoorn. Two monasteries stood close together there.

One monastery was called Nieuwlicht (New Light). Men lived there who gave their lives to God. They lived and prayed there together, as monks. The other monastery was called Bethlehem. Women lived there, nuns.

They were restless years. New ideas about faith were going around. Many people were unhappy with the clergy of the church. Others stayed faithful to the old church. Both groups believed in God, but they did not agree with each other.

A psalm in the field

On July 14, 1566, the people came to the field. How many there were, we do not know. An old historian, Geeraerdt Brandt, only writes that there were a great many.

Jan first had them sing a psalm. A psalm is a song from the Bible. Then he prayed. And then he began to preach.

Singing a song in a field. That sounds very normal now. But in 1566 it could cost you your freedom.

At exactly that moment, the mayors of Hoorn were sitting at the table in the Nieuwlicht monastery. They were eating there with the monks. The schout was there too, with his helper, the deputy schout. And there were two young noblemen. A nobleman is someone from an important, rich family.

They heard noise outside. They sent someone to look. He came back and said: someone is preaching out there! They were amazed, Brandt writes.

Nobody left

The schout, his helper, a monk and the two noblemen walked to the ditch. They stood right behind Jan. Maybe they wanted to frighten him. But Jan simply kept on preaching.

Then the monk jumped over the ditch. He shouted loudly, so the people would run away.

Try to imagine it. You are standing in a field. The schout of your own town is watching you. A monk jumps over the ditch, yelling. What would you do?

The people in the field stayed where they were. All of them. They kept listening, together.

The schout called out that he would teach them the tenth chapter of John, all right. John is a book of the Bible. What

exactly he meant, we do not know. Then he walked back to the monastery.

And now comes something surprising. The schout's helper and the two noblemen stayed. They listened to the whole sermon. Afterwards they told the monks that they had actually quite liked it.

A historian thinks it was no accident that those men were there that day. He thinks some people in the town council knew about it beforehand. That way they could be there "by accident".

A church grows

About the ordinary people in the field we know almost nothing. We do not know any names. But we do know what they did together. They came, they sang, they listened and they stayed, together.

That summer the same thing happened in many other places. In Hoorn a priest, Clement Maertsz., also began to preach openly. He baptized children and married couples. That is how a new church began. Not with a church building, but with people who came together.

It did not stay peaceful. In 1567 preaching like this was forbidden again. Jan had to flee once more, to Emden, just over the border in Germany. Whoever could, left, and whoever stayed kept quiet.

In 1572 Hoorn chose the side of Willem van Oranje (William of Orange). He led the revolt against the king. Now everything turned around. Jan Arentsz. came back and became a minister in Alkmaar, the town he had once fled from at night. He died in 1573.

A nun made of stone

For the monks and the nuns, 1572 was the end. The monks fled. The nuns had to leave their monastery. The buildings were torn down. About fifty nuns were taken by ship to Amsterdam. Others went to live in a convent in Hoorn. They lost their home and their place to pray together.

Long after that, between 2003 and 2008, archaeologists dug up the Bethlehem monastery. Archaeologists search in the ground for things from long ago. They found walls, wells, bridges and the nuns' graveyard. People from Blokker cleaned the old bricks. With them, they built a gate together.

In 2010 the nuns were buried again. In the churchyard of the church of Westerblokker. In the past that was a Catholic church, now it is a Protestant church. On their grave stands a statue of a nun kneeling in prayer.

And the field where Jan preached? You can no longer point it out. There is no sign and no stone to remember it.

True story?

Yes. That Jan Arentsz. preached by the monastery near Hoorn on July 14, 1566, is in several sources. The monk's jump, the words of the schout and the meal in the monastery come from one old history book, from 1671. His escape on a cart and his young years with the priest in Alkmaar are in one book about his life. Whether this was really the very first hedge sermon in Holland, we do not know for sure.

Talk about it

- The people stayed where they were when the schout and the monk came. Why is it easier to be brave when you are together with others?
- For some people 1572 meant freedom, for the nuns it was sad. How can you be kind to people who believe differently than you?

From the Bible

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. (John 10:27)

Go and see for yourself

The Protestantse Kerk Westerblokker (the Protestant Church of Westerblokker) stands on the corner of the Westerblokker and the Kolenbergstraat in Blokker, near Hoorn. In the churchyard is the grave with the kneeling nun. On the Bangert, by numbers 36 and 38, stands the gate that local people built from the old monastery stones.

Amsterdam: the refugee church that took in refugees

Children lay the first stone

It is October 29, 1669. On the Vijzelgracht, a canal in Amsterdam, a big house is being built. It will be a house for orphans. An orphan is a child whose father and mother have died.

Who lays the first stones? Not a mayor and not a minister. It is children! The children of Paul Godin and Sara van Raey.

The house belongs to a church. But in that church, nobody speaks Dutch. There people sing and pray in French.

How does a French-speaking church end up in Amsterdam? And why does that church build a house for orphans? To find out, we first go back in time.

A chapel for refugees

In the middle of Amsterdam stands an old church. Long ago it was the chapel of a monastery. In 1578 Amsterdam became a Protestant city. The city took the monasteries and churches away from the Catholics. For the brothers of the monastery, that was the end. For the Catholics in the city, it was a loss.

In that same year a Walloon church started in Amsterdam. The Walloons were Protestants who spoke French. They came from the south, from what is now Belgium and the north of France. There they were persecuted for their faith. Persecuted means that you are punished or hunted down.

In 1586 the Walloons were given the old monastery chapel. They have never left. Today the church is called the Waalse Kerk, the Walloon Church.

After 1585 more and more refugees came from the south. That year the big city of Antwerp fell into the hands of the Spanish army. Many Protestants fled to the north.

No bed for their children

Amsterdam had a big orphanage. But it was only for children of poorters. A poorter was someone with citizen rights in the city. Many Walloon families were new in the

city. They were not poorters. If their parents died, the city had no place for the children.

What would you do if you saw that children had nowhere to go?

The Walloon church decided to do it themselves. On February 16, 1631, the ministers, the elders and the deacons had a meeting. Elders and deacons are people who lead the church together and take care of the poor. They decided to start an orphanage of their own. They wrote down who it was for: for the orphans of their own people and their own faith.

It went quickly. On July 1, 1631, the first orphans moved into the house. It stood on the Laurierstraat. A family had given three houses there for it. A rich merchant, Louis de Geer, gave money too.

The famous poet Joost van den Vondel wrote a poem for the new orphanage. It has a line that says pure religion means helping the orphans in their misery.

A house full of orphans and grandmas and grandpas

The orphanage got a board of two elders and two deacons. Later, three women joined the board as well. In the house lived a father and mother who looked after the children.

The board members had their portraits painted. That way they could show that they took care of the orphans. Those paintings still exist.

After almost forty years the house was too small. The city gave free land on the Vijzelgracht. There the children laid the first stones in 1669. In 1671 the new house opened.

The house grew along with the need. In 1683 a wing was added for old women. In 1726 another wing was added for old men. So orphans and old people lived under one roof.

Refugees again

Meanwhile, France was becoming more and more dangerous for Protestants. There they were called Huguenots. King Louis XIV took away their freedom. They were no longer allowed to live out their faith freely.

From 1681 more and more Huguenots fled to Amsterdam. Many of them found their way to the Waalse Kerk, because their own language was spoken there.

The church grew enormously. Between 1681 and 1685 it had about 3,480 members. Between 1686 and 1690 there were more than six thousand. In a few years the church became almost twice as big!

What did the church do with all those new people? It went to speak with the city council on their behalf. It collected

money for those who had nothing. It looked for houses and buildings. And it gave the newcomers a place to belong.

There were rules, though. If you wanted help, you had to be a member of the church and behave well.

A merchant and a drawing teacher

Out of all those thousands of people, we know a few by name. Josias Duhamel was a merchant in Dieppe, a port town in France. In 1689 he fled. On July 4 he arrived in Amsterdam. He became a member of the Waalse Kerk and rented a house on the Prinsengracht. Less than a year later he was given the citizen rights of the city for free.

Another refugee was called Lucas Bouyssavy. He came from Bergerac in France. In Amsterdam he started calling himself Boissevain. According to an old family story, he hid for days without food between the wine barrels on a ship. His wife was said to have been smuggled across the border in a hay basket. Nobody knows for sure if it really happened that way.

What is written in the church books: Lucas taught drawing and French. His son Jérémie was baptized in the Waalse Kerk in 1702. In 1753 Jérémie and his wife became the father and mother of the house on the Vijzelgracht. That is in the family archive. So the son of a refugee took care of the church's orphans himself.

The door still opens

Not everyone in Amsterdam was happy with the refugees. Shopkeepers and craftsmen complained. From 1690 the city became stricter. Does that sound familiar? It was already happening more than three hundred years ago.

In 1955 the last orphan left the house on the Vijzelgracht. Later the old people moved to a new home as well. Part of the money came from a will from 1741. A woman, Agneta de Ruüsscher-de le Becq, had given her money to the diaconie, the deacons' fund for the poor, back then. More than two hundred years later, it was still helping.

The Walloon church is small now. But every other Sunday there is still a church service in French. The diaconie now mainly helps organizations that help people in need.

True story?

Yes. The orphanage of 1631, the house on the Vijzelgracht and the growth of the church are in several sources. The story about the wine barrels and the hay basket is a family story. The family writes themselves that it is not certain. That Jérémie Boissevain became father of the house is only in the family archive.

Talk about it

- The Walloons were refugees themselves and later helped other refugees. What would it be like to come to a country where you do not speak the language?
- Children laid the first stones of the orphanage. What could you do for a child who is new in your class?

From the Bible

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (James 1:27)

Go and see for yourself

The Waalse Kerk is at Walenpleintje 157-159 in Amsterdam, on the Oudezijds Achterburgwal. Inside there is a sign with the words "Fondée en 1409" (French for "Founded in 1409"), and you can see old gravestones in the floor. The old orphanage is at Vijzelgracht 2, on the corner with the Prinsengracht. You can only look at it from the outside. Look out for the two low wings for the old women and the old men.

Amsterdam: four hundred little rooms on the Amstel

A door that does not open

On the Amstel river in Amsterdam stands a very long building. The front is 102 meters long. When it was built, no other building in Amsterdam had such a long front.

In the middle there is a door. But that door never opens, because it is a fake door. Above that door are old words: “Diaconie Oude Vrouwen Huys anno 1681”. That is old Dutch for “Deacons’ House for Old Women, in the year 1681”.

Today the building is a museum. People come to look at paintings. But for more than three hundred years, old people who were poor lived here. The church took care of them.

How did a church get such a huge house? It started with a bag. A collection bag.

Men with a collection bag

In 1578 Amsterdam became a Protestant city. From then on, the Reformed church was the most important church in the city.

That church had deacons. The word means servant. Deacons took care of the poor in the church. Every Sunday they went around with the collection bag. The people in church gave money. Together the deacons formed the diaconie. That is the name for the group in a church that takes care of the poor.

That idea comes from the Bible. In the book of Acts, some widows were forgotten when food was handed out. A widow is a woman whose husband has died. The first church then chose seven men to share out the food fairly.

In Amsterdam, ordinary churchgoers gave Sunday after Sunday. Everyone gave a little, and all together it became a lot of money.

Bread, peat and wooden shoes

How did the deacons help in those days? In Holland they went to visit the poor. They looked at how someone lived.

Then they brought things, like bread and cheese. Or peat, a kind of dried earth that people burned in the stove. Also linen for clothes, and shoes or klompen, Dutch wooden shoes.

Often they brought it quietly. That way the neighbors did not see who was getting help.

There were rules too. If you got help, you were not allowed to beg. In some cities you were taken off the list if you got drunk, fought or swore.

And the city of Amsterdam grew and grew. Around 1500 about ten thousand people lived there. By 1650 there were more than two hundred thousand. Many of the new people were poor. So the diaconie could not help everyone.

A merchant gives everything

On October 18, 1680, a merchant died in Amsterdam. His name was Barent Helleman, and he left all his money to the diaconie. That was about 90,000 guilders. A guilder was the money of that time, and this was a huge amount.

Why did he do it? We do not know. No letter from him has been kept, and no painting. We only know about this one decision.

The deacons knew what they wanted to do with it. Until then, poor old women lived in other people's homes. The

diaconie paid those people for it. A house of their own would be better.

The city helped too. Amsterdam gave the diaconie a piece of land on the Amstel. In 1681 the builders began.

Four hundred little rooms

It became a big square building with a courtyard in the middle. All around were the women's little rooms. Four hundred women could live there!

On the river side there was a large hall. That is where the people living there ate together. And on Sundays that same hall became a church. It was even the second largest church hall in the city.

But not everyone was allowed in. You had to be at least fifty years old. You had to have lived in Amsterdam for fifteen years. And you had to have been a lidmaat for ten years. A lidmaat is a full member of the church, who has spoken out their faith there in front of everyone.

That means many poor women were left standing outside. For example a woman who had only lived in the city for a short time. Or a woman who belonged to a different church. The Catholics, the Lutherans and the French-speaking Walloon church took care of their own people.

There were four hundred places, in a city of more than two hundred thousand people. How would you choose who could come and live there?

A token for a loaf of bread

The diaconie also kept helping the poor who lived at home. In the Rijksmuseum, the big national museum in Amsterdam, there are small metal tokens from 1777. They are tokens for the poor. A poor church member got one of these tokens. With it, he could collect a loaf of bread when bread was handed out.

Where did the money come from? Around 1770, almost half came from the collection bag. Other money came from things like inheritances, such as the one from Barent Helleman. So the house on the Amstel ran on the money of ordinary churchgoers.

In February 1783 the house was a hundred years old. There was a party, and a silver medal was made. In 1810 the church hall got a new organ. It is still there! In 1817 old men were allowed to come and live there too.

From care home to museum

In 1953 the house got a new name: the Amstelhof. Slowly it became a nursing home for old people.

In 2007 the last people living there moved to new homes. Think about that for a moment. From 1683 to 2007, old people lived here without a break. That is more than three hundred years.

After that, the building was turned into a museum. It opened in 2009. Today it is called the H'ART Museum. The front of the building stayed, and so did the old church hall with the organ.

Nearby there are more old houses of the diaconie. In one of them, the Amstelrank, you now find Het Wereldhuis (the World House). Refugees get help there. In the past the diaconie asked if you had lived here for fifteen years. Now, in one of its old houses, it is the people who have just arrived who get help.

True story?

Yes. That Barent Helleman left his money to the diaconie, that the house was built for four hundred women and what the rules were, is in several sources. The sources do not agree on whether the house opened in 1682 or 1683. That the women first lived with other people, at a high cost, we only know from what the museum tells. The names of the first women who lived there have not been kept.

Talk about it

- The house was paid for mostly with small gifts from the collection bag. What can many people do together that one person cannot?
- Not everyone was allowed to live in the house. What do you think of those rules?

From the Bible

It is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20:35)

Go and see for yourself

The Amstelhof is at Amstel 51 in Amsterdam. From the other side of the river you can see the long front, with the words above the door that does not open. Inside is the H'ART Museum, with a garden full of old chestnut trees. Along the Nieuwe Herengracht and the Nieuwe Keizersgracht there are more old houses of the diaconie, such as the Corvershof and the Amstelrank.

Monnickendam: the small church that wanted to teach a whole country to read

Two out of three

It is 1534. The priest of Monnickendam, a small harbor town north of Amsterdam, writes down something that worries him. About two thirds of the people in his town follow a new teaching. That is two out of every three people!

This new group is called the doopsgezinden, the Mennonites. They are also called mennisten. They did not baptize babies. They only baptized adults who chose for themselves to follow Jesus. In those days that was strictly forbidden.

A year later the persecution began. Mennonites were arrested and punished. Some were killed. Many people from Monnickendam went into hiding or fled to Amsterdam.

Still, a small church was left. More than two hundred years later, something very big began in that small circle. Something you may still notice today, when you borrow a book or go to school.

Giving to people you never see

The Mennonite church in Monnickendam was small. In 1675 it had about one hundred and fifty members. It was not rich. The town lived from ships that sailed the sea. Because of wars, that trade was going badly.

And yet this church did something special. Between 1672 and 1736 it gave a lot of money to collections. That money went to Mennonites far away who were being persecuted. To Switzerland, to Germany, to Prussia and even to Lithuania.

Probably almost nobody in Monnickendam had ever met those people. They gave anyway.

Would you give money to someone you have never seen?

A bookseller becomes a minister

In 1724 Jan Nieuwenhuyzen was born in Haarlem. He became a bookseller and printer. A printer makes books with a printing press. Jan married a poet, Geesje Wijnalda. He even printed a book of her poems.

Then Jan chose a different life. He sold his printing business and studied to become a minister. Among the Mennonites a minister is called a predikant, a preacher. In 1771 he came to Monnickendam. He stayed there for thirty-five years, until he died.

Jan and Geesje had three children. One of them was Martinus. He became a doctor in Edam, a little town very close to Monnickendam. Martinus was already writing books when he was young.

Six men with a plan

In 1784 six men started a society. Two of them were Jan and his son Martinus. Who the other four were, we do not know.

The society got a long name: Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen. That means the Society for the Good of All. Nut means that something is good and useful for others. Algemeen means: for everyone. Soon everyone simply called it Het Nut.

What did Het Nut want? Ordinary people, even the poorest, had to be able to learn. That could be done with cheap little books in easy language. And with better schools for children.

According to an encyclopedia of the Mennonites, there was something striking in the rules. Anyone could become a member, whatever their faith. And Het Nut did not take sides for any church or political party.

That was special. In those days Mennonites were not allowed to have an important job in the government. Only members of the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) were allowed that. So the Mennonites knew how it feels to be left out. But it did not always go well. According to one source, Jewish people were still not allowed to become members.

Spelling books for children

Martinus got to work with what he was good at: writing. He made the first school book of Het Nut, in easy language for children. More followed. One was called *Spel- en Leesboekje voor eerstbeginnenden*, a little spelling and reading book for beginners. So it was for children who were just learning to read.

Martinus became the great engine of Het Nut. But in 1793 he got a high fever. He died, only thirty-three years old.

His father Jan was sixty-eight then. He went on preaching in Monnickendam.

Het Nut kept going. In 1795 it started a teacher training school in Haarlem, the first one in the Netherlands. There you learned to become a schoolteacher. After that more of those schools came, in Amsterdam, Groningen and Leiden. In 1806 there was a law for all the schools in the country. That law was very much like the ideas of Het Nut.

Piggy bank, library and people's university

Het Nut grew and grew. Around 1817 it started the first savings banks. People with little money could save a tiny bit there every week. Then they had something when they got sick or had no work.

Nut schools and libraries came. In 1956 Het Nut had 205 libraries for everyone and 45 for children. Later most of the schools, savings banks and libraries were taken over by the government. That way the work of Het Nut became a very normal part of life.

Not everyone was happy with Het Nut. People also talked about how Christian Het Nut still was. In 1864 a committee said that Het Nut had to stay Christian.

And the small church in Monnickendam? It stayed small. In 1955 it had seventy-four members. From 1935 it shared

its minister with Edam, the little town where Het Nut began.

Marble in the big church

Jan Nieuwenhuyzen died in February 1806. He was eighty-one. A year later a marble memorial was made for him. A memorial is a work of art to help people remember someone. It was put in the big church of Monnickendam. That was the church of the Hervormden, the Dutch Reformed.

So a minister of a small group got a place in the biggest church of the town. In a town where Mennonites once had to go into hiding.

True story?

Yes. That Jan and Martinus Nieuwenhuyzen started Het Nut in 1784, and that Het Nut started schools, savings banks and libraries, is in many sources. The sources do not agree on whether it was on October 16 or November 16, 1784, and whether it was in Edam or in Monnickendam. The collections for persecuted Mennonites far away, and the rule that Jewish people could not become members, are each in only one source.

Talk about it

- A small church gave money to people it never saw. Why would they have done that?
- Het Nut wanted everyone to be able to learn to read. What would be different for you if you could not read?

From the Bible

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.
(Galatians 6:10)

Go and see for yourself

The Grote of Sint-Nicolaaskerk (the Great Church or Saint Nicholas Church) is at De Zarken 2 in Monnickendam. Inside hangs the marble memorial for Jan Nieuwenhuyzen. You walk over a floor full of old gravestones. In Edam, a few kilometers away, is the Nieuwenhuyzenplein, a square named after the family.

The Salvation Army: soldiers with soup instead of guns

A packed hall

It is Sunday, May 8, 1887. On the Gerard Doustraat in Amsterdam there is a small hall. It belongs to a little Christian club, the Emmanuel society. Today something new begins there.

In the evening the hall fills up. Women shout. Some try to climb onto the stage. The police send extra officers.

George Railton wrote that down later. He was a leader from London, and he was there. Had the evening gone wrong? No, he thought. He wrote: “Never did I see a more glorious victory at any opening.”

What kind of strange church was this? It was called the Leger des Heils, the Salvation Army. And on that day it had started in the Netherlands.

An army without guns

The Salvation Army came from London. There William and Catherine Booth began their work in 1865. They told people about Jesus, people who never went to church anymore.

In 1877 their work took the shape of an army. They got a flag, uniforms and ranks, such as captain and lieutenant. But they did not fight with guns. They wanted to save people. Another word for being saved is salvation. That is how the Army got its name.

A teacher without a job

In Amsterdam lived a young man, Gerrit Govaars. He was a schoolteacher. He thought the Salvation Army was wonderful. In 1885 that cost him his job.

What would you do if you lost your work because of what you believe?

Govaars went to London. There he helped to translate songs. In 1886 he became an officer in the Army. In London they called him the “Hallelujah Dutchman”.

There was another man from Amsterdam who wanted to join: Ferdinand Schoch. He had once been an officer in a real army. William Booth advised him to wait until the Army started in the Netherlands.

In March 1887 a captain came from England, John Tyler, with his wife. He had been a sailor on the boat to Hoek van Holland, a Dutch port. He spoke a little Dutch. Reporters could hardly understand him. Together with Govaars and Mr. and Mrs. Schoch, he helped on that first Sunday in the Gerard Doustraat.

The bench at the front

At the front of the hall stood an ordinary bench. It was called the penitent form, the sinners' bench. Anyone who knelt there was showing: I want to give my life to God. On that first day sixteen people knelt there, the Army itself says.

The salvation soldiers, as the members of the Army are called, did not just stand neatly on the stage. They walked into the hall, in between the people. They talked with everyone. Anyone who had knelt got two visits at home within two weeks.

Not everyone liked it. In the summer of 1887, troublemakers often came. They disrupted the meetings.

Sometimes the police had to step in. Salvation soldiers were even beaten.

Many churches were suspicious too. The Army was loud. Women stood at the front and preached. And then those uniforms! Many ministers thought that was not right for a church.

Still, the group grew. In the summer of 1887 it got its own flag. Now it was a real corps: Amsterdam 1. In the Army, a corps is what other churches call a congregation. It is a group of believers with their own hall.

The cold winter

Then came the winter of 1890 to 1891. It got extremely cold. In Amsterdam, many people had no home. Where were they supposed to sleep?

The salvation soldiers opened their doors. Their halls became places to sleep. On the Rapenburg stood their building, the Vrede-Ark (the Peace Ark). People without a home could go there. On the Lijnbaansgracht there was shelter too. There was hot soup and breakfast. That way many people were saved from freezing to death.

That same year the Army opened a permanent place to sleep, on the Haarlemmerhouttuinen. A place like that was called a night shelter.

And then something happened. The city began to look at the Army differently. At first people laughed at the singing soldiers from De Pijp, the neighborhood where it all began. Now they saw the same people handing out soup in the freezing cold.

The Army had not made a big plan. It had a hall, it was cold, and the door opened.

A bed for ten cents

After that winter the work went on. On the Warmoesstraat there was a simple hotel, the Metropool. You could sleep there for ten cents. Next to the sleeping places came workshops. Whoever slept there could also earn a little money there. In 1892 William Booth himself came to Amsterdam. According to the Army, thousands of people stood at the station and in the streets. The mocking had slowly turned into respect.

In 1893 the Army counted almost one hundred thousand overnight stays in the whole of the Netherlands.

In 1895 the Army opened a house on the Prinsengracht. It was for women who needed help. There was room for sixty women. In Lunteren, a village in the middle of the country, the Army bought an old farm, Groot Batelaar. There people could recover and start again.

An old violin

Gerrit Govaars stayed with the Army all his life. He wrote songs that the salvation soldiers sang. He became a colonel. He died in 1954, when he was 88 years old.

In 2012 the Army in the Netherlands was 125 years old. The celebration began in the Gerard Doustraat. Bands of the Army set off from there for a relay. A violinist played on Govaars' violin. That same violin had been played there 125 years earlier too, on that first Sunday.

The Salvation Army still helps people in Amsterdam, and all over the Netherlands.

True story?

Yes. That the Salvation Army began on May 8, 1887, in the Gerard Doustraat, and that it opened its doors to people without a home in the cold winter of 1890 to 1891, is in many sources. What happened in the hall that first evening, we only know from Railton's own report. The sixteen people at the bench and most of the other numbers come from the Army itself. The sources tell different things about who exactly led the first meeting. Nobody knows for sure what house number the little hall was at, either.

Talk about it

- At first people laughed at the Army, later they respected it. What changed, do you think?
- The salvation soldiers opened their hall when it was cold. What does your church, school or family have that you could share with others?

From the Bible

for I was hungry and you gave Me food; (Matthew 25:35)

Go and see for yourself

The Gerard Doustraat is in De Pijp in Amsterdam. Today it is a busy street with cafés and restaurants. There is no sign about the start of the Salvation Army. Can you imagine that in 1887 there was a hall full of singing soldiers here?

Heeswijk: a monk with a plow on the tower

Like a silent sheep

It is January 1892. In a newspaper in Brabant, a province in the south of the Netherlands, there is an article called "The patient countryman". A countryman is a farmer.

The writer tells about a farmer who lets everything happen to him. He keeps quiet. He lets himself be "shorn and skinned like the dumb sheep", he writes. That means something like: the farmer lets everything be taken from him and says nothing back.

Then the writer asks a question. Is there nobody, then, who can offer help and rescue?

Who wrote that article? Not a farmer and not a politician. It was a monk from a monastery in Heeswijk. His name was Gerlacus van den Elsen.

Out of his question grew something you can still see everywhere in the Netherlands today: the Rabobank, one of the big Dutch banks. But it was not the work of one man. It was the work of very many farmers together.

A farm boy in the monastery

Gerlacus was born on April 13, 1853, in Gemert, in Brabant. His parents were farmers. He grew up in a long farmhouse.

When he was sixteen, he went to the abbey of Berne in Heeswijk. An abbey is a large monastery. Priests live there together. They are called Norbertines. They pray together and help in the churches nearby.

The abbey of Berne is very old. It was founded way back in 1134. It calls itself the oldest monastery community in the Netherlands that still exists.

Gerlacus became a priest. He was a learned man. In the abbey he taught the Bible and history. In 1886 he started a school, a gymnasium, which is a school for older children who study a lot. It started very small, in one room.

His life could have stayed like that. A teacher in a monastery. But outside the walls of the abbey, things were going badly for the farmers.

Grain from America

Around 1880 a lot of cheap grain came from America to Europe. Because of that, the farmers here got less money for their own grain. They became poorer.

In Brabant it was extra hard. Many farmers had a small piece of poor, sandy land. They could no longer pay a farmhand. Because of that, many farm workers had no work. The government hardly helped.

Did a farmer want to make his farm better? Then he needed money. But getting a loan was hard. A loan is money you borrow and pay back later. There were also usurers. Those are people who lend money and ask for far too much back. Gerlacus wanted to protect his farmers against them.

A union together

In August 1896 the Noordbrabantsche Christelijke Boerenbond (the North Brabant Christian Farmers' Union) was founded in 's-Hertogenbosch. A union is a club of people who stand up for something together. In this union, farmers worked together.

At first Gerlacus kept a bit of distance from the other men who started the union. But a few months later he threw himself into the work. He gave talks in the villages. He helped to start local farmers' clubs.

How did that work in a village? Take Duizel, a village in Brabant. A young schoolteacher lived there, Jozef Wintermans. He heard a talk by Gerlacus. After that, in November 1896, he started a farmers' union in his own village. He became its secretary. He was nineteen years old!

That is how it worked everywhere. A priest gave a talk. Someone in the village took up the work. And the boards were made up almost completely of farmers themselves.

What would you do if you heard that your village could change something together?

A bank of the village

The farmers also started their own banks: farmers' loan banks. A bank like that belonged to its members together. That is called a cooperative. The bank worked in its own village. The members could borrow money there, and they did not have to pay back too much extra.

Those small village banks needed help from a big bank. In 1898 two big banks came, one in Utrecht and one in Eindhoven. Gerlacus helped to found the bank in

Eindhoven. By 1900, 67 village banks already belonged to it.

The farmers also bought and sold together. That way they got better prices. Together they bought new kinds of machines and tools. And when things went wrong, they shared the bad luck together.

Ten years after the start, the Catholic farmers' unions already had more than fifty thousand members.

In 1972 the two big banks joined together. That is how the Rabobank came about.

Four priests

Gerlacus was not the only one in the abbey who helped people. There were three other priests from Berne. Two of them helped shopkeepers and craftsmen to work together. Another helped employers.

Meanwhile they simply stayed monks. They prayed together, preached and took care of the people in the church.

Gerlacus also wrote a weekly paper for the farmers. He was not afraid of a fight. Once he put the names of butter traders in the paper. They gave the farmers too little money for their butter. He told the farmers to stop trading with them. The farmers won.

A church paid for by farmers

In April 1925 Gerlacus died in the abbey. He was seventy-two. He was buried in the garden of the monastery.

Then the farmers did something special. Farming families from all over Brabant collected money together. With it, the abbey church was made bigger. In 1927 the new part was finished.

In the tower came a statue made of sandstone, about four meters high. It is a monk with a rosary. Next to him you see a plow with a cross on it. A plow is a tool a farmer uses to turn over the soil. The plow with the cross was the sign of the farmers' union.

A village was named after him too: Elsendorp. And in about fifty villages in Brabant there is a street with his name. There is even a kind of apple named after him!

In 1892 a monk asked in the newspaper if there was nobody who could help. By 1927 the villages had their own unions and banks. And the farmers themselves sat on the boards.

True story?

Yes. The article from 1892, the farmers' union of 1896, the banks of 1898 and the church that the farmers paid for in

1927 are in several sources. The stories about the butter and about the union in Duizel are each in only one source. The sources do not agree on which day in April 1925 Gerlacus died. Historians also see differently how big his own part was.

Talk about it

- Alone the farmers could do very little, but together they could start a bank. When did you do something together with others that would not have worked alone?
- Jozef Wintermans was only nineteen when he became secretary. Can you mean something for your village or your town while you are young?

From the Bible

Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. (Ecclesiastes 4:9)

Go and see for yourself

The Abdij van Berne (the abbey of Berne) is at Abdijstraat 49 in Heeswijk-Dinther. The statue of Gerlacus is on the outside of the tower, with the plow and the cross next to it. The abbey asks visitors to look at the building only from

the front. In Gemert, near the house where Gerlacus was born, is the Boerenbondsmuseum (the Farmers' Union Museum). There you can see what a village in Brabant looked like around 1900, with farms, a village school and a dairy factory.

Putten: the church where a village fell silent together

A Sunday without bells

It is Sunday morning, October 1, 1944. In Putten, a village on the Veluwe, an area of woods and heath in the middle of the Netherlands, the church bell should be ringing now. But the bells have to stay silent.

Around the village stands a ring of German soldiers. There are more than a thousand of them. Nobody can get in or out anymore. Everyone has to go to the square by the church.

Anyone who is sick or old, or has a baby, may stay at home. But then a white sheet has to hang out of the window.

Why is this happening? To find out, we go back a few hours.

A shot by the bridge

It was war. The German army had occupied the Netherlands. That means the Germans were in charge.

Many people in Putten were believers. There were also a few small groups from the resistance. The resistance was made up of people who fought against the Germans in secret.

On Saturday evening, September 30, resistance fighters shot at a German car near a bridge. A German officer and a resistance fighter were killed. Another officer was wounded.

The German army leaders wanted to punish the whole village. That is why the soldiers came on that Sunday morning.

A church full of people

The women and children had to go into the Oude Kerk, the Old Church. The men first went to the school next to it. There was shooting in the village. Seven people were killed that day, says Stichting Oktober 44 (the October 44 Foundation). Other sources give a higher number.

The church was very crowded. People were crying. A woman who was there said later that a German officer stood in the pulpit. That is the high place where the

minister preaches on Sunday. He said the church would be set on fire. That did not happen.

In the evening at nine o'clock the women and children were allowed to go home. Men over fifty and boys under eighteen could go with them. After that the other men had to spend the night in the church. In their own church.

Psalms on the square

On Monday morning the men had to stand on the square. At one o'clock they were taken to the station.

One of the few men who later came back wrote about it. That morning they had sung a few more psalms. Psalms are songs from the Bible. The men had known them by heart since they were children. According to a story that is told in Putten, it was Psalm 84. Whether that is right, we do not know for sure.

That afternoon the women in the church were told: the village will be destroyed. About one hundred and ten houses were set on fire.

The men went by train to a camp in Amersfoort, a city nearby. Some of the old and sick men were allowed to go home from there. The others went to camps in Germany. There they had to do very hard work, sometimes in ditches full of water. Most of them died there.

A long list

On April 18, 1945, Putten was set free. People celebrated. But where were the men? Nobody knew.

A Dutch captain went to Germany to search. He came back with a long list of names.

On Ascension Day, May 10, 1945, the village came together in the Oude Kerk. The old minister, Reverend Holland, went up into the pulpit. By the light of an oil lamp he read out the names. There were about one hundred and eighty. They were the men who were now known to have died.

Later Reverend Holland said: "I had to be hard on myself to do it."

Try to imagine that. A church full of people listening for the name of their father. What would you feel if you were sitting there?

Of the 659 men who had been taken away, only 48 came back. Putten got a name that stayed: the village of widows and orphans. A widow is a woman whose husband has died. An orphan is a child without a father or mother.

Standing together

How do you go on when almost all the fathers are gone? Nobody can do that alone.

Help came from all over the country and from abroad. People in Stroud, a town in England, collected money for the widows and children. In Putten there is still a meeting center called Stroud. A group of family members of the men still meets there, every two months.

On October 2, 1945, a year after the razzia, there was a memorial service in the church. A razzia is a big, sudden hunt for people to arrest them. The new minister, Reverend Kievit, asked everyone to stand up. He said: "I now ask the congregation to rise from their seats." So they stood there, together, and thought of their dead.

The church had no answer to the question why. But it had a place, a day and people beside you. Many men had no grave nearby. Still, the village had somewhere to be silent together.

A cup with two churches

Many men from Putten died in a camp near the German village of Ladelund. The minister there was called Johannes Meyer. He buried the dead in the churchyard of his village. After the war he wrote letters to the families. Then they knew where their husband or son lay.

Meyer had once been a member of Hitler's party. That is part of the story too. Still, he helped the families from Putten.

In 1950 about 130 people from Putten traveled to Ladelund to see the graves. They did not sleep in Germany. They slept just across the border, in Denmark. That is how close the pain still was.

A year later Meyer came to Putten. The mayor gave him a crystal chalice, a beautiful cup. On it, the church of Putten and the church of Ladelund stand side by side.

Later the two churches started an exchange for young people. Young people from Putten go to Ladelund, and young people from Ladelund come to Putten. In 2015 more than seventy people from Putten ran a relay to Ladelund in five days. That is more than seven hundred kilometers!

A woman looking at the church

In 1949 a monument was put up. It is a statue of a woman with a handkerchief in her hand. She is looking at the Oude Kerk. Everyone calls her the Vrouwtje van Putten, the Little Woman of Putten.

Every year on October 2, hundreds of people come to the statue. Wreaths are laid, by school children too. Around that time, the children in groep 8, the last year of Dutch primary school, learn what happened in their village.

And on Sundays the doors of the Oude Kerk still simply open.

True story?

Yes. The razzia of October 1 and 2, 1944, the men in the church, the reading of the names in 1945 and the ties with Ladelund are in many sources. The officer in the pulpit and the singing of psalms we know because people who were there told about it later. That it was Psalm 84 is a story we do not know for sure. The sources do not completely agree on the exact numbers.

Talk about it

- The minister asked the whole church to stand up together. Why does it help to be sad together?
- People from Putten later went to Germany, but slept in Denmark. Why is forgiving sometimes a long road?

From the Bible

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death (Revelation 21:4)

This verse is written in Latin on the cup that Putten gave to Ladelund.

Go and see for yourself

The Vrouwtje van Putten stands in the Gedenkpark (the Memorial Park) on the Dorpsstraat in Putten. She is

looking at the Oude Kerk. Across the street, at Dorpsstraat 127, is the Gedachtenisruimte (the Remembrance Room) of Stichting Oktober 44. The names of the men who were taken away are there.

Stavenisse: the bell that rang for help

A bell in the storm

It is Sunday, February 1, 1953. In the village of Stavenisse, in Zeeland, the province in the far southwest of the Netherlands, people are sitting in attics and on roofs. There is water all around them. A storm is raging.

Then they hear the church bell ringing.

But it is not calling people to church. A man from the village wrote later that the bell sounded frightened in the storm. Only later did it become clear why. There were people in the tower. They were ringing the bell to call for help.

How did the village end up under water? To find out, we first go back in time.

A village with two churches

Stavenisse lies on the island of Tholen, on the water of the Oosterschelde, a wide arm of the sea. Around the village there are dikes. A dike is a long, high bank of earth that holds back the seawater.

In the village stood an old Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed church) from 1617. There was also a smaller church: the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente, a small, strict Reformed church. It had no minister of its own. On Sundays an elder read out a sermon from an old book. An elder is someone from the church who has been chosen to help lead.

Around 1906 that church was very small. It had fewer than twenty-five members. Then a young man of about 24 was chosen as elder. At first he did not want to. He thought about it for four weeks. Then he said yes.

He kept doing it for 46 years. He read out sermons and taught the children about the faith. Under his leadership the church grew. The little church building became too small, and a new building came. A stone was made with his full name on it. But he did not want that! His name did not belong on a building, he thought. So a stone came with only his initials.

The night of the storm

In the night from Saturday, January 31, to Sunday, February 1, there was a very strong storm. The storm drove the seawater into the Oosterschelde. In Stavenisse the siren went off. That was only an hour before the water came.

First the dike by the harbor broke. Then more dikes. The water streamed into the village. It came up about three and a half meters high. That is about twice as high as a grown-up. Many houses collapsed.

The old church was flooded too. Inside, the water stood more than three meters high.

That night about one hundred and fifty people in Stavenisse died. From the small Oud Gereformeerde Gemeente there were 88, according to the church itself. The old elder, who had read out the sermons for 46 years, also died that night.

It is hard to read that. A whole village lost fathers, mothers, children, neighbors and friends in one night.

A Bible against a sack of grain

In one house, people were sitting together. A man picked up the Bible and read a chapter out loud, Isaiah 2. That is

in the book by A.J. Smits. He lived in Stavenisse himself and wrote a book about the disaster in 1956.

Smits also tells about a walk along the dike, later on. Among the broken things stood an old Bible, leaning against a sack of grain.

The people of Stavenisse reached for the words they knew: words from the Bible.

What would you do if you were sitting in the attic with your family and had to wait?

Fishermen come to help

On Monday, February 2, the rescuers came. Fishermen and rowers from other villages came with their boats. They came from Tholen, from Yerseke and from even farther away. They sailed into the village to pick people up.

Planes flew over. They dropped food and drinking water. The ship Le bonne espoir took about a hundred people to Dordrecht. The ship Crescendo took about four hundred.

On Wednesday everyone had to leave. Only a group of twenty people was allowed to stay, to do the work that had to be done in the village. Even twelve cows and fourteen pigs went along on a boat to Bergen op Zoom. Then Stavenisse was empty.

Why?

Many people in Zeeland wondered: was this a punishment from God? Others said: the dikes were too low and badly looked after. An engineer had already warned about that in the 1930s.

Smits saw the disaster as a judgment from God. But he also saw people who had been saved in a wonderful way. Why one person died and another did not, no human being could say, he believed. He wrote that God's judgments are "unsearchable". That means: we humans cannot understand them.

Many people in Zeeland carried their grief in silence. A school worksheet about the disaster puts it like this: "Do not complain but carry it, and pray for help."

The small church went on. Another elder started preaching himself from then on. Later he became a minister.

Wooden houses from Norway

The village had to be built up again. But where were the people supposed to live?

Help came from far away. Norway gave 326 wooden houses to the Netherlands. They came as kits. Some of them came to Stavenisse. They were made for harsh winters, with glass wool in the walls and double windows.

On August 13, 1954, King Haakon of Norway came to have a look, together with Queen Juliana of the Netherlands. The new street was named after him: the Koning Haakonstraat (King Haakon Street).

For families who had lost everything, a house like that was a new beginning. And people still live in them today.

True story?

Yes. The dike breaks in the night from January 31 to February 1, 1953, the roughly one hundred and fifty dead in Stavenisse, the rescue by boat and the Norwegian houses are in many sources. The ringing of the bell, the man with the Bible and the Bible against the sack of grain we only know from the book by Smits, who lived in the village himself. The story of the old elder and the number 88 come from books by the church itself. How many people died exactly is a little different from source to source.

Talk about it

- Fishermen from other villages came with their boats to help. Who comes to help you when things are hard?
- The elder did not want his name on the church. Why do you think he did not want that?

From the Bible

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

Go and see for yourself

In the old town hall of Stavenisse, at Voorstraat 42, you now find the Watersnoodhuis (the Flood House). The stories about the disaster are kept there. On the walls of the Hervormde Kerk you can still see how high the salty water came. On the Koning Haakonstraat stand the Norwegian wooden houses. People live there, so look from the street.

The Mozes en Aäronkerk: a hundred mattresses between the pillars

Not eating

It is November 1975. In a big church on the Waterlooplein in Amsterdam, there are mattresses on the floor. Between the tall pillars lie about a hundred men. They come from Morocco.

They are not eating. They are on a hunger strike. That means they refuse to eat, to show how important something is to them. They are waiting for an answer from the government in Den Haag (The Hague).

Why are these men lying in a church? To find out, we first have to go a long way back in time.

A house with Moses on the front

In 1641 Franciscans bought a house in Amsterdam. Franciscans are monks. They live simply and work among the people. The house was called Moyses. It had a stone in its front wall with Moses on it.

In those days Catholics in Amsterdam were not allowed to build a normal church. So they met in a schuilkerk, a hidden church. A hidden church is a church tucked away behind the front of an ordinary house. Everyone knew it was there. But officially, nobody saw it.

Later the brothers bought the house next door. It was called Aäron, which is Dutch for Aaron. That is how the church got its name: the Mozes en Aäronkerk, the Moses and Aaron Church.

Between 1837 and 1841 a big new church was built, over the top of the old hidden church. From the outside it looks like a temple, with pillars and statues. Inside there are tall pillars. The old altars from the hidden church moved along with it. They are still there.

A church in a poor neighborhood

The church stood in a neighborhood where many poor people lived. Many of them were Jewish. From 1866 to 1895 a Franciscan worked here. He helped poor people,

whatever their faith was. In 1891 the Jewish neighborhood held a special celebration in his honor, a magazine about Amsterdam says.

From 1969 the church became a place for many new things. Next to the church a new building went up: the Mozeshuis (the Moses House). There was a tea room, there were courses and there was help for people. On the church's website it is called an "action church". Artists and action groups met there. An action group is a group of people who want to change something together.

No papers

In 1975 the government came up with a new rule. Foreign workers who lived here without a permit could still get one. A permit is a paper that says you are allowed to live and work here. About fifteen thousand people could qualify for it.

But you did have to prove a few things. You had to have a valid passport. And you had to show that you had lived and worked here for at least a year, without a break.

For many Moroccan men, that was impossible. Some could not get a new passport. And some bosses did not want to sign that the men worked for them. They were afraid they would then still have to pay money to the government.

So these men could not prove who they were and what they did. Even though they had lived and worked here for years. How would you feel if nobody would say that you are really here?

The door opens

The men found help from a new club of Moroccan workers, the KMAN. Dutch people helped as well.

On November 7, 1975, the hunger strike began. It took place in churches in Amsterdam, Utrecht and Den Haag. In all, 182 men took part. The biggest group, about a hundred men, lay in the Mozes en Aäronkerk.

Who exactly opened the door of the church, we do not know. Not a single source gives a name. But the door opened.

And then all kinds of things happened in the church. Volunteers brought mattresses and blankets. They arranged medical help. In the evenings films were shown. Banners were hung up. People kept watch.

Moroccan workers and Dutch people worked together there. Trade unions, church groups and political parties supported the protest. Groups that at first had little to do with each other started working together. The newspapers called the men the “church Moroccans”.

The men told each other that they had started together. They wanted to keep going together until the end, too. Someone who knew them told a museum that later.

Three years of patience

After a little more than a week, a staatssecretaris spoke with the men and their helpers. A staatssecretaris is a junior minister, someone who helps a minister run the country. He promised that the rule would be made less strict. Then the hunger strike stopped.

But the problem was not solved yet. For three months the church remained the place where the men met. After that, the matter was left alone for two years. Then came petitions and marches in many cities.

Not everyone thought the protest was good. The government wanted fewer people without papers in the country. Many Dutch people wanted that too. They asked: why should these 182 men in particular be allowed to stay? People still think differently about that today.

In the summer of 1978 the men went on hunger strike again. This time in another church in Amsterdam: De Duif (The Dove). On October 17, 1978, the decision came. The men got a permit. They could stay. According to most sources, that was true for all 182. According to another

source it was 120, because some had already gone back to Morocco.

A table for everyone

After 1980 no more church services were held in the church. The building became a hall for meetings and concerts. In 2013 the money ran out.

Then the church got a new beginning. The bishop handed it over to the Community of Sant'Egidio. That is a Catholic group that works for poor people and for peace. In 2014 a Mass was held there again, for the first time in 34 years.

Sant'Egidio started a restaurant there for homeless people. At Christmas, hundreds of guests sit down at the table, including people who live on the street. And somewhere in that space, where people pray now, the mattresses lay in 1975.

True story?

Yes. The hidden church from 1641, the new church from 1841 and the hunger strike from November 7, 1975, are in many sources. How many strikers lay in this church is different from source to source: most say a hundred, some say all 182. The sources also do not agree on the number of men who were allowed to stay in 1978. What the men said to each other, we know from the memory of one storyteller.

Talk about it

- The men had no papers to prove who they were. How important is it that someone says: you belong here?
- Nobody remembers who opened the door of the church. Why does what those people did still matter?

From the Bible

you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:34)

Go and see for yourself

The Mozes en Aäronkerk is on the Waterlooplein in Amsterdam. On some afternoons the church is open to visitors. Inside you can see the tall pillars and the old altars from the hidden church. At the back, on the Jodenbreestraat, you can still see the old little statues of Moses and Aaron.

Bethel: the church service that lasted 96 days

A candle that keeps burning

It is Friday, October 26, 2018. In Den Haag (The Hague) there is a community center with a chapel in it. It is called Bethel. On the table at the front, a candle is lit.

Then a church service begins. That is nothing special yet. But this service does not stop. Not after an hour, not at night, not on Sunday and not on Monday. Not at Christmas either.

The candle will keep burning for more than three months. Why would a church do something like that?

A family that had to leave

It started with a family from Armenia. That is a country between Europe and Asia. A father, a mother and three children came to the Netherlands in 2010. The father had been active in politics in Armenia. He said his life was in danger there.

The family applied for asylum. That means you ask if you can stay in another country, because you are not safe in your own country. For years, judges and officials made decisions about their case. In the end the answer was: no. The family had to go back.

By 2018 they had already lived in the Netherlands for nine years. The children were 21, 19 and 15 years old. They had grown up here.

First the family stayed in a church in Katwijk, a town on the coast, for four weeks. Then something important became clear. The police are allowed to go into a church. But the police are not allowed to interrupt a church service. That is what the law says.

So a church that wanted to protect the family had to do one thing. The service could never stop.

A schedule full of ministers

In Katwijk it did not work out. In Den Haag it could. So the family moved to Bethel, and the service began.

But how do you do that, a service day and night? There always had to be someone leading. That is often a minister or a pastor.

The churches in Den Haag made a big schedule. Fourteen people took care of the practical things. Were there only a few visitors? Then someone was phoned and asked to come.

A minister from Den Haag said: "It is impossible, God knows, to do it alone, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." A woman from his church often came by. She started a conversation group for refugees. Why did she do that? She said: "It is simply our duty."

After four weeks, 350 different leaders had already stood up in Bethel. Two Easter candles, big church candles, had already burned all the way down.

Churches from all over the country

Soon people came from many different churches. Protestants, Baptists, Pentecostals and Catholics. Sometimes a minister handed the service over to someone from a very different church. They worshiped differently,

and thought differently about many things. Still, together they kept the service going.

A Catholic parish from Den Haag gave an icon. An icon is a painted image that people use when they pray. It was called "Mary of our sea". It was a reminder of the refugees who drown at sea.

By the end, almost a thousand leaders had taken a turn, the organizers counted. They came from all over the Netherlands, and even from outside the Netherlands. Newspapers and broadcasters in more than thirty countries told the story.

Imagine your church asks: will you spend a night in that chapel? What would you say?

Staying inside

For the family, Bethel was a safe place. But it was also a place they could not leave. Anyone who went outside could be arrested. The youngest could not go to school. So the children had lessons in the building. Visitors brought all kinds of things.

After four weeks the oldest daughter told the NOS, the Dutch national news: "When I realize that we have been here for four weeks already, it actually shocks me."

Not everyone agreed

Not everyone thought the church asylum was a good idea. Church asylum means a church gives someone a safe place. A politician in Den Haag said that a church may never block decisions made by the government. Some Christians found it hard too. A church service to get something done in politics, is that still really praying? they asked.

The church said it was simply keeping the law. One of the leaders said: "We are not creating a free state, but we are looking for a way to treat each other humanely." Humanely means in a human, kind way.

Some people who had doubts at first came to have a look. A few changed their minds. So did the minister of the church in Katwijk. He came to lead in Bethel himself. Others kept their opinion.

On December 20 the staatssecretaris said no. That is the person in the government who was in charge of matters like this. The family was not allowed to stay. The church decided to keep going. On Christmas night and on New Year's Eve the service went on too. The nights were especially hard, the church said later. But the schedule held.

A new rule

In the night of January 29, 2019, the political parties in the government made an agreement. Hundreds of children who had lived in the Netherlands for a long time got a new chance to stay. Other things came with it. For children who came later, this arrangement disappeared. And the Netherlands would take in fewer refugees from camps. Some people were not happy about that.

On January 30 the chapel filled up for the last service. The oldest daughter said it felt unreal to be able to go outside again. The church had become a home for them. Then the candle was put out. It had burned for more than 2,300 hours. A sign went up on the door: the church is closed.

In March 2019 the family got a permit to stay. Under the new rule, 569 children got a permit. But 439 children were turned down.

Bethel is still a community center. There is neighborhood coffee, a meal and music on Sunday. And in the chapel, believers still come together for their services.

True story?

Yes. That the service in Bethel went on from October 26, 2018, to January 30, 2019, is in many newspapers and reports. How many leaders came, we know from counts by

the church itself, and those are different at different moments. That the father was in danger in Armenia, we know because he said so himself. Whether the church did the right thing here, Christians and politicians still think differently about that.

Talk about it

- A minister said: it is impossible to do this alone. What can you not do alone, but can do together?
- Some people thought the church asylum was good, others did not. Why do you think they thought so differently about it?

From the Bible

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. (Hebrews 13:2)

Go and see for yourself

Bethel is at Thomas Schwenckestraat 28-30 in Den Haag. It is a community and church house where you can walk in for a cup of coffee, a meal or a concert. Inside is the chapel where the service went on for 96 days. Be careful: the Bethelkerk in Scheveningen is a different church.