DUTCH CHURCH HISTORY

VOLUME 3

What Do These Stones Mean?

Eight places you can visit, from the restored dioceses to the new churches

When your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?'

Joshua 4:6

WIM KAMPHORST

DUTCH CHURCH HISTORY · VOLUME 3

What Do These Stones Mean?

Eight places you can visit,
from the restored dioceses to the new churches

WIM KAMPHORST

Contents

Introduction: stones of yesterday **2**

Utrecht: the cathedral that cost a cabinet **5**

Amsterdam: the door of the consistory room **23**

Assen: the church where a synod ruled on a talking serpent **40**

Echt: five o'clock in the afternoon on the Peijerstraat **56**

Noordwijkerhout: the hall where celibacy was put to a vote **75**

Biddinghuizen: five hundred campers and a field in the polder **94**

Utrecht: fifty-one votes in the Jacobikerk **113**

Amsterdam-Zuidoost: five church halls behind one front door **132**

Afterword **152**

What Do These Stones Mean?. Dutch church history in places you can visit, volume 3

© 2026 Wim Kamphorst
Stichting (F)Luister Nederland

Translated from the Dutch edition. Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or made public without prior written permission from the author.

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: stones of yesterday

The first volume of this series ended in Brielle in 1572. The second volume ended in Ulrum in 1834, in an inn where a congregation signed its name under a deed. This third volume picks up where that one stopped and comes all the way to today.

That brings the stones closer. You may know some of the places in this book from the news, or from the stories of your parents and grandparents. There are people still alive who sat in the hall themselves or stood in the field.

A history you can visit

As in the earlier volumes, each chapter begins at a place you can still visit today. A cathedral in Utrecht. A church in Assen. A street in Echt. A conference center in the bulb-growing region. An event ground in the polder. A building in Amsterdam-Zuidoost with five church halls behind one front door.

Then we go back to the moment that happened there, and to the people who were present.

This volume runs from 1853 to now. From the year in which the Catholic Church in the Netherlands received bishops again, to the

churches of people who came here from Ghana, Suriname and many other countries.

Facts first

You would think the sources get better the closer an event lies to our time. Sometimes that is true. But even about the last hundred and fifty years, stories go around that are more beautiful than what really happened. A door that, according to the newspapers, was sawn open was in reality pried open. Figures for visitors and members often come from the organization itself.

For each chapter I have looked into what is certain, what we know only from tradition or from someone's own words, and what is uncertain. I say so in the text. After each chapter there is a short overview, followed by the sources.

Belonging to everyone

In these centuries churches split apart and came together again. Catholics got their bishops back and Protestants protested. The Gereformeerden broke away from the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church), and a little over a hundred years later their children and grandchildren came together in one Protestantse Kerk (the Protestant Church in the Netherlands). New churches appeared, with new songs, in new neighborhoods.

With events this close to us, people often still feel tied to one side. I do not take sides. I try to show honestly what happened and what it meant for the people who lived through it.

A few people about whom I already wrote a whole chapter in other books appear here only briefly. About people who are still alive, I hold back.

How you can read this book

The chapters are in order of time. You can read the book from front to back, but you can also take it with you. After each chapter, under **Go and see for yourself**, you will find where the place is and what you can see there. Some buildings in this volume are still in use, others stand empty or are for sale. I do not include opening hours, because they change. For those, check the website of the place itself.

When your children ask in time to come, saying, "What do these stones mean to you?" (Joshua 4:6)

Utrecht: the cathedral that cost a cabinet

On April 20, 1853, a secretary in Utrecht took possession of a chair that was not his. His name was J.Ph. Deppen. The man he did it for, the new archbishop, was not there himself. Joannes Zwijsen had himself represented, by proxy, in a city that a few weeks earlier had stirred up the protest against his appointment. Five days before, the king in Amsterdam had received a committee with more than fifty-one thousand signatures.

That is how the office of bishop began again in Utrecht, after more than two centuries. No procession, no speech, no man in white on the steps. Anyone who knows what was happening in the country in those weeks understands why.

On the Lange Nieuwstraat, two buildings stand side by side that belong together. At number 38 is Museum Catharijneconvent, in an old monastery. At number 36 stands a church with a tower fifty-three meters high and an ornate gable facing the street: the Sint-Catharinakathedraal, the Cathedral of Saint Catherine. Inside you see white walls and high Gothic arches. In the choir stands the cathedra, the bishop's chair. The word cathedral comes from it: a cathedral is the church where the bishop has his seat. Along the

walls hang the stations of a Way of the Cross, fourteen pictures of the road of suffering of Jesus. They already hung here in the nineteenth century, disappeared, and came back in 2003.

Since 1853 this has been the main church of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Utrecht. That year looks innocent. It was one of the most turbulent years in the Dutch church history of the nineteenth century. More than fifty-one thousand Protestants signed a protest to the king in Amsterdam alone. A cabinet fell. And the Catholics of the Netherlands received bishops in their own country again for the first time since around 1600.

If you stand on the pavement in front of this church, you see a building. But if you know the story, you see a place where in 1853 two groups of Christians could not understand each other.

A church that changed its use five times

To understand what happened in 1853, you need to know what these walls had already been through. In 1468 the Carmelites, a monastic order that lived on gifts, began building a monastery with a church here. They built slowly, because the money came in slowly. In 1529 they had to hand over the half-finished church to the Knights of Saint John, an order of knights that cared for the sick and for travelers. Emperor Charles V wanted to use the old land of the Knights for his castle Vredenburg.

The Knights of Saint John had the church completed to a design by Rombout Keldermans. In 1560 it was finished. It was dedicated to Catherine of Alexandria, an early Christian martyr.

Twenty years later, in 1580, Catholic worship was banned in Utrecht, and the Knights of Saint John left. From 1636 Protestants used the church. They removed the decorations, whitewashed

the walls and took out the marble choir screen. For a time it also housed an anatomy theater, and iron was stored there.

After the French period the church became part of a barracks. From 1815 Catholic soldiers worshiped there. In 1836 part of the building collapsed during a storm. In 1840 King Willem II gave the church to the Catholics of Utrecht, with money for repairs.

That was the church that became a cathedral in 1853: a building that began Catholic, became Protestant, served as a barracks and came back Catholic.

A church in the waiting room

In the Republic, the Dutch state of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Reformed church was the privileged church. The Catholic faith was heavily restricted, and public Catholic services were forbidden. Catholics met in schuilkerken, hidden churches, halls that looked from the outside like an ordinary house or warehouse. From 1592 Rome regarded the north of the Netherlands as a mission territory. There were no dioceses anymore. The Catholics were governed by a representative of the pope, an apostolic vicar.

After 1795 Catholics officially received freedom of religion. They could replace their hidden churches with real churches. Around 1830 about thirty-eight percent of the Dutch were Catholic, writes the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (Catholic Documentation Center) in Nijmegen. A large group. But without bishops of their own, it still felt like a church in the waiting room.

So from 1847 Catholics wrote letters to Rome. First lay people, then deans and priests, then a committee from Amsterdam, Catholic members of parliament and finally the bishops themselves. They all asked the same thing: give us an ordinary church structure again, with dioceses and bishops. That is how the Jesuit Albers

described it in 1903, in a Catholic historian's look back at what his church had gone through.

What that meant for an ordinary Catholic farmer in Brabant or a shopkeeper in Utrecht, I cannot pull from documents. What you do know is that they had waited for more than two centuries.

The constitution of 1848 and a letter from Rome

The breakthrough came through politics. In 1848 the Netherlands received a new constitution, written under the leadership of the liberal statesman Johan Rudolf Thorbecke. Church and state were fully separated. Every church could organize itself as it wished.

Thorbecke was born in Zwolle in 1798. He was a professor in Leiden, Lutheran by upbringing, but he did not go to church. The Parlementair Documentatiecentrum (Parliamentary Documentation Center) calls him the greatest Dutch statesman of the nineteenth century. From 1849 he led the cabinet.

On December 9, 1851, the pope's representative in The Hague told Minister Van Sonsbeeck that Rome wanted to bring back the bishops. In the spring of 1852 the minister replied that the pope was free to organize his church. He only asked to hear in good time what Rome decided. In September 1852 the pope made his decision.

On January 1, 1853, Zwijsen received a letter from Rome. That day he wrote to Van Vree, one of the other vicars: "Today I received a letter from Rome." The cardinals had decided favorably on the new structure. That is how Albers gives it in 1903, drawing on the letters themselves. On February 28 the objection came up that he had to his appointment: besides Utrecht, he also had to keep governing 's-Hertogenbosch. He gave in. He remained convinced, he wrote, that God wanted it this way, and he left the rest to Him.

A quiet man, who wanted to keep it quiet. The news itself did not stay quiet.

March fourth, 1853

The pope's letter is dated March 4, 1853. Pius IX announced that the Netherlands would once again be an ordinary church province. Utrecht became an archdiocese again, as it had already been in 1559. Under it came four dioceses: Haarlem, 's-Hertogenbosch, Breda and Roermond. The papal letter begins with the words Ex qua die, and is called by that name.

The letter contained a sentence that hit Protestants hard. The pope wrote about the damage done by "the Calvinist heresy," as the historian Slijkerman quotes it. A heresy is a teaching the church condemns as error. Protestants heard in that word the faith for which their ancestors had suffered.

In Rome the pope himself turned out to be uneasy about the tone. Albers writes that he had objections to a few words. Cardinal Barnabò had the copies called back and Lurasco hurried to stop the dispatch, but Count Van Liedekerke had already sent one on its way. A corrected version reached the internuncio in The Hague in early April. On March 14 the pope told the Dutch envoy Van Liedekerke that his government should not now try to limit the restoration. That is how it stands in the jubilee book of 1953, *In vrijheid herboren* (Reborn in Freedom).

Joannes Zwijsen was appointed Archbishop of Utrecht.

The miller's son from Kerkdriel

Joannes Zwijsen was born on August 28, 1794, in Kerkdriel, in the Bommelerwaard, a river region in the middle of the country. His father was a miller. The house on the Molenstraat no longer exists.

In 1817 he became a priest. He was a chaplain in Schijndel and then parish priest in Tilburg.

In Tilburg he got to know Crown Prince Willem, the later King Willem II. According to some historians, that connection later helped his appointment. In his own time rumors also went around about that connection. There is no evidence for them, and I will leave it at that.

What he built up in Tilburg is certain, though. In 1832 he founded the Sisters of Charity, to give girls an education. In 1844 the fraters followed, a brotherhood that taught poor boys and took in orphans. The first frater, Petrus van de Ven, gave his entire fortune to the new work. Zwijsen chose the name fraters in honor of the Brethren of the Common Life, the movement of Geert Grote from the fourteenth century.

Behind those names stand people: a parish priest who wanted to give girls an education, and a frater who gave away his entire fortune for poor boys and orphans. James wrote: *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble* (James 1:27).

In 1842 he became a bishop. The biographical notice in De Nieuwe Belgische Illustratie of 1903 gives his consecration in Tilburg on April 17, and his motto: *Mansuete et fortiter*, gentle and strong. In 1853 Rome appointed him archbishop. Besides Utrecht, he was also given the administration of 's-Hertogenbosch.

According to the account by Albers, Zwijsen did not want this at all. Rome rejected his objections. A biographical sketch in the same magazine described him with the words: "To an iron will he joined a great calm." The same sketch calls him a man of childlike piety and apostolic wisdom, careful in his plans and patient in carrying them through.

A saying that clings to him in tradition I leave standing here with a reservation. He is said to have told the pope that in the Netherlands you can accomplish a great deal, if you do it quietly. I have no source from his own time for that. It does fit the man who had himself represented on April 20.

Wait for our deeds

For Protestants, Utrecht was no ordinary city. In 1579 the Union of Utrecht had been concluded here, the alliance from which the Republic grew. The city had a strong, strict Calvinist tradition, the magazine Onze Eeuw wrote in 1903. Partly for that reason, Protestants objected to Utrecht of all places becoming the seat of a Catholic archbishop.

The first draft for the Utrecht protest was written by the young professor De Geer. The final adres came from Montijn, Van Ittersum and Kemink, with the support of Mulder and Vreede. On March 13, 1853, nine days after the date of the letter, the Hervormde (Dutch Reformed) church council sent it to the king. An adres was a formal petition with signatures. The church council asked the king not to allow anyone to take the title of bishop. The document was passed around to church councils throughout the country. In the Provinciale Utrechtsche Courant of March 27, Vreede wrote the warning that sums up the mood of those days: “Wait for our deeds.”

Others followed. In Arnhem the minister Anthony Brummelkamp wrote a petition for the church councils of Arnhem and Velp. He asked the king not to recognize the bishops, to break off diplomatic ties with Rome and to restrict the freedom of Catholics. According to his biographer Melis te Velde, he went even further: in his eyes, anyone who accepted the restoration also approved of the murder of William of Orange. Brummelkamp himself elsewhere called Rome the snake at the bosom of society.

In pamphlets and newspapers there was talk of a return of the Inquisition, the church court that had persecuted Protestants in the sixteenth century. Some Protestants even thought that Thorbecke had encouraged the pope.

Not everyone in the church went along. The minister Van Koetsveld asked a question that stuck: is it Christian to hate people, and fellow citizens at that? It is a small voice in a loud time.

How do you look at this, as a Protestant or a Catholic of today? I notice that I can understand both. The fear of the Protestants had roots: their ancestors had been persecuted, and the pope called their faith a heresy. But what they asked for was that their Catholic neighbors would be less free than they were themselves.

Jesus gave a simple measure: *Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them* (Matthew 7:12). The Protestants of 1853 knew the stories about ancestors who were persecuted for their faith. That memory makes their fear understandable, and their request to the king painful to read.

Fifty thousand signatures on the Dam

In Utrecht, the professor Gerrit Mulder played a prominent role in the movement. The historian Slijkerman calls the city that spring "a reactionary stronghold." On the advice of Minister Van Zuylen, the king did not receive the Utrecht petition.

The great moment came in Amsterdam. There about thirty-eight thousand men and fourteen thousand women had signed a petition, together more than fifty-one thousand people. The king was in the city on April 11 for his yearly visit. On April 15, 1853, Willem III received a committee in the palace on the Dam, the main square of Amsterdam, with Prince Hendrik at his side. The minister and poet

Bernard ter Haar spoke for them, on behalf of what Onze Eeuw calls a general Protestant committee.

Ter Haar spoke with indignation. He called the restoration "an insult to our Protestant confession of faith," and also to history, to the forefathers and to the House of Orange. Outside, on the Dam, a large crowd was waiting to hear what the king would say.

The cabinet had given the king an answer to read. It said a friendly but clear no: the constitution gave every church freedom. The king spoke other words. He praised the childlike love of his people, which had supported him in difficult times, and he let it be known that he sympathized with the Protestants. His hands were tied by the constitution, he said. He promised nothing concrete. According to the reports, he ended with the sentence that this day had tied the bond between the House of Orange and the Netherlands even tighter.

The historian Hooykaas wrote in 1994 that the official text in the newspaper of the next day had been toned down. According to eyewitnesses, the king spoke out more fiercely. Willem III had long disliked Thorbecke. Hooykaas thinks the king used the movement to get rid of Thorbecke and his ministers. It remains a historian's interpretation, although he supports it with accounts by people who were there.

A sharp remark by Thorbecke himself played a part. He had earlier spoken of the faint pulse of the artery that is Amsterdam. The king held that against him, according to Onze Eeuw. Later Thorbecke said that his ministry had underestimated the strength of the Protestant revival.

Thorbecke steps down

The cabinet was already under pressure in those weeks. The government had only received an official message from Rome on March 24, three weeks after the news had become public. On April 13 the conservative member of parliament Van Doorn asked the ministers in the Tweede Kamer (the lower house of parliament) whether they had done enough to learn in time what the pope was planning. Thorbecke's opponents felt he had let the restoration happen too easily. Conservatives who were not very religious also joined the protest, because they found his ideas too progressive.

For Thorbecke the king's answer was unacceptable. Under the constitution of 1848, the ministers are responsible for what the king says. A king who publicly distances himself from his own cabinet breaks that rule.

On April 16 the ministers wrote the king a letter, drafted by Thorbecke. In it they defended the freedom the constitution gave the churches. The king had to adopt the cabinet's answer, or they proposed changing the ministry, because there was no agreement with the Crown. The king refused to make the statement and consulted his adviser Van Reenen. Around April 17 and 18 the ministers offered their resignation. In the same days the Tweede Kamer asked the government, by a large majority, to protest to the pope. On April 19 a new cabinet took office under Floris van Hall, with three former members of the previous one.

The new government dissolved parliament. In the elections of May 1853 the liberals suffered a heavy defeat. The conservatives went from nine to twenty-seven seats.

And then a quiet twist. Thorbecke, the man many Protestants suspected of a secret pact with Rome, was elected in Maastricht in 1853.

A Catholic district. He sat in parliament for it until 1856. In 1862 he became a minister again.

No triumph

What did the Catholics themselves do in those weeks? The sources I found say little about it. I find that a pity, because they were the people it was all about, and their voice is hardly heard in the accounts of 1853. Part of the Catholics of Amsterdam did not feel safe in those days and left the city for a while, write Rogier and De Rooy in 1953.

The Jesuit Albers described in 1903 how it was supposed to have gone. Joy and gratitude glowed on every face, he writes, and many wept with thanks. There was no triumph. They did not see the restoration as a victory over enemies. They thanked God, who had answered prayers they had asked for a long time.

A petition of thanks went to Rome. On April 6, J.W. Cramer, the chairman of the committee, reported to Lurasco in Rome that it was ready. Zwijsen and the Bishop of Haarlem approved it on May 20. On July 13, 1853, it was handed over and read aloud to Pius IX in Rome. The pope expressed his great satisfaction and blessed all the signers, especially Cramer. A petition of thanks also went to King Willem III. A Catholic society had a medal struck, with the restoration shown on the back as a favor from God.

All of this comes from one Catholic source, written fifty years later. I have not found it in an independent source. It does fit what happened afterward.

If it went this way, people who had waited for more than two centuries did not celebrate their restoration as a victory over others. Paul wrote: *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men* (Romans 12:18).

A law and a quiet archbishop

The Van Hall cabinet did not reverse the restoration. The constitution of 1848 remained unchanged. A Law on Church Bodies was passed, which confirmed the separation of church and state while keeping the churches under some supervision. The Parlementair Documentatiecentrum calls the law largely without consequence. In September 1853 the movement faded away.

After April 20 things moved fast. On April 22 the internuncio installed Van Vree in Haarlem. In Breda, 's-Hertogenbosch and Roermond the ceremonies followed on April 25 through 27. On May 2 the bishops informed the government that they had accepted their office, and on May 15 Zwijsen consecrated Van Vree as bishop in the seminary chapel at Haaren.

Zwijsen went to work. In 1857 he opened a seminary to train priests in his archdiocese. In 1858 he established the chapters, the councils of priests around the bishop. In 1864 he held the first provincial council, a meeting of all the Dutch bishops together. A major restoration began at the church on the Lange Nieuwstraat. From 1859 the interior received color: stained glass windows, painted walls and new furniture from the workshop of Friedrich Wilhelm Mengelberg.

In September 1853 Zwijsen himself still traveled through Utrecht, reportedly incognito, in a suit like the Dutch priests wore. It is a small picture, and I find it telling: the archbishop of the city came in unnoticed. The same month the king visited Utrecht. Mulder said then that Orange is watching and will go on watching.

In 1868 Zwijsen stepped down as Archbishop of Utrecht. He remained Bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch. On October 16, 1877, he died in his home there, eighty-three years old. The funeral was on October 19 in the Sint-Jan. He was buried in Orthen, close to the grave

of two of his Sisters of Charity. In 1882 a chapel was built over his grave.

Two archbishops in one city

The story has another side. In 1853 Utrecht already had an archbishop. In 1723 Catholics in Utrecht had broken away from Rome. They were later called Old Catholics. Their teaching is much like the Roman Catholic teaching, but they do not recognize the authority of the pope. They kept their own Archbishop of Utrecht. Their cathedral, the Gertrudiskathedraal, stands today on the Willemsplantsoen and was built from 1912 to 1914.

So since 1853 Utrecht has had two Catholic archbishops, each with his own cathedral in the same city.

The white walls

In the years 1955 to 1970 the church on the Lange Nieuwstraat removed most of the nineteenth-century decoration again. A drawing by the painter Pieter Saenredam from 1636 served as the model. That drawing shows the church as the Protestants had made it: white and empty. The walls were whitewashed again.

I find that one of the strangest and most beautiful things about this place. The main church of the Roman Catholic archdiocese looks inside the way the Protestants left it in the seventeenth century. Later some pieces came back: the bishop's chair, the choir screen, the benches for the priests, Mengelberg's Way of the Cross and, in 2004, a Gothic sacrament tower.

It almost came to an end. In 2018 the parish board wanted to close the cathedral, because there was no money. On March 2, 2019, it was announced that Archbishop Eijk had reversed that decision. At the

end of 2024 the archbishop opened the Holy Year of the Catholic Church here, and at the end of 2025 it was closed here.

If you come in now, you walk across the place where in 1853 a country was thrown into turmoil. The walls are white. In the choir stands the chair that a secretary took possession of in April 1853, on behalf of an absent man.

Go there yourself

The Sint-Catharinakathedraal stands at Lange Nieuwstraat 36 in the city center of Utrecht, about a fifteen-minute walk from Utrecht Centraal station. You recognize the church by its tower and by the gable on the street, a copy of the gable from 1550. Inside you see the white medieval space, the cathedra, the choir screen, Mengelberg's Stations of the Cross and the Gothic sacrament tower. The church is in use for services. For the times when you can go inside, check the website of the Archdiocese of Utrecht or of Kerken Kijken.

Right next door, at number 38, is Museum Catharijneconvent, in the former monastery of the Carmelites and the later hospital of the Knights of Saint John. Among other things the museum has medieval art, a treasury with gold and silver work, and paintings by Rembrandt and Jan Steen. For opening hours, check the website of Museum Catharijneconvent.

If you want to see the other side of the story, walk to the Willemsplantsoen by the canal that rings the old city. There stands the Gertrudiskathedraal, the church of the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the announcement of the restoration of the episcopal hierarchy in March 1853 (the letter is

dated March 4), with Utrecht as archdiocese and four dioceses under it; the appointment of Joannes Zwijsen; his birth on August 28, 1794, and his death on October 16, 1877; the founding of the Sisters of Charity (1832) and the fraters (1844); the petition of the Hervormde church council of Utrecht on March 13, 1853; the Amsterdam petition with more than 51,000 signatures and the audience on April 15 with Ter Haar as spokesman; the divergent answer of Willem III and the fall of the Thorbecke cabinet around April 18 and 19; the election defeat of the liberals; Thorbecke's election in Maastricht; the taking of possession of the archiepiscopal seat on April 20 and the installations after it; the Catharinakerk as cathedral since 1853; the restoration of 1955 to 1970 based on Saenredam; the reversed closure decision of 2019.

From letters and texts of contemporaries, via later work: Zwijsen's letters of January 1 and February 28, 1853 and his acceptance in trust in God (Albers, 1903, who gives the letters); the warning "Wait for our deeds" (Vreede, March 27, 1853, quoted by Rogier and De Rooy); the words of Ter Haar about an insult to the Protestant confession of faith; the king's closing sentence (Onze Eeuw, 1903); Van Koetsveld's question whether hating is Christian (Rogier and De Rooy). I have read these texts in those later books and accounts, not in the original newspapers.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: that Zwijsen wanted to stay in Brabant and objected to two dioceses; the restrained reaction of the Catholics, the petition of thanks to the pope and the medal (only from a Catholic source from 1903); the role of Gerrit Mulder and the king's refusal to receive the Utrecht petition (one scholarly source); that Zwijsen walked around Utrecht unnoticed in September 1853 (Rogier and De Rooy, with "reportedly").

Unconfirmed: the rumors about the friendship between Zwijsen and Willem II; the saying that you can accomplish a great deal in the

Netherlands if you do it quietly (tradition only); the exact course of the papal letter (March 4 or 12, a withdrawn first version, public on March 18 according to Rogier and De Rooy, a corrected version in The Hague on April 4 according to Albers); the king's precise words on April 15, because according to eyewitnesses the newspaper text had been toned down.

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one reading):

- *Advance notice.* The Parlementair Documentatiecentrum describes a communication from the internuncio to the minister on December 9, 1851 and an official message on March 24, 1853. Rogier and De Rooy also mention a deliberately unofficial oral communication on January 12, 1853.
- *Zwijsen's birthplace.* Kerkdriel according to the Bommelerwaard article, "Driel" in the DBNL piece of 1903; the English-language Wikipedia wrongly says Tilburg.
- *Zwijsen's consecration date.* The piece of 1903 gives April 17, 1842; other sources only the year 1842.
- *Date of the cabinet decision.* The sources differ by a day, giving April 17, 18 and 19 for the resignation and the new cabinet taking office.
- *Number of signatures.* More than 51,000 in Amsterdam (Slijkerman: about 38,000 men and 14,000 women); Onze Eeuw says more than 50,000.

Interpretation: that Willem III used the Aprilbeweging (the April Movement) to get rid of Thorbecke is the reading of the historian Hooykaas. Rogier and De Rooy see the movement mainly as a political row aimed against Thorbecke. That the Catholics thanked God and did not celebrate as victors is how Albers saw it. I let it stand as their testimony.

Sources for this chapter

1. Parlement.com, “Aprilbeweging 1853”
2. Parlement.com, “Kabinet-Thorbecke I (1849-1853)”
3. Parlement.com, “Dr.Mr. J.R. Thorbecke”
4. Parlement.com, “Z.M. koning Willem III”
5. G.J. Hooykaas, “Koning Willem III en de grondwet in april 1853”, BMGN 109 (1994)
6. D.S. Slijkerman, Het geheim van de ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid (Leiden 2011), chapter on the April Movement
7. Onze Eeuw, jaargang 3 (1903), “De Aprilbeweging” (DBNL)
8. P. Albers S.J., “Het herstel der Hiërarchie”, De Nieuwe Belgische Illustratie 1903 (DBNL)
9. De Nieuwe Belgische Illustratie 1903, over Zwijsen (DBNL)
10. De Nieuwe Belgische Illustratie, over de fraters van Tilburg (DBNL)
11. Melis te Velde, Anthony Brummelkamp (1811-1888), 1853 (DBNL)
12. J.P. Rottier, Godsdienstcontroverse of politieke rel? (Erasmus Universiteit 2015)
13. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, Geschiedenis van het Nederlands katholicisme
14. Bert van Coenen, “De kapel op de begraafplaats te Orthen”, Bossche Kringen 2017
15. In Your Pocket Bommelerwaard, “Bekende Bommelerwaarders: Mgr. Zwijsen”
16. Rijksmonumentenregister, Sint Catharinakerk, monument 36264
17. Kerken Kijken, Catharinakathedraal: geschiedenis en gebouw
18. DUIC, “Hoe een dreigende sluiting nieuw leven blies in de Catharinakathedraal” (2020)
19. Aartsbisdom Utrecht, Jaarverslag 2025
20. Museum Catharijneconvent, bezoekersinformatie

21. DUIC, “Gertrudiskerk: kleurige kathedraal aan de singel”
22. L.J. Rogier en N. de Rooy, In vrijheid herboren. Katholiek Nederland 1853-1953, chapter on the April Movement (DBNL)
23. Rogier en De Rooy, In vrijheid herboren, chapter on the restored hierarchy and installations (DBNL)
24. Bible.com, Jakobus 1:27 (NKJV)
25. Bible.com, Mattheüs 7:12 (NKJV)
26. Bible.com, Romeinen 12:18 (NKJV)

Amsterdam: the door of the consistory room

On Wednesday morning, January 6, 1886, at eight o'clock, the sexton J. Karres stood at the Nieuwe Kerk (the New Church) in Amsterdam in front of a small group of men. He saw Frederik Rutgers, the president of the church wardens, and let them in. Behind Rutgers came two professors, a brewer, two laborers and a former fire chief.

They walked to the side building of the church. That was where the consistory room was, with a door that had had iron fitted behind it a few days before. A little later the police were standing there, and a commissioner who said he would not interfere in a quarrel within the church.

If you stand on the Dam today, the main square of Amsterdam, with your back to the National Monument, you see the Nieuwe Kerk to the right of the Royal Palace. People go inside every day, but hardly anyone for a church service. The Nieuwe Kerk has become an exhibition space. Organ concerts are played there, kings and queens are inaugurated there, and there is a café built against the church.

On the site of that café, in 1886, stood another building. It was a side building of the church, containing the consistory room: the meeting

room of the church council of the Hervormde (Dutch Reformed) congregation of Amsterdam. That is where the title deeds of the church buildings were kept, and the register of members. The safes with the money of the church wardens and the deacons stood there too.

That building is gone. It was demolished in 1961, during a major restoration. One thing from that room has survived: a wooden door with a damaged panel. That door is now in a storage depot, and you cannot simply go and look at it. But you can stand on the Dam and know that here, on that Wednesday morning, a church split began that was felt in the smallest villages of the Netherlands.

Why did a professor, a brewer and two laborers break open a door that morning? To understand that, you need to go back a few years.

A certificate of good conduct

In the Hervormde Kerk of the nineteenth century, after catechism, the church's instruction, young people received proof that they could become members. Anyone who moved took an attestation along: a statement from the church council that you were a confessing member in good standing. Just a piece of paper, you might say. In Amsterdam it became the heart of a conflict.

The Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk was a broad church in those years. Its pulpits held orthodox ministers, who held on to the old confessions of faith, and also liberal or modern ministers, who had let go of much of them. According to a contemporary writing in the magazine De Tijdspiegel, in the spring of 1885 the Amsterdam church council refused attestations to young people of modern ministers. These were young people who would not confess that Christ is the only Redeemer. The classis, the regional church body, declared itself not competent. The provincial church board ordered

the attestations to be issued anyway. This so-called attestation question had been going on since 1884.

The orthodox majority in the Amsterdam church council believed the church could not accept what it did not itself believe. The modern side saw it differently. At a Protestant gathering in Zwolle, Dr. Meyboom argued that the orthodox parties should not make life in the church impossible for the moderns. In their view, their young people belonged too. How would you have seen it, if you had been one of those young people and your minister had taught you the way he thought best?

The man who was no longer a minister

Abraham Kuyper was forty-eight in 1886. He was born in 1837 in Maassluis. From 1870 to 1874 he had been a minister in Amsterdam, after which he chose politics and journalism. In 1879 he founded the Antirevolutionaire Partij (the Anti-Revolutionary Party), and in 1880 the Vrije Universiteit (the Free University). He was a professor at that university, and as an elder he remained the leader of the orthodox church council members in Amsterdam.

I keep his life story short here, because he gets a chapter of his own in another book. For this morning in 1886 you only need to know that he was used to fighting, in his newspaper De Standaard and in politics. And his Vrije Universiteit trained ministers outside the regular theological faculties, something Hervormde professors opposed.

His longing was older than this winter. In 1869 Kuyper wrote that the church would be set free. Later he said that the synodal organization had to vanish without a trace. For him it came down to one point, which he summed up in his weekly paper De Heraut on March 21, 1886: a church in which all kinds of directions live to-

gether is no church. Whoever shares that conviction sees a cleansing in 1886. Whoever does not sees a man tearing a church in two.

Beside him stood two colleagues. Frederik Lodewijk Rutgers was a professor at the VU and president of the church wardens of the Hervormde congregation. The church wardens managed the buildings and the property. Alexander Frederik de Savornin Lohman was a professor of law at the VU. He held no church office in Amsterdam, but he knew the law.

Article 41

On December 14, 1885, the Amsterdam church council added a new article to the regulations for the management of the church buildings and property. This Article 41 dealt with what had to happen if two church governing bodies came to stand against each other. In that case the church wardens were to follow the church council "that abides by God's Word."

That sounds like a matter of faith. The higher church administration read something else in it: if the church council ever broke with the national church, the buildings and the money would go with the church council. The Classicaal Bestuur, the regional administration of the Hervormde Kerk, considered the article contrary to Reformed church order. De Tijdspiegel quoted Cramer, who had already written about such regulations in 1875. Whoever drew them up, he said, wanted to have the key to the money chest in hand when a clash came.

Kuyper and Rutgers defended themselves in a written defense, the Contra-Memorie. In it they said that the suspended members did not hold to Article 41 unconditionally. They asked the question that mattered: was this a crime, or a difference of conviction? They

thought it conceivable to have two governing bodies in one congregation at the same time.

Here you see the side of the Hervormde Kerk. For the church administration this was about more than faith. The buildings belonged to the whole Hervormde congregation, to the liberal members as well. A church council that arranged in advance that this property would go with it in a split was, in their eyes, preparing a break.

Eighty names

In early January 1886 the Classicaal Bestuur suspended eighty members of the Amsterdam church council. According to an overview by the Gereformeerde Kerken, they were five ministers, forty-two elders and thirty-three deacons. Kuyper and Rutgers were among them. It happened about four days before January 8, the final deadline by which the attestations had to be issued.

The sources do not agree on the exact date. Some give December 1885, an overview of the Gereformeerde churches gives January 4, 1886. The figures for the size of the whole church council also vary, from just over a hundred to a hundred and thirty-six members. What is certain is that the eighty formed the majority and that they had all voted for the new course.

Suspending so many office bearers at once was unusual. Normally such a discipline case was handled person by person, and that took a long time. The suspended members did not recognize the suspension. In their eyes the elder-wardens, with Rutgers as president, still had control of the church buildings.

Iron behind the wood

On January 4 the Reverend Adrianus Johannes Westhoff called off the meeting of the church council. He barricaded himself in the

consistory with three police officers. The next day he had the sexton Karres replace the lock with an American mortise lock, and Karres took the key with him. Iron plates were fitted behind the wooden panels of the door. Two men, Piet Smit and W.R. van Oostendorp, had to guard the building against the church wardens.

The sources do not agree on who exactly gave which order. Ons Amsterdam calls Westhoff chairman of the church council, the Geheugen van de VU (the VU's history website) calls him chairman of the classis. According to a blog by the Geheugen van de VU, it was the two guards who had the steel plates fitted. The picture is the same: the room with the papers had to stay shut.

So the two sides stood against each other. On one side a church administration that wanted to protect the congregation's property against a church council it had itself suspended. On the other side suspended office bearers who believed that they were the ones who had to protect that property, against a church administration that in their view was letting go of the confession.

Eight o'clock in the morning

On Wednesday, January 6, 1886, at eight o'clock in the morning, the group came. Kuyper, Rutgers and De Savornin Lohman. The brewer W. Hovy. Two laborers, Klaas Kater and Bart Poesiat, who also belonged to the suspended office bearers. And a former fire chief, Meijer. The sexton Karres let them in.

The guards Smit and Van Oostendorp went to stand in front of the door of the consistory room and had the police called. Inspector Marchand did not know what to do about it himself and brought in Commissioner Stork. The lawyers W. Heineken and Theo Heemskerk also arrived. Heemskerk later became prime minister.

Rutgers asked the police to remove the "burglars." As president of the church wardens, he apparently saw the guards as the intruders, and not his own group. Stork's police report records that he saw a bloodbath coming. Stork held to his position: the government should not interfere in a quarrel within the church. De Savornin Lohman grew angry about that, according to the reports. In the end the officers left. The guards took a remark by Stork as an order and went with them.

Then only Kuyper's men were left standing in front of the closed door.

A saw that was not there

What happened next went into history as the "paneelzagerij," the panel sawing. In the liberal press Kuyper and the others were called the paneelzagers, the panel sawyers. In cartoons, among others in the magazine De Nederlandsche Spectator, they were drawn as burglars.

But if you read the sources, you find no saw. According to the Geheugen van de VU, the men pried a panel out of the door and pushed the steel plate aside. Klaas Kater crawled through the opening and unscrewed the new lock from the inside. Anyone who examined the surviving door in 2024 saw no saw marks on it. Ons Amsterdam also writes that in fact no saw was involved. The saw belongs to the nickname, not to the event.

The sources are careful about Kuyper's own role. According to tradition, he took the lead when others hesitated. The Geheugen van de VU writes that he "seems" to have stood at the front. What is certain is that Kater finished the job.

I find that a lovely detail. In the stories, Kuyper stands at this door. In the report, a brewery hand crawls through the hole.

Klaas Kater and Bart Poesiat were laborers, but they did not stand there as servants of the professors. They themselves belonged to the suspended office bearers. The stories are mostly about the professors, but the church council of Amsterdam also consisted of men like them.

The newspapers of the following days wrote that the ministers had been "put out of their own church." According to the same papers, De Savornin Lohman was seen laughing behind the high windows. About Westhoff the story goes that he called Kuyper the churchly Napoleon. Who said it and when is not entirely clear in my source. Westhoff himself wrote in a pamphlet, *Kijkjes achter de Schermen* (Peeks Behind the Scenes), that God had avenged him enough in the last weeks. That is how it sounded on the other side of the door.

Snow on the Dam

Behind the door, brewery workers led by Poesiat nailed a wooden frame against the door. Kuyper, Rutgers and De Savornin Lohman stayed in the building. On Friday, January 8, the sexton Karres refused to let in a few ministers who had not been suspended. Charles Boissevain of the Algemeen Handelsblad described how they stood in the snow in front of the door, like crows flapping about.

On January 9 the post delivered a postcard addressed to Dr. A. Kuyper, Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam. It carried one sentence, in neat handwriting: "You will not get out the door tonight." The sender lived in Utrecht. It stayed at words. The card came back, through a gift from Dr. A.G. Honig, into Kuyper's archive at the Vrije Universiteit, which fills more than nine meters of shelf.

Liberal and conservative newspapers condemned the occupation. They feared that the quarrel in the church would spill over into pol-

itics, with Kuyper and his party as the instigators. A writer in De Tijdspiegel noted that papers that normally kept out of church quarrels were devoting columns to the case. Later students of the Vrije Universiteit took over the guard, armed with clubs according to the Geheugen van de VU. That way the room stayed occupied while the case could go to court.

Dolerend

The word that has stuck to this movement means lamenting or grieving. The suspended office bearers and their congregations called themselves dolerend: they grieved over a church that in their view had let go of its confession. Their new name, Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk, had been the official name of the church until 1816. They wanted to be the old church, with its own government.

Outside Amsterdam, congregations went the same way. On February 7, 1886, in Kootwijk, on the Veluwe, a wooded region in the center of the country, Jan Hendrikus Houtzagers was installed as minister without the permission of the classis. He had been trained at the Vrije Universiteit. Kootwijk thereby became the first dolerende congregation. Voorthuizen, Kollum, Reitsum and Leiderdorp followed, Voorthuizen already a day later.

In those months people also looked for a way out. In March 1886 Kuyper wrote in his paper De Heraut about an agreement. His proposal concerned the church buildings in the city, and he pointed out that Amsterdam had one cathedral and ten churches. His slogan for the talks was short: leave the synod out of it, and do not touch the concept of the church. A proposal by the Reverend Tinholt was also adopted to let the two directions exist side by side, a modus vivendi without deciding whether the parties had a right to exist, for example by dividing the congregation into districts. A committee was formed. Tinholt died suddenly during the conflict, and the writer

in De Tijdspiegel already doubted in March 1886 whether the plan would ever happen. The split did happen.

I think that is worth mentioning. Looking back, a split is often told as though it was unavoidable. There were people who were still looking for another way.

Of Tinholt we know little more than his proposal and that he died during the conflict. Paul wrote: *Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another* (Romans 14:19). Tinholt made that effort, even though he did not live to see the end.

In Amsterdam the decision came at the end of 1886. The synod, the highest governing body of the Hervormde Kerk, ruled against Kuyper and his followers. The sexton Karres put the occupiers out of the room. According to Ons Amsterdam, they had held out for almost a year. On December 16, 1886, the suspended church council continued as the Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk, with the word "doleerende" added. Later the Hoge Raad (the Supreme Court) also ruled against Kuyper's group. The buildings remained the property of the Hervormde congregation.

What it cost

The price was high, on both sides.

The dolerenden had lost their churches. They held their services in rented halls. From January 11 to 14, 1887, about fifteen hundred members and delegates from all over the country gathered in Amsterdam for the Reformed Church Congress. The first halls lay scattered across the city: Maison Stroucken on the Leidse Kade, the tobacco auction house Frascati on the Nes, the meeting room De Vereeniging on the Warmoesstraat and Plancius on the Plantage Kerklaan. The church council found a plot of land near De Gooyer

too close to the railway. A building plan in the garden of a town house on the Keizersgracht fell through: neighbors objected, and the city council rejected it because a church would disturb the peace of the gardens. At the beginning of 1888 the church council simply bought the house itself, for about seventy-five thousand guilders.

Kuyper led the building committee. Entries came from J.W. Meijer, a fire department officer who had trained himself as an architect, from Tjeerd Kuipers, whom Kuyper found too young, and from non-Reformed architects such as Van Gendt and Salm. The design by Gerlof Salm, submitted under the motto *Soli Deo Gloria*, won the commission, on condition that the help of his son Abraham stayed secret. Kuyper defended a non-Reformed architect by pointing to the temple of Solomon. The church had room for about seventeen hundred people, with double galleries and the organ above the pulpit. Kuyper did not want a pulpit like a closed, tall, hollow, gloomy flower cup. The building cost just under 125,000 guilders.

On November 4, 1888, the Keizersgrachtkerk was taken into use, as the first dolerende church in Amsterdam. That Sunday there were three services, at ten, two and six o'clock, with the Reverends H.W. van Loon, P. van Son and D.J. Karssen. The communion of the first service went to Frascati, because unrest was feared. The sexton J.C. van den Akker opened the wrought-iron gate, and an hour before the start the church was full. Beforehand the organ played Psalm 66, verse 5. Van Loon preached on three things: a great change, an excellent privilege and a glorious expectation. A week later the Amsterdamsche Kerkbode praised the acoustics and the exits. Kuyper's De Heraut and De Standaard reported nothing about that first service.

A small story from the first years: during the Scripture reading, Professor J. Woltjer of the Vrije Universiteit read aloud, as lector, and a young minister did not know whom he had in front of him. In the

first years the preachers included the Reverends W.H. Gispen and B. van Schelven. Until 1892 four more dolerende churches were added in Amsterdam: the Raamkerk, the Funenkerk, the Boomslootkerk and the Buiten Amstelkerk.

The Hervormde congregation lost people. According to Ons Amsterdam, about 25,000 of its 155,000 members left. Nationally, the census of 1889 counted about 181,000 dolerenden, spread over some two hundred congregations, with 76 ministers who went with Kuyper. The share of Hervormden in the population fell in those years from 55 to 49 percent. At the Afscheiding of 1834 (the secession from the Hervormde Kerk), about one percent of the believers had left. Now it was about ten percent.

Behind those numbers are congregations and families who had to choose. Imagine that in 1885 you still sat in the same church pew as your neighbors, and that afterward on Sundays you sang in a rented hall, like Frascati, a tobacco auction house on the Nes. In Amsterdam the Hervormde congregation was left without the majority of its church council. The dolerenden were left without a church building. Both sides lost something they saw as their own.

Paul wrote about the congregation as a body: *And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it* (1 Corinthians 12:26). In 1886 that body fell apart, and the pain was on both sides: with the families in the rented halls and with the congregation that had lost its church council.

June seventeenth, 1892

The dolerenden were not the first to leave the Hervormde Kerk. In 1834 the Afscheiding had begun in Ulrum, under Hendrik de Cock. From that movement the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk

had grown. Two groups with the same confession, each with its own history and its own customs.

On June 17, 1892, a synod met in the Keizersgrachtkerk in Amsterdam. There the dolerende churches united with almost all the congregations of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk. Together they went on as the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. Almost all, the sources write: not every congregation joined.

A hundred and twelve years later, in 2004, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland merged with the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk and the Lutheran church into the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (the Protestant Church in the Netherlands). The church of the panel sawyers and the church of the men who had the door reinforced were one church again.

A board over the panel

The Hervormde congregation did not have the damaged door replaced. A new lock was put on, and a board was placed over the broken panel. So the door stayed in the side building for more than seventy-five years, as a reminder of what had happened there. Around 1930 two Hervormde ministers proposed removing the traces, the Reverends Den Hartog and De Vrijer. The church wardens did not want that. In 1936 the church council confirmed the decision once more.

You may wonder what such a door meant for those who walked past it every week. Sometimes you leave a scar in place to remember how things must never happen again. Or to remember who did it. From the sources I do not know which of the two tipped the balance.

During the restoration of the Nieuwe Kerk, the neo-Gothic side building was pulled down in 1961. The door ended up in an attic, where it was found again in 1979. After that it was shown in

exhibitions: in the Amsterdams Historisch Museum, in Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, and around the hundredth anniversary of the Doleantie in Maassluis and at the Vrije Universiteit. The sources differ about where it is now. According to the most recent report, from November 2024, it belongs to the heritage collection of the Protestantse Kerk Amsterdam and is kept in a depot.

The wood that the Hervormden covered with a board is now kept by a church in which Hervormden and Gereformeerden sit together.

If you stand on the Dam and look at the sandstone annex beside the Nieuwe Kerk, you see a café with an entrance to the church. Somewhere on that spot, in 1886, there was a door that a brewery hand crawled through.

Go there yourself

The Nieuwe Kerk stands on the Dam in the center of Amsterdam, next to the Royal Palace. Regular church services are no longer held there. It is an exhibition space, where organ concerts are also given and royal ceremonies take place. Inside you see the pulpit by Albert Jansz Vinckenbrinck and the tomb of Admiral Michiel de Ruyter. For opening hours, check the website of De Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam.

The side building with the consistory room no longer exists. On that spot a later building stands against the church, with a café. The door itself cannot be seen: it is in a depot of the Protestantse Kerk Amsterdam.

If you want to follow the story further, you can walk to the Keizersgrachtkerk on the Keizersgracht. That is where, on June 17, 1892, the synod met that formed the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. The church is still in use by the Protestant Keizersgrachtkerk congregation. Kuyper's archive, with the threatening postcard of January

9, 1886, is kept at the University Library of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and can be viewed by appointment.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the attestation question in Amsterdam (1884-1885); Article 41 of the management regulations (December 14, 1885) and the objection of the Classicaal Bestuur; the suspension of eighty church council members; the reinforcement of the door with iron plates and a new lock; the occupation of the consistory room on Wednesday, January 6, 1886, by Kuyper, Rutgers, De Savornin Lohman and others; the departure of the police after the decision of Commissioner Stork; the prying open of a panel, without a saw; the guard by VU students; the ruling against Kuyper and his followers at the end of 1886; the union of June 17, 1892, in the Keizersgrachtkerk; the preservation of the damaged door; the threatening card of January 9, 1886 (Vrije Universiteit).

From texts of contemporaries, via later sources: Kuyper on the church that would be set free (1869), on a church with all kinds of directions (De Heraut, March 21, 1886) and his slogan "Leave the Synod out of it. Do not touch the concept of the Church."; the Contra-Memorie of Kuyper and Rutgers; Cramer's warning from 1875; Westhoff's pamphlet *Kijkjes achter de Schermen*. I have read these sentences in the report in De Tijdspiegel of 1886 and not in the original publications.

Only from tradition or a single source: that Kuyper stood at the front and took the lead (the sources write "seems"); the scene of January 8 in the snow (through Boissevain's account, which I only know through the Geheugen van de VU and which is not a literal quotation); the figure of 25,000 Amsterdam members who left; the presence of the brewer Hovy and the former fire chief Meijer; the newspaper reports about De Savornin Lohman behind the

windows; Westhoff's barricading himself in with three officers on January 4 and the American mortise lock (Geheugen van de VU).

Unconfirmed or disputed: the saw from the name "paneelzagerij" (a nickname, no saw was used); the exact date of the suspension (December 1885 or January 4, 1886) and the total size of the church council (102, 110 or 136 members); who exactly gave the order to fit the plates (the Reverend Westhoff or the guards themselves) and whether Westhoff was chairman of the church council or of the classis; whether Westhoff called Kuyper "our churchly Napoleon," and when; where the door is kept today (Catharijneconvent according to an older source, a depot of the Protestantse Kerk Amsterdam according to a report from 2024); the date of the proposal of 1930 (one source says around 1930, another 1936).

Where the sources differ: the occupation of January 6. Ons Amsterdam and the Geheugen van de VU describe a successful occupation that lasted almost a year. The source list of gereformeerdekerken.info writes that the attempt to retake the Nieuwe Kerk by breaking out a panel failed. I followed the story of the first two sources, because they themselves mention the door and the police report. The architect of the Keizersgrachtkerk (Salm) and the design with his son come only from gereformeerdekerken.info.

Interpretation: whether the occupation was an act of loyalty to the confession or a break-in on someone else's property depends on which church administration you regard as lawful. The court chose the Hervormde church administration; the dolerenden kept appealing to their conscience.

Sources for this chapter

1. Ons Amsterdam, "De Nieuwe Kerk gekraakt, 6 januari 1886"
2. Geheugen van de VU, "VU-hoogleraren plegen inbraak"

3. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, “Een dreigtweet anno 1886”
4. De Tijdspiegel, jaargang 43 (1886), via DBNL
5. Gereformeerde Kerken info, “De Keizersgrachtkerk te Amsterdam”
6. Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, Petrus, “Doleantie”
7. Historiek, “Doleantie (1886)”
8. De Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam
9. Wikipedia, “Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam”
10. Wikipedia, “Abraham Kuyper”
11. Wikipedia, “1886 Dutch Reformed Church split”
12. Bible.com, Romeinen 14:19 (NKJV)
13. Bible.com, 1 Korinthe 12:26 (NKJV)

Assen: the church where a synod ruled on a talking serpent

On Saturday, March 13, 1926, a minister on Texel received a letter. Johannes Jacobus Buskes was twenty-six, chairman of the church council of the Gereformeerde Kerk in Oosterend, and the sender was the moderamen of the synod in Assen: the executive committee of the national assembly. The letter held a word of encouragement. He was to read it aloud from the pulpit the next morning.

Buskes read the text. It said that no one was allowed to doubt the literal existence of the trees and of the serpent in the third chapter of the Bible, and that the authority of the Bible stood above that of any science. Years later he wrote down what he did on Sunday, March 14.

But first, the place the letter came from.

On the Zuidersingel in Assen, a provincial town in the northeast of the Netherlands, stands a church of red and yellow brick. A square tower with a pointed pyramid roof rises on the left. The windows are rounded at the top and have stained glass. The building has the

shape of a Greek cross, with four equal arms under gabled roofs of Dutch tiles.

Inside it is plain. Wooden pews, a wooden pulpit, wooden vaults with iron tie rods running through them. Up to about two meters high the walls are paneled with wood. According to the Rijksmonumentenregister (the national register of monuments), the interior is still largely as it was when the building was completed in 1925. The furnishings followed the guidelines that Abraham Kuyper had drawn up for Reformed churches.

This is the Zuiderkerk. Today it stands empty and for sale. In May 2026 a website about Reformed church buildings reported that no new use had been found yet.

A hundred years ago this building had just been finished. The first stone was laid on July 28, 1924. In the spring of 1926 delegates from all over the country gathered in this new church for an extraordinary synod, a national assembly of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (a Reformed denomination formed in 1892). They had to give a judgment about one minister from Amsterdam and about one question from the third chapter of the Bible. Had the serpent in paradise really spoken, with a voice you could hear?

The answer they gave here would split the church. And forty-one years later another synod would take it back.

A boy from Alkmaar who followed Bavinck

Johannes Gerardus Geelkerken was born on June 13, 1879, in Alkmaar. His father had first been Hervormd (Dutch Reformed) and later joined the Gereformeerde Kerk in Utrecht. He was an elder there until he died in 1891. Jan was twelve at the time. His biographer Maarten Aalders describes, according to a reviewer, a child

from a devout family, intelligent, eager to learn and dominant, who wanted to become a minister early on. Fencing was his hobby.

In 1899 he enrolled as a theology student at the Vrije Universiteit (the Free University) in Amsterdam, the university Abraham Kuyper had founded. His great teacher became Professor Herman Bavinck. Geelkerken also sought personal faith in the Nederlandse Christen-Studenten Vereniging, the Dutch Christian student association, because he missed warmth among students who did everything with the mind. He was convinced that the church had to open its doors to society. A church that shut itself off would, in his view, come to look like a sect.

In 1906 he married and settled in Hilversum. His doctoral thesis was on the psychology of religion, the science that studies how faith works in people. It turned into a hard road, with a fierce conflict with the faculty and with Bavinck himself. On October 11, 1909, he received his doctorate. He also submitted the work for a prize competition and received an honorable mention, but the gold medal was withheld from him. The objections concerned the scholarly value he gave to religious consciousness. After his doctorate he needed a long rest cure. A scholarly career was no longer possible.

He chose the church. On February 5, 1911, he became a minister in Epe. The Reverend K. Fernhout installed him there. That name comes back later in this story.

"To full flowering" in Amsterdam-Zuid

On May 30, 1915, Geelkerken began at the Gereformeerde Kerk of Amsterdam-Zuid. The congregation met in the Parkkerk on the Gerard Brandtstraat. According to the memorial account that appeared after his death, he came to full flowering there. His listeners were

struck again and again by the rare clarity of his mind, when he answered the questions of the time with great knowledge.

He was popular with a large part of his congregation. He also became the leader of what in those years was called the movement of the young: a group of younger Gereformeerden who felt their church had dug itself in too deeply. They wanted more room for personal devotion, for science, for contact with other Christians.

In 2013 Aalders wrote a book of almost six hundred pages about him. According to a review of it, Geelkerken was a gifted man who did not take criticism well and often answered with arrogance. Aalders shows that in the 1920s both parties dug themselves in further and further. Keep that in mind as you read what follows. This story has no hero facing a villain.

There was tension within the congregation itself too. A second church building had been added, along with a second call, and later a small group of dissatisfied members formed around H. Marinus.

Sunday evening, March 23, 1924

On Sunday evening, March 23, 1924, Geelkerken preached on Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The catechism is a book of instruction from 1563, divided into fifty-two Lord's Days, so that each week a part of the faith gets its turn. Lord's Day 3 deals with the question of where evil comes from, and so with the fall into sin in Genesis 3.

The Bible chapter begins like this: *Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"* (Genesis 3:1)

Three days later, on March 26, a church member, H. Marinus, filed a complaint with the church council. It concerned four points from Genesis 2 and 3: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life, the serpent, and the fact that the serpent spoke. According to Marinus, his minister left room for a reading other than the literal one.

So it was about four details. No one disputed that God had created the world or that humanity had fallen into sin. The question was how to read those four details.

Two sides of one question

What did Geelkerken actually say? The sources do not fully agree on that.

The South African theologian G.L. Kruger studied the documents from those years in 1994. According to him, Geelkerken never explicitly denied the historical reality of the trees and the serpent. He acknowledged that Genesis 1 to 3 has authority as revelation from God. But he did not want the fall into sin to depend on the question of whether there had been a real, audible serpent. He opposed one mandatory interpretation, imposed as "the only possible and exclusively true one." He called his defense *Mechanische binding of organische vrijheid inzake Schriftbeschouwing* (Mechanical binding or organic freedom in the view of Scripture), and in a pamphlet he called the church's investigation an inquisition. A reviewer of a later book about the case summed up his position like this: for him, a less literal reading was not necessarily in conflict with the Bible.

The Encyclopedie Drenthe puts it more sharply: Geelkerken denied that the serpent had spoken in a way the senses could perceive. Perhaps the difference lies in whether you look at what he said, or at what his words left open.

The church council of Amsterdam-Zuid rallied around its minister. The committee of the synod later wrote that complaints had been smothered, and that Geelkerken's haughty attitude toward Marinus was part of a broader dissatisfaction in the congregation. On the other side stood a committee of ten that supported Geelkerken. He wrote pamphlets himself: *Op weg naar den synode* (On the Way to the Synod), *Om het recht van mijn ambt* (For the Right of My Office) and, in October 1925, the paper *Woord en Geest* (Word and Spirit). He warned the classis that it would get no pleasure from this. At the end of 1925 his name appeared in a newspaper supplement with the review of the year, among figures like Chamberlain and Mussolini. That is how big the case had become. A troublemaker the church could not use at that moment, a reviewer calls him.

The church process ran long. On April 22, 1925, the classis of Amsterdam decided that Geelkerken had to sign a form: the historicity of Genesis 3 was settled, and Marinus had misunderstood nothing. He refused. In total there were nine meetings that produced little, because his answers were, according to Kruger, vague, late or evasive. The classis referred the case to the synod.

And the other side? For the synod this was no casual matter of interpretation. According to Kruger, the synod felt that Geelkerken rejected the traditional reading without giving good reasons for it. It judged that his presentation did not agree with the evident meaning of the Bible story. In its view he thereby touched Articles 4 and 5 of the Belgic Confession. Those articles deal with which books belong to the Bible and with its authority. Behind that judgment was an honest concern. If you start choosing at Genesis 3 what literally happened and what did not, where does it stop? What is left of the fall into sin, and of the redemption that follows it?

I have laid both sides next to each other for a long time. I want you to hear them both as they were meant. Geelkerken did not want to

pull his congregation away from the Bible. He wanted to show that you could remain Reformed with your mind and with the science of your time. The synod did not want to force the Bible into a straitjacket. It wanted to prevent the authority of God's Word from being worn away bit by bit.

A new church on the Singel

The complaint did not stay in Amsterdam. In 1926 an extraordinary synod met in the Zuiderkerk in Assen. The chairman was the Reverend K. Fernhout, the same man who had installed Geelkerken as a minister in Epe.

Fifteen years earlier Fernhout had installed the young minister in his office. Now he chaired the assembly that had to judge him. It shows how close together the people in this struggle stood.

The doctrinal committee of the synod put nineteen questions to Geelkerken. He answered with a lecture on how to deal with the Bible, which Kruger calls a lesson in the view of Scripture. The synod drew a lot of attention in the press. During the meeting Dr. J.C. de Moor, one of the former chairmen of earlier synods, also died. Beyond that, the sources I have been able to consult say nothing about the atmosphere in the church on the Singel. How long the meetings lasted and what exactly was said is in the Acta, the official record of the synod. I have not examined it myself.

"Realities perceptible to the senses"

The ruling became a byword. The synod declared that the trees, the serpent and the speaking of the serpent in Genesis 3 had been realities perceptible to the senses. In other words: if you had stood there, you would have seen the serpent and heard its voice. A later observer sums up the synod's line: the tree of knowledge, the ser-

pent and the tree of life had to be understood "in the proper or literal sense."

Geelkerken was asked to sign a statement binding himself to this judgment without reservation. He refused. He wanted the judgment to remain open to testing by science that was itself bound to God's Word. The synod saw that as a refusal. It suspended him. When he did not submit to that, deposition followed. According to Kruger, that was on March 17, 1926.

It did not stop at one man. The elders and deacons in Amsterdam-Zuid who stood behind their minister were deposed as well. The synod declared that the Gereformeerde Kerk of Amsterdam-Zuid had broken its bond with the other Gereformeerde churches. Most of the congregation chose Geelkerken.

According to the description of the archive of the Gereformeerde church in Amsterdam-Zuid, the congregation met in the Parkkerk until 1926. During the split, the Concertgebouw, the famous concert hall, became a temporary place to meet. From that spring there were two Gereformeerde congregations in Amsterdam-Zuid, each convinced that it remained faithful to the Bible.

Sunday, March 14, on Texel

The synod had a message drawn up that was to be read from the pulpit in all the Gereformeerde churches. That is how Assen reached the island of Texel too.

Back to Buskes, with the letter in his hand. He describes in his memoirs that as chairman of the church council he received the document from the moderamen, and that he read it aloud on Sunday, March 14, in Oosterend, as requested. But he did not leave it there. He told his congregation that he could not join the synod of Assen in its prayer and could not thank it for its decision. In his conviction,

the synod had equated one interpretation of the Bible, the fundamentalist one, with the authority of the Bible itself.

Two elders, who had said nothing to his face, acted behind his back. After that the classis of Alkmaar questioned the ministers one by one. Each minister had to say whether he agreed with Assen without reservation. Buskes said no. After a heated discussion he was suspended for three weeks. He remembered later how the Reverend Breukelaar from Zaandam held up his teacup and said that a cup is a cup and a tree is a tree. Buskes found that naively literal reading.

He had a hard time in those weeks, he writes. The discipline ran cold and empty: he calls it discipline without pastoral care. Almost no one from his own circle contacted him personally. Old teachers and colleagues stayed silent. Letters came mostly from people outside his church. Professor W.J. Aalders of Groningen advised him to be careful, and his letter of April 16, 1926, gave him air to breathe. His father wrote him that he should hold on to God's Word. Professor F.W. Grosheide wrote warmly, even though he did not agree with him.

In those three weeks he received a call from Amsterdam-Zuid, the congregation that stayed loyal to Geelkerken. He accepted it. The synod deposed the elders and deacons who stood behind Geelkerken and declared that Amsterdam-Zuid had broken its bond with the other Gereformeerde churches. According to a review of a book about this case, Buskes hoped that by leaving he would prevent a split on Texel. It did not work. In Oosterend a second Gereformeerde church came into being, of people who followed him and Geelkerken.

Oosterend was a fishing village where the Gereformeerden were counted among the devout, the *fijnen*. Buskes was loved there. In

1984 N. Dros spoke with people who had been there, and one of them said: "Never before were feelings in the village so seriously overwrought as then."

James wrote: *Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace* (James 3:18). Buskes gave up his congregation in the hope that it would remain one. On Texel he did not see that peace. More than forty years later he would, however, live to see a sign of reconciliation.

Later Buskes judged harshly. In his memoirs he wrote: "Assen is a black page in the history of the Gereformeerde Kerken." He also said that Assen was really no church at all, because the synod had put the institution above the congregation. It is his judgment, from his own book. Others thought differently. In 1956 Professor Brillenburg Wurth was still defending the synod, a defense that Buskes found historically incorrect.

In that pulpit in Oosterend, Buskes had to decide for himself that Sunday what he would do with the letter in his hand.

The restored bond

In the months after Assen, the congregations and ministers who followed Geelkerken sought each other out. A Central Committee was formed, which set itself against what it called the spirit of Assen, and Geelkerken had his own paper, *Woord en Geest*, which he had already started in October 1925. On October 11, 1926, a declaration of principles appeared from the Conference of Gereformeerde Churches outside the denomination. On October 18 a letter from J.C. Aalders reached the church council of Schoonhoven: he and his family were joining this restored church bond.

That is how the Gereformeerde Kerken in Hersteld Verband (in Restored Bond) came into being. The name says what they wanted

to be: not a new church, but the Gereformeerde church bond as, in their view, it was meant to be. Opponents mockingly read the letters H.V. as hellend vlak, the slippery slope.

It did not grow large. A reviewer of the 2013 biography writes that Geelkerken took only a handful of followers with him. I have not found exact numbers. In 1946 the Hersteld Verband merged into the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk.

A Reformed theologian to the end

Geelkerken stayed with the congregation in Amsterdam-Zuid that had remained loyal to him. He died on February 3, 1960, in Amsterdam, eighty years old.

The memorial account that appeared after his death contains a sentence that shows how his friends saw him: "He was and remained a Reformed theologian." According to the same text, his Reformed conviction was very firm on the inside and broad and open toward the outside. He had wanted to tie the word Reformed less and less to one system and, like Bavinck, he sought the connection between what is specifically Reformed, what is generally Christian and what is generally human. The biographer of 2013 calls him a thoroughly Reformed theologian, and writes that a dramatic outcome could no longer be avoided.

I often think of people who are put out of something and spend their whole lives saying that they really belong there. What happened seven years after his death, Geelkerken did not live to see.

Thursday, September 21, 1967

The Assen ruling stood for more than forty years. In 1960 H.A.L. van der Linden asked the synod to revise it. That request was turned down. A year later the Reverend Th. Delleman asked the

synod again to look at the ruling and to lift its binding character. A committee, in the church called deputies, advised in 1963 and 1964 to do so.

On September 21, 1967, the synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken, meeting in Amsterdam, decided by a large majority to withdraw the ruling. The decision is in the Acta of 1967 and 1968, Article 209. According to an article in the magazine *Streven*, the heart of it was this sentence: "the pronouncement of 1926 shall no longer stand in the churches as a doctrinal pronouncement." The Encyclopedie Drenthe gives the year 1968, because this synod met from 1967 to 1968. Many spoke of the fall of Assen.

This decision also had two sides. There was a minority report. Concerned members joined together in groups, among them Waarheid en Eenheid (Truth and Unity). They feared that with Assen the authority of the Bible was disappearing too. In 1969 they asked the synod to reverse the decision of 1967. That was turned down, because there were no new arguments.

And Buskes? He was one of the three ministers affected by Assen who were still alive. After the decision he was invited to lead a service in the Gereformeerde church in Amsterdam-Zuid. It was meant as a sign of reconciliation, more than forty years after he had left that church fellowship because of Assen.

The serpent and the question that remained

What the synod did in 1967 was something other than saying that the serpent had not spoken. It said that the church could no longer bind its members to that one interpretation. Christians still think differently about this today. In many churches Genesis 3 is read as an account of what literally happened. In others as a true story about God and humanity, in which not every detail is a photograph.

How do you read it?

I will not answer that question for you here. But I do see what the question cost in 1926. A minister lost his office in the church in which he had grown up. Elders and deacons were deposed. A young minister on Texel left his congregation in the hope of preventing a break, and saw it come anyway. In Amsterdam-Zuid and Oosterend there were suddenly two Gereformeerde congregations where there had been one. On both sides sat people who loved the Bible and were afraid the other side was losing it.

Paul wrote: *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part* (1 Corinthians 13:12). That held for everyone in the church on the Singel, whichever side he stood on.

An empty church on the Singel

After that the building on the Zuidersingel was used for almost another century. People were baptized, married and said goodbye there. From 2011 an evangelical congregation met there, Life Assen, formerly called City Life Church. It is now building elsewhere, and the church is for sale.

If you walk along the Singel, you see the tower with its pyramid roof rising above the street. Behind the stained glass windows still stand the wooden pews from the time it was built, and the wooden pulpit where a hundred years ago a decision was made about one verse from Genesis.

Go there yourself

The Zuiderkerk stands at Zuidersingel 79 in Assen, on the Singels, the ring of canals and streets around the old town. The building is a national monument and is part of the protected townscape of Assen. On the left you see the square tower with the pyramid roof.

Next to the church stands the former parsonage, which belongs to the complex.

The building was for sale in 2025 and 2026 and no longer had a regular user. Whether you can go inside depends on the owner at the time you visit. From the street you can get a good look at the church. For current information about the church, check the website gereformeerdekerken.info or the Rijksmonumentenregister.

If you want to see the rest of the story, you can walk along the Gerard Brandtstraat in Amsterdam, where Geelkerken's congregation worshiped until 1926. I have not been able to find out what state that building is in now.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the building of the Zuiderkerk from 1923 to 1925 and its status as a national monument; the extraordinary synod of 1926 in the Zuiderkerk, chaired by the Reverend K. Fernhout; the complaint about four points from Genesis 2 and 3; the ruling that the trees, the serpent and the speaking of the serpent were realities perceptible to the senses; the suspension and deposition of Geelkerken; the founding of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Hersteld Verband and their move into the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk in 1946; Geelkerken's death in 1960; the decision of the synod of 1967 that the ruling no longer counted as a doctrinal pronouncement.

Only from own testimony or later tradition: what Buskes said and did in Oosterend on March 14, 1926, his suspension by the classis, Breukelaar's teacup, the letters of Aalders, Grosheide and his father, and his judgment on Assen (all from his own memoirs, which I read on DBNL, but in a summary of the chapter and not in every word); the testimony about the feelings in Oosterend (Dros, through a re-

view, from conversations in 1984); the judgment on Geelkerken's character (his memorial account and his biographer); Geelkerken's reference to an inquisition and the words "the only possible and exclusively true one" (Kruger, from Geelkerken's pamphlets).

Unconfirmed: the exact date of the deposition (March 17, 1926, one source; in my sources it falls after the message that Buskes read aloud on March 14, so I have not been able to establish the order of the synod's decision and the deposition); the exact opening date and length of the synod (not found); the membership figures of the Hersteld Verband (not found); who exactly met in the Concertgebouw in 1926 (derived from an archive description).

Where the sources differ: Kruger and the Encyclopedie Drenthe on what Geelkerken said (did not deny that the serpent spoke, or denied that it spoke in a way the senses could perceive); the Encyclopedie Drenthe gives 1968 for the withdrawal, the Acta and Streven 1967; the piece about the Concertgebouw and the number of followers stays vague.

Interpretation: the sources differ on whether Geelkerken denied the literal speaking of the serpent, or only left room for another reading. Whether the synod of 1926 or that of 1967 was right is a question of faith and Bible interpretation, not of history.

Sources for this chapter

1. Rijksmonumentenregister, monument 469336: Zuiderkerk, Assen
2. Encyclopedie Drenthe, "Synode van Assen"
3. Gereformeerdekerken.info, "Zuiderkerk Assen weer in de verkoop" (20 december 2025)
4. Gereformeerdekerken.info, "Is een kerk kopen nog aantrekkelijk…?" (28 mei 2026)

5. Verkoopbrochure Zuidersingel 79, Assen (Funda in Business)
6. G.L. Kruger, "Dr. J.G. Geelkerken as kontroversis (1920-1926)", In die Skriflig, 1994
7. J.J. Buskes, memoirs, chapter on Assen (DBNL)
8. Obituary notice J.G. Geelkerken, Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde 1961 (DBNL)
9. R. van der Woude, review of M.J. Aalders, Heeft de slang gesproken?, BMGN 2014
10. J. Exalto, review of N. Dros, De sprekende slang, Ons Erfdeel 2010
11. L.G. Jansma, review of N. Dros, De sprekende slang, Religie & Samenleving 2010
12. P. Beentjes, "Heeft de slang gesproken?", Streven 1972-1973 (DBNL)
13. H.H. Kruyswijk, Baas in eigen boek?, dissertation Leiden University 2011
14. HDC Vrije Universiteit, archive description Gereformeerde Kerk Amsterdam-Zuid
15. Geheugen van de VU, studie over J.C. Aalders en het herstelde kerkverband
16. Archimon, kerkgebouwen in Assen
17. Bible.com, Genesis 3:1 (NKJV)
18. Bible.com, Jakobus 3:18 (NKJV)
19. Bible.com, 1 Korinthe 13:12 (NKJV)

Echt: five o'clock in the afternoon on the Peijerstraat

On the front of the house at Peijerstraat 16 in Echt, a small town in the southern province of Limburg, there is a tile. It carries two names, Rosa and Edith Stein, with a date and a time: August 2, 1942, 5:00 p.m. If you are in a hurry, you walk right past it. According to the foundation in Echt that keeps her memory alive, the tile marks the spot where the German police took the two sisters away.

It was a Sunday afternoon in summer. In front of the convent on the Bovenste Straat stood a police van, and people were standing in the street. Two men of the SS had gone inside. They gave Sister Teresia Benedicta, as Edith Stein was called in the convent, five minutes to pack her things. That is how it stands in the life story written by the Carmelite order. Rosa, her sister, stood beside her.

A few streets away that convent still stands. It is a plain brick building with a chapel on the street side, a large window with stone tracery and above the door a relief of Mary with the child Jesus. Beside the entrance is a memorial stone for Edith Stein. Behind the wall lies a garden with an old convent graveyard and small hermitages.

One week connects these two places. On Sunday, July 26, 1942, a letter from the bishops against the deportation of Jews was read aloud in every Catholic church in the Netherlands. A week later, also on a Sunday, Catholics of Jewish descent were arrested all over the country. Two of them lived on the Bovenste Straat.

What did those two Sundays have to do with each other? That question is less simple than it seems. First you need to know who lived behind that wall, and how she got there.

Twenty sisters from Cologne

The convent in Echt had already existed for more than sixty years when Edith Stein knocked on its door. And it was a convent of refugees. In 1875 twenty Carmelite nuns came from Cologne to Echt. In Germany the Kulturkampf was going on, the struggle of the Prussian state against the power of the Catholic Church. Convents were being closed there, and the sisters looked for a place across the border.

Carmelite nuns live in an enclosed convent: they pray and work behind the walls of their house. The order goes back to the Spanish convent reformer Teresa of Ávila. In 1879 and 1880 Pierre Cuypers, the architect of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, built a new convent for them on the Bovenste Straat. There was room for twenty-one sisters, in four wings around a courtyard with a cloister. The building is now a national monument.

More than sixty years later it would once again give shelter to a woman who came from Cologne.

A philosopher in the Carmel

Edith Stein was born on October 12, 1891, in Breslau, then a German city. She was the youngest of eleven children in a Jewish family. Her

father died before she was two. Her mother, Auguste Stein-Courant, was left with the children.

Around the age of fourteen she let go of her parents' faith and called herself an atheist. She studied in Breslau, Göttingen and Freiburg and in 1916 earned her doctorate with a thesis on empathy: how do you understand what another person is experiencing? She became a student of the philosopher Edmund Husserl, one of the great thinkers of her time.

On New Year's Day 1922 she was baptized. According to the statement the Dutch bishops issued about her in 1998, the life story of Teresa of Ávila played a large role in this. Later, in 1938, she wrote to a sister that whoever seeks the truth seeks God, even if he does not know it himself. She taught, until the National Socialists came to power in 1933. As a woman of Jewish descent she was no longer allowed to teach. That same year she entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne. She received the religious name Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, Teresia Benedicta of the Cross.

She did not choose that name lightly. This is how she told it in 1933 to someone close to her: she had told the Lord that she understood that His cross was now being laid on the Jewish people, and that she wanted to bear it willingly. Her words on the subject are short. She said, so it is passed on: that I would do.

There is much more to tell about her years in Cologne. I will leave it here, because this chapter is about another moment.

New Year's Eve 1938

November 9, 1938, was Kristallnacht, the night of great violence against Jews in Germany. After that, her order decided to bring her to safety, outside Germany.

On December 31, 1938, Edith Stein arrived in Echt. The convent that had been founded half a century earlier by sisters from Cologne now took in a sister from Cologne.

Her sister Rosa wanted to follow her. Rosa was born in 1883 and had looked after the family for years. On Christmas Eve 1936 she too had been baptized in Cologne. In April 1939 she traveled to Belgium, to a woman who presented herself as a member of the Third Order of the Carmel and was going to help her further. That woman turned out to be a swindler, and Rosa lost almost all her belongings. According to the notes in the edition of Edith's letters, she arrived in Echt with almost nothing.

Rosa did not become an enclosed nun. She joined the Third Order, for believers who live outside the enclosure, and did for the convent what had to be done outside the walls.

In this story Rosa often stands in the shadow of her sister. She had looked after the family for years, arrived in Echt with almost nothing and did the work outside the walls there. On Christmas Eve 1936 she had chosen Christ for herself, and now she stood in a foreign country on the threshold of the enclosure.

The cross as a subject of study

In Echt Edith kept writing. In 1941 she worked on a study of the early Christian writer Dionysius. After that she began a book on John of the Cross, the Spanish poet and mystic who, together with Teresa of Ávila, had reformed the Carmel. It was given the title *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, the science of the cross. It appeared only in 1950, eight years after her death.

Meanwhile the Netherlands too was occupied. In May 1940 Germany invaded the country, and the measures against Jews that Edith knew from Germany now came here as well. To the occu-

pier it made no difference whether someone had been baptized. Whoever had Jewish parents was a Jew.

Edith wrote about it calmly. On December 31, 1941, she reported in a letter that if they could not get away, they would in any case be taken away by the authorities. She had already prepared for it. On June 9, 1939, she had written a will in which she asked the Lord to accept her life and her death. From now on, she wrote, she accepted the death God had destined for her, with joy and in complete surrender to His holiest will. On Passion Sunday 1939 she had already asked permission to offer herself to the Sacred Heart as an offering of atonement for true peace.

A way out was sought. A convent of Carmelite nuns in Le Pâquier, in Switzerland, was willing to take her in. On Sunday, July 5, 1942, the sisters there voted by secret ballot, and the decision was unanimous: she could come, for an indefinite time. Only the visa never came. A place also had to be found for Rosa, and Edith had already asked a friend in Switzerland about that. The answer of the Swiss authorities was negative. It came only when Edith Stein was already dead.

In Le Pâquier the sisters voted unanimously to take in a woman from Echt, for an indefinite time. Jesus called such hospitality something done to Himself: *I was a stranger and you took Me in* (Matthew 25:35). That the visa did not come does not make their decision any smaller.

On July 29, 1942, four days before the arrest, Edith wrote to an acquaintance that whatever God arranges, she accepts it.

According to a story told about her, she also postponed her departure herself, out of concern that the prioress in Echt would otherwise be arrested. I have found that story only in a Swiss report on new research into her last months, and there it is stated cautiously.

A telegram on Saturday, July 11

In July 1942 the great deportations from the Netherlands began. On July 15 the first train left Westerbork, with Auschwitz as its destination.

The large churches consulted one another in those years in the Interkerkelijk Contact (Inter-Church Contact). Roman Catholics and Protestants sat at one table there, something that had long been far from a matter of course in the Netherlands. On Saturday, July 11, 1942, they jointly sent a telegram to Reich Commissioner Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the highest German administrator in the Netherlands. The Roman Catholic bishops signed, and with them most of the Protestant churches, as well as the Mennonites and the Remonstrants. They protested against the deportation of Jews and of Dutch people who had to work in Germany. The action against the Jews, they wrote, had already shocked them deeply.

In that telegram they stood up for more people than just their own members. Proverbs says: *Open your mouth for the speechless, in the cause of all who are appointed to die* (Proverbs 31:8). Churches that had long lived past one another did this together that Saturday.

The Germans answered with an offer. It stands in black and white in a letter that a German diplomat in The Hague sent to Berlin on July 31, 1942. Jews who had been baptized before January 1, 1941, would not be deported. The churches could stand up for their own members. There was a condition attached, though: they were no longer to speak up for the other Jews.

How would you have chosen? For a church leadership in 1942 this was no question on paper. On one side were the names of church members you might be able to save. On the other was the question of whether you were allowed to stay silent about all the others.

Friday, July 24: a ban

The churches wanted to have the text of the telegram read aloud in the services on Sunday, July 26, so that the faithful would know what their leaders had done. The occupier forbade it. According to the German letter of July 31, the ban came on July 24.

Here the paths parted. The synod of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk decided not to read out the telegram. The German letter shows that not every minister kept to that. In a number of smaller churches the telegram was read aloud as well. According to the same letter, the small Lutheran church had refused to take part from the start.

The Catholic bishops held to their plan. Their pastoral letter, dated July 20, gave the full text of the telegram. A pastoral letter is a letter from the bishops to all the faithful, read aloud from the pulpit at Mass. According to the life story of Edith Stein that her Cologne prioress wrote after the war, Archbishop Johannes de Jong of Utrecht refused on July 24 to strike the text of the telegram.

I do not want to judge too quickly here. Saying afterward who was brave and who was not is easy. The Hervormde synod tried to save the people who could still be saved. The bishops chose to break the silence. Both choices were made by people who did not know how it would end.

Sunday, July 26: the letter from the pulpit

On Sunday, July 26, 1942, the letter was read aloud in every Catholic church in the Netherlands, at every Mass. So in Echt too. The text opened by stating that it was a time of great need, spiritual and material. Then the bishops named two forms of that need: the persecution of the Jews and the fate of the people who had to work abroad.

An American Catholic magazine discussed the German documents about these weeks in 1998. It writes that in their letter the bishops also quoted the words of Jesus about Jerusalem from the Gospel of Luke. I have not been able to see the full letter myself, so I pass that on as it stands there.

In the churches it stayed quiet for a week after that. On the German side it did not.

In secret reports from the last days of July, published in 1980 from the collection of the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (the Dutch State Institute for War Documentation), stands Seyss-Inquart's reaction. Because the Catholic bishops had meddled in something that was not their business, the Catholic Jews would now be deported too. No further intervention would be allowed.

On Sunday, August 2, General Commissioner Schmidt, one of the highest German administrators, said it out loud in a speech. According to the life story of Edith Stein, he called the arrests a reprisal for the letter of the bishops.

Sunday, August 2: five minutes

That same day Catholics of Jewish descent were arrested all over the Netherlands. In Berkel-Enschot the police took two Löb sisters from the convent Koningsoord, and after that three of their brothers from the abbey Koningshoeven. A Jewish doctor, Lisamaria Meirowsky, who worked as a portress in a Trappist monastery in that area, was also arrested. In Limburg it concerned thirty people, according to the historians Annelies and Herman van Rens. Most of them were released later.

In Echt the police came to the Bovenste Straat for Edith and Rosa. The Carmel later recorded what happened. Two SS men stood at the door and gave Sister Benedicta five minutes. The prioress, Mother

Antonia, told them that steps had already been taken to have the two sisters taken in by Swiss convents. Edith herself explained her plans to the spokesman of the SS. She asked for travel papers from the Swiss consul in The Hague, and a note was hastily drawn up, asking him to help them across the border as quickly as possible. Who wrote that note, Edith or Rosa, is said differently in the sources.

It did not help. Outside stood a crowd, and according to the Carmel's account the people protested loudly. The two sisters got in, and then the van drove away. Nobody knew where to.

The best-known line of that afternoon is that Edith took her terrified sister by the hand and said: "Come, Rosa, we go for our people." The Dutch bishops included those words in 1998 in their statement on her canonization. A Swiss report on new research points out that the line comes from one sister, and that she did not confirm it on another occasion. It may have been said that way. It is not certain. What is certain is the tile on the Peijerstraat. Five o'clock in the afternoon.

It was the last arrest of that day, so it is told. Rosa was fifty-eight, Edith fifty.

Amersfoort, Westerbork, and then the east

The sisters were taken to camp Amersfoort, in the night of August 2 to 3. In the night of August 3 to 4 they were taken on to Westerbork, the transit camp in Drenthe. They were there only a few days, from about August 4 to 7.

There are stories about those days from people who were there. They do not always give the name, but they say the same thing. Edith was calm. She comforted other women. Edith washed the children, combed their hair and made sure they got something to

eat. In Amersfoort, so it is told, she became the spiritual leader of the group, without anyone saying so out loud.

She herself wrote to the prioress in Echt on August 4: "We are very calm and cheerful." And after that: "Now we have a chance to experience a little how to live purely from within." A day later she reported that since the previous day every petition by Catholic Jews had been forbidden. A note in the margin of the first letter says: August 5, no longer possible. On August 6 she asked for the next volume of the breviary, the prayer book of the order. So far, she wrote, she had been able to pray gloriously. She also asked for woolen stockings, blankets and her identity card and ration cards.

Two men, Pierre Cuypers and Piet van Kempen, brought the requested things to the camp. They came back with the news that Edith did not know how long she would stay there. A rumor went around that a transport would leave for Silesia the next day, but nobody knew for sure. In a note of August 6, which came out through the mother of a sister, it was put as a question: tomorrow a transport to Silesia or Czechoslovakia?

Rosa had her own message. She wrote to the Swiss consulate in Amsterdam: help us across the border as quickly as possible. It no longer arrived.

Lisamaria Meirowsky was in Westerbork too. On August 6, on the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, she wrote to her confessor. She had, she said, complete trust in God and had surrendered herself entirely to His will. She saw her path as a grace. She was going, she wrote, to bear witness to Jesus Christ together with the sisters and with the bishops. Her letter was published in 1956 in the book *Dying We Live*. She was one of the Catholics of Jewish descent who were on the same transport that week.

A Dutch official in Westerbork is said to have been so impressed by Edith's calm that he offered her an escape plan. She turned it down, so it is told: accepting it would have been her complete destruction. I have this story only from general works, without a name or date. So you may read it as what it is: a story that is going around.

On August 7 a train left for Auschwitz. On the way, at a stop in Schifferstadt, Edith threw a note out of the wagon. On it was written: "On the way ad orientem. Sr Teresa Benedicta a Cruce. Edith Stein." Toward the east. She connected it with the Oriens, the Dayspring, an old Christian image for the risen Messiah.

An employee of the post office who knew her spoke to her, according to a report from 1982, at the station of Breslau, the city where she was born. He concludes from it that she knew then that she would die. His name is not given.

According to the official records, Edith and Rosa Stein were murdered in the gas chamber on August 9, 1942. Edith was fifty. According to the research of Van Rens, ninety-two Catholics of Jewish descent from the Netherlands died in Auschwitz that day, among them about ten people from Limburg. The researcher Rainer Schmidt of the Edith Stein Jahrbuch has raised questions about that date. In the confusion of Auschwitz in 1942 the registers do not always add up, and he considers it possible that she lived longer. We know for certain only that she left Westerbork and did not return.

How many people were arrested in total on August 2 is less certain than you would expect. According to police reports it was about 244 people. A regional source says 245. Other publications come to well over four hundred or even seven hundred. The death tolls also differ. I give the lowest numbers, because they are the best supported, and I add that the discussion is not closed.

Did the letter cost them their lives?

Here I must be careful. In Catholic books about Edith Stein it is often said that she died because the bishops spoke. The Vatican too, at her canonization, called her arrest an act of reprisal for the letter.

Much points in that direction. The German documents themselves make the connection, and Schmidt said it in public. The order in time is clear: first the letter, a week later the arrests. And it was precisely the Catholics of Jewish descent who were arrested.

There are other facts as well. The German promise was conditional and, as the same letter of July 31 shows, provisional. The roughly four thousand Christians of Jewish descent were to be held temporarily in a camp in the Netherlands. According to the historian Kelvin Crombie, Seyss-Inquart said in private that he would deport baptized Jews at a moment that suited him politically. In that case the letter mainly determined when the Catholics would be next, and less whether it would happen. What would have happened to Edith and Rosa without the letter, no one can say. Even before the letter they needed a visa to get away, and it never came.

There is also a story going around that Pope Pius XII became more careful about open protest because of what happened in the Netherlands. A Catholic theologian who wrote about it in 2012 presents it as something that is said, not as an established fact. I leave it there too.

What later happened to the Jews baptized as Protestants, I have not been able to establish with a reliable source for this chapter. I therefore pass no judgment on which choice in July 1942 saved more lives. What I do know: the bishops spoke, and they knew that could carry a price. The Hervormde synod kept silent about the telegram, and that choice had a price too.

A monument on the church square

On May 1, 1987, Edith Stein was beatified in Cologne. On October 11, 1998, Pope John Paul II declared her a saint in Rome, as a martyr. Two weeks later, on October 24, 1998, a new monument to her was unveiled in front of the Sint-Landricuskerk in Echt. The next day there was a festive service in the church and then a silent march through the town.

Not everyone was glad about the canonization. Jewish critics feared that the Church was thereby silently sending out a call for Jews to convert. Edith Stein was murdered because she was Jewish, and for that reason it is a sensitive matter for many to honor her as a Christian martyr. The Dutch bishops wrote in 1998 that in honoring Edith Stein they asked for respect and modesty toward the many Jews who remained faithful to the faith of their ancestors. They called her a daughter of Israel.

They also wrote there about God's lasting faithfulness to the Jewish people. Paul puts it like this in his letter to the Romans: *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (Romans 11:29).

The tile and the chapel

In 1999 an Edith Stein altar was blessed in the church. Today the parish is officially named after Saint Landricus and Saint Edith Stein. It is the first parish in Limburg to bear her name.

I am curious what you will experience when you stand in Echt. A small Limburg town, a quiet street, a convent wall. Of what happened in 1942 there is little to see. There is no camp, no railway line, no building that explains anything. There is a convent chapel, a monument on a church square and a tile on a wall.

Stand for a moment in front of number 16 on the Peijerstraat. Two names, a date, a time. Five o'clock in the afternoon, on a Sunday in August, a week after the bishops had spoken. There stood two sisters: one a philosopher who had sought the truth and found God, the other the woman who had cared for the family all her life.

Go there yourself

The Carmelite convent stands at Bovenste Straat 48 in Echt, in central Limburg. The building by Pierre Cuypers is a national monument. Beside the entrance stands the memorial stone for Edith Stein. According to Stichting Dr. Edith Stein Echt (the Dr. Edith Stein Echt Foundation), the chapel is open every day and you can see a small room connected with her. According to the monuments register, Carmelite nuns from Maastricht have lived there since 1987. It is a convent, not a museum.

On the square in front of the Sint-Landricuskerk stands the Edith Stein monument from 1998. In the church, which is now a pilgrimage church for Saint Edith Stein, you find two stained glass windows and a triptych about her life, the Edith Stein altar and, according to the foundation, her original choir cloak. The tile hangs on the house at Peijerstraat 16. By the town hall stands the war memorial of Echt, which also bears the names of Edith and Rosa Stein. Behind the convent lies the Edith Steinstraat.

The foundation has laid out an Edith Stein route along five points, which ends at the Cultuurhuis Edith Stein (the Edith Stein Culture House). There you find a library, a permanent photo exhibition and a film about her life. The culture house is open only on limited days. For opening times and guided tours, check the website of Stichting Dr. Edith Stein Echt. Hart van Limburg also offers a guided tour.

If you want to go further, you can visit Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork (the Westerbork Camp Memorial Center) in Drenthe or Kamp Amersfoort, the two places where Edith and Rosa spent their last days in the Netherlands.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the settlement of Carmelite nuns from Cologne in Echt in 1875 and the building of the convent by Cuypers in 1879 and 1880; Edith Stein's birth on October 12, 1891, in Breslau, her baptism in 1922 and her entry into the convent in Cologne in 1933; her arrival in Echt on December 31, 1938; Rosa's detour through Belgium; the unanimous acceptance by the Carmel of Le Pâquier on July 5, 1942; the telegram of the churches of July 11, 1942; the German promise for Jews baptized before January 1, 1941; the ban of July 24; the reading of the pastoral letter in all Catholic churches on July 26, 1942; the decision of the Hervormde synod not to read out the telegram; the arrests of Catholics of Jewish descent on August 2, 1942 and the German statement that this was reprisal; the transport via Amersfoort and Westerbork to Auschwitz; beatification and canonization in 1987 and 1998; the memorials in Echt.

From her own words and letters (via editions of letters and the Carmel): the will of June 9, 1939 and the request on Passion Sunday 1939; the letter about the chance of deportation; the letter of July 29, 1942 (whatever God arranges, I accept it); the letter of December 31, 1941; the letters and notes from Westerbork of August 4, 5 and 6 and the margin note about the forbidden petitions; the note from the train near Schifferstadt; her sentence from 1938 that whoever seeks the truth seeks God. I have read these texts in summaries and excerpts in articles (Carmelite Institute, Rorate Caeli, Hozana), not in the full edition of the letters. The sentences from the letters

of August 4 and the note from the train are quoted in the English wording of those sources. The other sentences above are retold, not translated word for word.

Only from tradition or own testimony: the words "Come, Rosa, we go for our people" (one source calls them a later, legendary addition; another says that the sister who passed them on did not always confirm them); that Edith postponed her departure for Switzerland out of concern for the prioress; that Archbishop De Jong refused to strike the text of the telegram (from the life story by her Cologne prioress); the conversation in 1933 about the cross of the Jewish people (one source, without the name of the person she spoke with); the descriptions of Edith's behavior in Amersfoort and Westerbork (several accounts without names); the offer by a Dutch official to flee and her answer; the conversation with the post office employee in Breslau, recorded without a name; the letter of Lisamaria Meirowsky (found through a blog that refers to *Dying We Live*, 1956; I did not see the book itself).

Unconfirmed or disputed:

- *Date of death.* August 9, 1942, is the official date, doubted by Rainer Schmidt.
- *Number arrested.* The total number of arrested is about 244 according to police reports, 245 according to a regional source, well over 400 or even 700 according to other publications. The death tolls also differ: 92 Catholics according to Van Rens, 113 according to Crombie and other authors. Van Rens gives August 3 for the arrests, most sources August 2.
- *Date in the bishops' statement.* The statement of the bishops from 1998 gives July 27 for the reading of the letter. That is evidently a mistake, because July 26, 1942, was the Sunday.
- *Seyss-Inquart.* That he later wanted to deport baptized Jews after all comes only from a reading by Kelvin Crombie.

- *Pius XII.* That the letter influenced him is "said," not demonstrated.
- *Rosa's arrival.* The exact year in which Rosa arrived in Echt is not clear-cut; it is certain that she came by way of Belgium.
- *Who wrote the note to the Swiss consul.* One source has Edith draw it up during the arrest, another calls it a message from Rosa from Westerbork.
- *Pierre Cuypers and Piet van Kempen.* One source names them as men who brought things to Westerbork. There is nothing more to be found about them; no connection is made with the architect.
- *Breslau.* The conversation at the station of Breslau is placed in the source on August 7, which cannot be right if the train left Westerbork that day. I have therefore given no date.
- *Jews baptized as Protestants.* What later happened to the Jews baptized as Protestants, I have not been able to establish with an open source.

Interpretation: that the Germans presented the arrests as reprisal for the pulpit letter is certain. Whether the Catholic Jews would have been spared without that letter cannot be proven. The promise was conditional and provisional. Whether Edith Stein is a martyr is a judgment of the Church and also a sensitive question for Jewish readers. I believe with the Church that she accepted her death out of love, and I add that she was murdered because she was Jewish.

Sources for this chapter

1. Rijksmonumentenregister, monument 525532: Karmelitessenklooster Echt
2. Stichting Dr. Edith Stein Echt
3. Meertens Instituut, Bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland: Edith Stein, Echt

4. TracesOfWar, Monument Edith en Rosa Stein Echt
5. Joods Monument, Edith Teresia Hedwig Stein
6. Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, "Stein, Edith", Neue Deutsche Biographie 25 (2013)
7. Nederlandse Bisschoppenconferentie, verklaring bij de heiligverklaring van Edith Stein (1998)
8. EHRI, German letter from The Hague of July 31, 1942 on the reaction of the Dutch churches (English translation)
9. Inside the Vatican (1998) via CatholicCulture, "Secret Nazi Accounts of Events of July, 1942"
10. Carmelite Quotes, uit T.R. Posselt, *Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*, over de herderlijke brief
11. Carmelite Quotes, on the pastoral letter of 1942
12. Carmelite Quotes, on Rosa Stein, with letters of Edith Stein
13. Carmelite Quotes, het besluit van de Karmel van Le Pâquier (5 juli 1942)
14. RSI, "Edith Stein, i dubbi sugli ultimi mesi"
15. Annelies en Herman van Rens, over de jodendeportaties uit Limburg (PSHAL, 2008)
16. Brabant Remembers, "Dood in habijt"
17. Kelvin Crombie, "Jewish Christians in the Netherlands during the Holocaust" (2022)
18. Joseph A. Komonchak, "An anniversary", Commonweal (2012)
19. Vatican News Service, Teresia Benedicta a Cruce
20. Bisdom Roermond, Clavis: parochie Echt draagt naam van Edith Stein
21. Hart van Limburg, rondleiding Echt: Edith Stein
22. Wikipedia (Engels), Edith Stein
23. Rose Pacatte, "Catholic Jews and the Holocaust", National Catholic Reporter (2010)
24. Wikipedia (Engels), Carmelite Monastery, Echt

25. Carmelite Institute, Tribute to Truth: Edith Stein (pdf, with references to Posselt and the edition of the letters)
26. Rorate Caeli, 75 years Echt, August 2, 1942 (quotations from the Carmelite biography and letters)
27. Hozana, Day 5: Martyrdom, Radiance (briefje uit de trein, Schifferstadt)
28. Catholicism.org, Come, We Go for Our People
29. Hiatt Holocaust Collection, Edith Stein (College of the Holy Cross)
30. Blog Supremacy and Survival, Another Magdalen: Dr Lisamaria Meirowsky
31. Bible.com, Spreuken 31:8 (NKJV)
32. Bible.com, Romeinen 11:29 (NKJV)

Noordwijkerhout: the hall where celibacy was put to a vote

On the Langelaan in Noordwijkerhout stands a large hotel among the bulb fields. On its website it is called the NH Noordwijk Conference Centre Leeuwenhorst. It has more than five hundred rooms and well over a hundred meeting rooms, and the largest hall seats two thousand people. In spring, many rooms look out over the tulips. People come for a conference or for a few days by the sea.

The website says nothing about the history of the building. As far as I have been able to find, there is no sign to remind anyone of it. But in January 1970, more than a hundred people sat together here for four days: bishops, priests, nuns and ordinary believers. Eight bishops sat among them, a cardinal among them. In the last days they voted on a question that would divide the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands for years. May a priest marry?

A large majority of the assembly said yes. A few weeks later the pope wrote that he did not find the arguments convincing. In the years that followed, the Dutch church received bishops who thought differently from the majority in that hall.

To understand what happened here, you first need to know what kind of building this was.

A convent on high ground

The name Leeuwenhorst is much older than the hotel. In 1261 land was donated here for a convent. Around 1275 Cistercian nuns lived here, sisters who followed the strict rule of the order of Cîteaux. It was a convent for women from the nobility, the last one founded in Holland. For three centuries prayer was offered here. In the sixteenth century it went into decline, after fires and violence by iconoclasts, people who smashed church images. In 1573 or 1574 it came to an end.

Almost nothing of the convent buildings remains above ground. You can still recognize the horst, the slightly higher sandy ridge on which the convent stood. The old convent lanes and the block-shaped layout of the land are still there too. On the Leeweg stand two stone gateposts from the eighteenth century with the word "Leeuwenhorst" on them. They are a rijksmonument, a protected national monument.

Almost four centuries after the sisters left, the church came back to this ground.

"The most modern seminary building in the Netherlands"

The young diocese of Rotterdam needed its own minor seminary. That was a boarding school for boys who wanted to become priests. They received a classical secondary education and a church formation there, and afterward went on to the major seminary. The minor seminary of the diocese of Haarlem was full, and the Rotterdam boys were living for the time being at Stoutenburg castle near Amersfoort.

In 1958 the diocese bought land near Noordwijkerhout, on the site of the old convent. The new seminary was given the name Leeuwenhorst. In a large fundraising campaign, the faithful in the diocese gave a great deal of money. In 1962 the complex was finished. According to the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (Catholic Documentation Center) in Nijmegen, it was then the most modern seminary building in the Netherlands, and a source of pride for the diocese.

That pride did not last long. A few years after the opening, the number of students dropped. The school became a broader secondary school, where boys who lived at home were allowed to come as well. It did not help. By the late 1960s the building was already being used as a conference center, and in 1971 the diocese decided to sell it. As early as 1967, conferences of bishops from all over Europe had gathered here for a first joint symposium.

I find that a telling picture. A building made for future priests became the place where the church met to discuss what a priest actually is.

A book everyone wanted to read

For Catholics in the Netherlands, the 1960s were a time of great change. From 1962 to 1965 the Second Vatican Council had met in Rome. A council is a great assembly of all the bishops of the worldwide church. This council opened windows: Mass could be said in the people's own language, and there was more room for lay people and for dialogue with other churches.

In the Netherlands things moved fast. In 1966 De Nieuwe Katechismus (The New Catechism) appeared, with the subtitle "proclamation of the faith for adults." A catechism is a book that explains the faith, in the past often in questions and answers. This book was dif-

ferent. It told a story, it used ordinary language and it was meant for adults. The Hoger Katechetisch Instituut (Higher Catechetical Institute) made it, commissioned by the bishops.

The book was a success, in translation as well. According to an overview I found only on Wikipedia, more than four hundred thousand copies had been sold in the Netherlands by the end of 1967. In Rome, questions were raised. Vatican censors found no heresy in it, but judged that some parts did not agree with the teaching of the church. An appendix was added. The bishops accepted that. The authors continued to disagree.

The catechism was a sign of things to come. A few years later, Noordwijkerhout would show again how far the Netherlands and Rome could drift apart.

A council without rules

In January 1966 Bishop De Vet of Breda, on behalf of all the Dutch bishops, asked the Pastoraal Instituut van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie (the Pastoral Institute of the Dutch Church Province) to prepare a Dutch council of its own. This became the Pastoraal Concilie, the Pastoral Council. The word pastoral comes from pastor, shepherd. It was about caring for believers in daily life, not about new doctrines.

It was meant to be an open discussion. Bishops sat at the table, but so did priests, members of religious orders and ordinary believers. Even other denominations were involved. There were no rules for such an assembly, so the participants made them up as they went along. The council was meant, Cardinal Alfrink said at the opening, to give the whole People of God a chance at every level.

The council opened in November 1966. Fifteen study committees prepared the subjects, from mission work and development aid to

marriage and family, young people, religious orders, the unity of Christians, the relationship with the Jews and peace. From 1968 to 1970 the assembly met six times in the former minor seminary of Noordwijkerhout. Each diocese sent ten elected representatives. There were ten members of religious orders and fifteen people appointed by the bishops themselves. In all, about one hundred and fifty people had a vote, and each session lasted two or three days. The first was about authority in the church.

Not everyone felt represented. The Catholic trade union NKV pointed out that there were many intellectuals in it, especially in the committees, and no workers.

The man behind the organization was the Franciscan Walter Goddijn, director of the Pastoral Institute and secretary of the council. According to the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, he was nicknamed "the pope of the Netherlands." That says something about his influence. One reviewer called him a spider in the Roman Catholic web.

A fish in water

After the death of Bishop De Vet in 1967, Cardinal Bernard Alfrink became chairman of the Pastoral Institute. Alfrink was born on July 3, 1900, in Nijkerk, on the Veluwe, a wooded region in the middle of the country. In December 1955 he had been installed as Archbishop of Utrecht. He led the Dutch Catholics in the years when everything was set in motion.

Historian Ton van Schaik wrote a biography of him. A reviewer summed it up this way: Alfrink was conservative by nature and loyal to Rome, and yet he grew along with the renewal. At the Pastoral Council, according to that biography, he was "like a fish in water." In a personal conversation he could be warm, but his sharp

irony sometimes hurt people. He kept his distance, which a biographer ascribes to the seminary, where he started at the age of thirteen. A bishop later told how all the bishops called each other by their first names, except the cardinal. He kept saying "u," the formal "you."

There is also a story from 1951. When he unexpectedly became coadjutor, he reported to Cardinal De Jong. The cardinal is said to have told him that he would have preferred someone else. Alfrink answered: "So would I." His biographer calls it unproven. It does fit the man.

In Rome he was reviled, in his own country admired. The initiative for the council came from the bishops under his leadership. According to the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, he wanted to go further and make renewal possible in the leadership of the church as well. That is why those who wanted renewal loved him. Those who felt the Netherlands was going its own way distrusted him. About Rome he himself let no bad word be heard, not even when his troubles there began.

A curate behind the row of bishops

In a photograph of one of the last sessions, a young priest sits behind a row of bishops. His successor in Utrecht said of it in 2017 that he looked uncomfortable. It is the curate Ad Simonis.

Simonis was born in 1931 in Lisse, a few kilometers from Noordwijkerhout, the oldest of eleven children. In 1957 he was ordained a priest in Rotterdam. The bishops appointed him as a member of the council for the third, fourth and sixth sessions. Later he called himself a dutiful man, which is how he had been raised. As a hospital chaplain in The Hague he stood at the bedside of the sick and the dying every day. What he heard about the new church, he said, was only slogans about a new church and a new image of man.

He belonged to the small group that did not agree with the course of the majority. This minority doubted whether the assembly really represented the true Catholics of the Netherlands. They accused secretary Goddijn of steering public opinion through the media. Simonis and others complained that the representation was not right and that the draft reports had remained drafts.

In the press he was brushed aside. A leading progressive priest answered the mention of his name with a question of his own: Simonis? An unimportant voice. That is how the American weekly Time reported it.

Simonis himself put it this way later: next to Cardinal Ottaviani, a fierce defender of the old teaching, he felt liberal, and next to the theologian Hans Küng he felt conservative. About the word conservative, he said that others used it, but that he said with Paul: *Test all things; hold fast what is good.* (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

I have tried to read both sides. What stands out is that both groups believed they were being faithful to the church. One group sought faithfulness in renewal, the other in holding on to what the worldwide church taught. On which side would you have sat, if you had been in that hall?

Four days in January 1970

In January 1970 the Pastoral Council met for its fifth, next to last session. On the agenda was the office of the priest, and with it celibacy.

Celibacy is the obligation for Roman Catholic priests in the Western church not to marry. In the Bible, Paul calls remaining unmarried a gift, and he adds at once: *But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.* (1 Corinthians 7:7). The question was whether that gift should be required of every priest.

The subject drew the press. An American weekly wrote about hundreds of restless young priests in the country. It also wrote about how much the Dutch clergy was losing: in 1968 alone, two hundred and fifty of 13,400 priests had left. According to the same paper, one sentence was heard in the hall more often than any other: we do not want a break with Rome. It was a careful debate of four days.

A Dutch journal wrote that year about the possible future of the office. It named four kinds of office-bearers for the church of tomorrow: men who stayed unmarried, men who married later, men who were already married when they accepted the office, and men for whom both office and marriage were desired. A separate office for women was also discussed. The same writer spoke of weariness in the church. Some were already tired of all the talking, and at times it did indeed seem as if the real drive was gone.

In the hall, the well-known Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx defended the report on the office. According to a review of Goddijn's memoirs, he did so "not very strongly." The report was accepted in early January.

According to a German church paper, the decision was made on January 7, 1970. The assembly came out in favor of abolishing compulsory celibacy, and of allowing priests who had married to return. The result was given by the Archbishop of Utrecht in 2017, at the sixtieth anniversary of Simonis's ordination: ninety votes for, six against. The eight bishops present abstained. Simonis was one of the six who voted against. In his speech, the archbishop said it to Simonis himself: you voted against, in a hall where the great majority was enthusiastically in favor.

Six against ninety. Simonis voted against in a hall where almost everyone saw it differently, a few kilometers from Lisse, where he was born.

Cardinal Alfrink spoke as well. He said that the bishops would inform Rome and the worldwide church, and that the outcome would be something between what ought to happen and what could happen. He warned that without a solution to the question, there would very soon be no young priests left. He did not want a timetable that made the conversation with Rome impossible. That is how Time reported his words, in English, and I rendered them into Dutch. Here they are in English again, so they are not his exact words.

How the hall reacted, I cannot tell. There is no recording that I have been able to find, and the reports name no names. What I do know is how much was at stake for these people. A priest who wanted to marry and still be a priest suddenly had a majority behind him in the Netherlands. In Rome he did not.

The empty chair of the internuncio

According to the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, this session drew the most international interest.

One man showed how Rome felt about it. The internuncio Angelo Felici was the pope's representative in the Netherlands, a kind of Vatican ambassador. The Katholiek Documentatiecentrum writes that he boycotted the session on celibacy. According to Wikipedia, he left the hall in protest when the proposal was put to a vote. From that moment on, the conflict with Rome was visible to everyone.

The bishops faced a hard choice. They had wanted the council themselves, and now the assembly had come out in favor of something the pope had warned against beforehand. Shortly before the session, Paul VI had written to Alfrink and the other bishops. The pope called celibacy an incomparable treasure of the Latin church. He asked the bishops to say calmly and without reserve that they

were in full agreement with the worldwide church on the disputed points. That is how the British weekly The Tablet reported it.

According to Wikipedia, the bishops adopted the position on January 19, 1970. I have not found that date in a second source. But the letter the pope wrote two weeks later does show that public statements had come from the Netherlands that worried him.

A letter to Cardinal Villot

On February 2, 1970, Pope Paul VI wrote a letter to his Secretary of State, Cardinal Jean Villot. The letter, which was about the Netherlands, is still on the Vatican website.

The pope wrote that the public statements from the Netherlands had caused him deep sorrow. He called the Dutch church a highly deserving part of the body of Christ. He asked himself whether he had fallen short somewhere, and he asked it in humble and entirely inward sincerity. On the matter itself he was clear. He called the bond between priesthood and celibacy an extremely precious and irreplaceable good for the Latin church. He did not find the arguments from the Netherlands convincing. Priests who had married could not be given back their office by the church. About ordaining older married men in areas of great need, he had serious reservations. Such a change, he feared, could become a dangerous illusion. He asked the Dutch bishops to look at the matter again together with Rome, in prayer and in love. And he asked for generous prayers from the faithful who suffer in silence, and he gave his blessing to the priests who stayed faithful.

One thing stands out in an otherwise firm letter: the question whether he himself had fallen short somewhere. In Psalm 139 the poet prays: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;* (Psalm 139:23).

Cardinal Alfrink went to Rome. He was to try to separate priestly office from celibacy for the Netherlands. He did not succeed. In 2018 Paul Hamans wrote a major book about the council. A reviewer of it sees in that failed journey and the appointments that followed the beginning of a polarization that would last a long time. The good relationship between Alfrink and Pope Paul VI was lost as well.

Later Alfrink would find out how far things had gone. After his seventy-fifth birthday, his request for retirement was still on its way when Rome let him know that the pope had already granted it. He read in it a sign that Rome wanted to be rid of him quickly.

In the course of 1970 the assembly met one more time, on April 8, for the sixth and last session. After that, the Pastoral Council was over. In 1972 the Pastoral Institute closed its doors.

A curate becomes a bishop

On December 30, 1970, almost a year after the vote, Pope Paul VI appointed a new Bishop of Rotterdam: Ad Simonis, the curate who had voted against in Noordwijkerhout. His successor later called the appointment unexpected.

Many progressive Catholics in Rotterdam were angry. The chapter, the body of priests that advises the bishop, had put forward three candidates, and Rome passed them over. According to Time, the Vatican pointed out that Simonis had finished second in the suggestions of priests and deanery councils. Those who were unhappy said that this result had come about through a split vote. The chapter had placed him eighth. Internuncio Felici called the chapter's list manipulated.

Simonis himself did not want it. He said later that he had resisted, but gave in when they asked him again. "I would gladly have stayed

a parish priest." Cardinal Alfrink was not happy about it either, but Simonis had the support of many ordinary believers.

On March 20, 1971, Simonis was consecrated bishop in Rotterdam. His successor in Utrecht watched it on television as a seventeen-year-old. Cardinal Alfrink was one of the bishops who laid hands on him. That image stays with me: the chairman of the institute that had organized the council, consecrating the man who had voted against it.

What Alfrink thought of the appointment is not in my sources, except the hint that he was not happy about it. What is there is that he laid hands on Simonis. Paul asks the church in Ephesus to live *with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,* (Ephesians 4:2). Bearing with one another is something other than agreeing with one another.

A year later came a second appointment. In 1972 Joannes Gijsen became Bishop of Roermond. According to a biographical sketch on Wikipedia, he too had opposed the course of the council. The same text says that Alfrink traveled to Rome to object, and was told that he had to consecrate Gijsen himself. I have not been able to check that story in any second source.

According to historian Ton van Schaik, both appointments caused "quite a lot of public uproar." Those who had hoped for renewal saw them as a brake. Those who felt the council had gone too far saw them as a restoration. The Katholiek Documentatiecentrum writes that after the council Rome hardened its position and blocked renewal through the appointment of bishops. A look back in the journal Ons Erfdeel says that the approach of Noordwijkerhout came across in Rome as a provocation. Both sentences are true, and they show how differently the same years were experienced. The same look back lets the writer draw his own conclusion: the

radicals of the late 1960s had brought the Dutch church under Roman supervision, and turned it into a small right-wing remnant.

"A real war of religion"

Simonis later became Archbishop of Utrecht and, in 1985, a cardinal. He had been coadjutor in Utrecht since 1983. His position brought him much criticism and ridicule, also within the church. When he took office in Utrecht, people held up signs that said: Simonis, go to Rome. About the years after the council he often said that it was "a real war of religion." That is how his successor told it in 2017.

About himself he said what he had always said: "I have never changed." The world had changed, he felt, not he. In the early 1980s, so his successor knows, he predicted that the church in the Netherlands would become very small. He preferred convincing to forcing, and felt that people need time to change. Later the picture became milder. He became a wise grandfather instead of a dogmatic extremist, an American news site wrote at his death.

War is a big word, and it was his own word. Priests who had married did not get their office back. The majority of Noordwijkerhout saw its decision carried out nowhere. The minority that had voted against gained a voice in the new bishops, but also the criticism that came with it.

Walter Goddijn paid a price too. In his memoirs, which a reviewer calls a defense of his own life, he tells how he became a scapegoat. He received a professorship in Tilburg, which he himself called a desert. The bishops passed him over when a secretary-general of the church province was chosen, and he never got over that. He believed that the present misery in the church could have been prevented if celibacy had been dropped in 1970. The reviewer

found that a claim that does not hold automatically, because churches without that rule struggle with similar problems.

In January 1980 Pope John Paul II called the Dutch bishops together for a special synod in Rome, under his own chairmanship. There the bishops chose by majority to follow the line of the worldwide church, including on celibacy. A German church paper wrote in 2020 that with this, the decisions of Noordwijkerhout became a dead letter.

By then Alfrink had already retired. He died in 1987.

What is left of Leeuwenhorst

It is hard to write about the Pastoral Council without taking sides. I have tried. What I see are people who all loved the church and disagreed painfully about what that love required. A cardinal standing between his own faithful and his friend in Rome. A curate who voted against the current and later paid a high price for it, in ridicule and criticism. Priests who wanted to marry and keep their calling. A pope who asked himself whether he had fallen short.

The Katholiek Documentatiecentrum writes that as far as concrete results go, the council is history. As an experiment, a church that met with all its members at once, it may yet take on meaning.

If you drive along the Langelaan today, you see a hotel with a large parking lot among the bulb fields. Behind the windows, meetings are still held. Nearby, under the ground, lies what remains of a convent where sisters prayed for three centuries. And somewhere on this spot, in January 1970, more than a hundred people sat together and voted for or against, or abstained.

Go there yourself

The hotel and conference center NH Noordwijk Conference Centre Leeuwenhorst is at Langelaan 3 in Noordwijkerhout, among the bulb fields. It is an ordinary hotel, where you can eat or have a drink. There is no memorial to the Pastoral Council, and the website tells nothing about the history of the building. I have not been able to find out whether the 1962 complex is still standing in full. Check the NH Hotels website for directions and opening hours.

If you want to see something of the old convent, go to the Leeweg. At number 19 stand two stone gateposts from the eighteenth century with the inscription "Leeuwenhorst," a national monument. The high sandy ridge of the convent and the old lanes can still be recognized in the landscape.

Nearby is the Nieuw Leeuwenhorst estate of Zuid-Hollands Landschap, a nature conservation trust. The Noordwijk tourist office describes a forest walk there, along a pond that was once a German anti-tank ditch and past places that recall the Second World War. In spring you can combine your visit with the flowering bulb fields.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the abbey of Leeuwenhorst (13th to 16th century) on this site; the building of the minor seminary of the diocese of Rotterdam (land bought in 1958, finished in 1962) and its use as a conference center from the late 1960s; the setup of the Pastoral Council (opened November 1966, six plenary sessions from 1968 to 1970 in Noordwijkerhout); the role of Walter Goddijn and Cardinal Alfrink; the overwhelming majority against compulsory celibacy in January 1970; the boycott by internuncio Felici; the letter of Paul VI of February 2, 1970; the appointment of Simonis on December 30, 1970, and his consecration on March

20, 1971; the public uproar over the appointments of Simonis and Gijsen; the synod of 1980.

From the own words of those involved:

- Paul VI: the letter to Villot of February 2, 1970 (Portuguese text on vatican.va, retold by me). The letter to Alfrink and the bishops comes only from the report in The Tablet of January 17, 1970. The date of that letter is not certain; the Vatican lists a letter to the Dutch episcopate of January 12, 1970.
- Simonis: the remark about Ottaviani and Küng (Time, January 1971, retold); the words about the label conservative, about the appointment, about staying a parish priest, about his sense of duty and about the slogans (article in Crux, 2020, without a source for the original interview, retold); "I have never changed" and "a real war of religion" (via the speech of his successor in 2017).
- Alfrink: his opening words about the People of God (Wikipedia, quoted); his words in January 1970 (Time, January 19, 1970, translated by me from English into Dutch, and here rendered back into English); "So would I" in 1951 (biographer Van Schaik: unproven).
- Goddijn: his memoirs (*Kardinale kwesties*), only through the review by Van Schaik; I did not read the book myself.
- A journal (Streven, 1969 or 1970) on four kinds of office-bearers and on the weariness; I saw only the text that DBNL gives.

Only from tradition or own testimony: the exact result (90 for, 6 against, eight bishops abstaining) and the vote against by Simonis, told by his successor in 2017; the expression "a real war of religion," used by Simonis himself; Simonis as a hospital chaplain in The Hague (Crux; the speech of 2017 and Wikipedia call him a curate, Time calls him a parish priest in The Hague in 1971); that the

Archbishop of Utrecht watched the consecration on television as a seventeen-year-old (his own memory).

Unconfirmed or disputed:

- *The figures.* I found the result of 90 to 6 in only one source, a speech. That the majority was overwhelming is stated in every source I read.
- *Date of the vote.* January 7, 1970 comes from one source, a German church paper. Time wrote about the result on January 19, 1970.
- *Result.* At the time, Time reported 93 votes for and 2 against in the vote on compulsory celibacy, and 72 votes for admitting women to all church offices. The result of 90 to 6 comes from the speech of 2017. I have not been able to resolve that difference; in both versions the vote against by Simonis stands as a minority.
- *The position of the bishops* on January 19, 1970 (Wikipedia only).
- *Alfrink's journey to Rome* to contest the appointment of Gijsen (Wikipedia only).
- *The sales figures* of De Nieuwe Katechismus (Wikipedia only), and the date of the bishops' statement of October 15, 1968, which I did not use.
- *The dates of the sessions.* First session January 3, 1968, last April 8, 1970, chairman Piet Steenkamp (Wikipedia only).
- *The building.* Whether the seminary building of 1962 still exists in full.
- *The statement about the chapter.* That the chapter's list was "manipulated" is Felici's accusation; what the Vatican said about the suggestions of priests comes from Time and has not been independently checked.

Interpretation: whether Rome saved or held back the Dutch church with these appointments depends on whom you ask. Sources from

both sides agree that the polarization that followed lasted a long time.

Sources for this chapter

1. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, Pastoraal Concilie van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie
2. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, Pastoraal Instituut van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie
3. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, Klein-seminarie Leeuwenhorst, Noordwijkerhout
4. Ton H.M. van Schaik, review of W. Goddijn, Kardinale kwesties (BMGN, 2005)
5. Simon Beentjes, review of P. Hamans, Het pastoraal concilie (Tijdschrift voor Theologie, 2020)
6. Aartsbisdom Utrecht, toespraak bij 60 jaar priesterschap van kardinaal Simonis (2017)
7. Aartsbisdom Utrecht, Biography of Adrianus Cardinal Simonis
8. Paulus VI, letter to Cardinal Villot on ecclesiastical celibacy, February 2, 1970
9. Larousse, Journal de l'année 1970, La vie religieuse
10. Frans Oudejans on Van Schaik, Alfrink, een biografie (Ons Erfdeel, 1999)
11. Ons Erfdeel, jaargang 49 (2006), "Toch vrij verschillend"
12. Ton H.M. van Schaik, Kardinaal Bernard Alfrink (1900-1987) en Utrecht
13. Polygoon, installatie van mgr. Alfrink tot aartsbisschop van Utrecht, 4 december 1955
14. Konradsblatt, via IHU Unisinos, 5 februari 2020
15. Maarten van den Bos, "Een doodgewoon Rooms boek?" (Trajecta, 2021)

16. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum, archief Hoger Katechetisch Instituut
17. Wikipedia, Pastoraal Concilie van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie
18. Wikipedia, Joannes Gijsen
19. Wikipedia, Dutch Catechism
20. Gemeente Noordwijk, cultuurhistorisch onderzoek Oud Leeuwenhorst
21. Monasteries Geoplaza (VU), Leeuwenhorst
22. Rijksmonumentenregister, monument 30775
23. Noordwijk.info, boswandeling Nieuw Leeuwenhorst
24. NH Hotels, NH Noordwijk Conference Centre Leeuwenhorst
25. Time, Religion: Celibacy, No! (19 januari 1970)
26. Time, Religion: More Trouble in Holland (18 januari 1971)
27. The Tablet, Celibacy and ordination of women dominate debate (17 januari 1970)
28. Crux, Dutch cardinal tried to hold church together during turbulent times (2020)
29. Streven, over het ambt en het Pastoraal Concilie (DBNL)
30. Bible.com, 1 Korinthe 7:7 (NKJV)
31. Bible.com, Psalm 139:23 (NKJV)
32. Bible.com, Efeze 4:2 (NKJV)
33. Bible.com, 1 Thessalonicenzen 5:21 (NKJV)

Biddinghuizen: five hundred campers and a field in the polder

It is Sunday morning, Pentecost 2026, and on the field in Biddinghuizen stands a large, empty cross. In and around the Big Tent, about twenty thousand people have gathered. Those who no longer fit in the tent follow the service from the fields on large screens. Thousands of people receive a small piece of bread and a little cup. Someone on the stage says that through the blood of Jesus they are forgiven and reconciled to God. That is how reports of the service put it afterward. It is the service of the Lord's Supper, on the grounds where, two months later, a pop festival will stand.

On the Spijkweg in Biddinghuizen, in the middle of the Flevopolder, land reclaimed from the former Zuiderzee, the roller coasters of Walibi Holland rise above the flat country. Next to the amusement park lies an event site of about eighty hectares, around two hundred acres. In summer it hosts Lowlands, the pop festival. Defqon.1 is held there too.

On the Pentecost weekend in May, something else stands there. From May 22 to 25, 2026, Stichting Opwekking (the Opwekking Foundation) held its Pinksterconferentie, its Pentecost Conference,

here for the fifty-sixth time. The theme was "I Am," after the name God made known to Moses at the burning bush. There were more than eighty-five seminars, divided over seven learning tracks. The organizers expected a record. A year earlier, cars on their way to Biddinghuizen had been stuck in a long traffic jam. This time there were extra access roads and fixed time slots for arriving.

From the entrance runs the Boulevard, under a footbridge. On the main grounds lies the Plaza, the busy square that leads to every other part. In a large tent, the EXPO, about fifty organizations have a stand: mission work, relief work, Bible schools. There is a program for children, for teenagers and for young people. In the Bijzondere Mensen Tent, the Special People Tent, people with an intellectual disability come together. The organizers speak of about sixty thousand visitors a year.

It began in 1971, with about five hundred people at a family camp. How did a camping weekend become one of the largest festivals in the Netherlands? To understand that, you have to go further back, to a man who left the Leger des Heils (the Salvation Army).

A former soldier in Amsterdam

In 1907 something began in Amsterdam that would later be called the Pentecostal movement in the Netherlands. The man who set it in motion was Gerrit Polman, a former soldier of the Salvation Army. Together with his wife, he led the Pinkstergemeente (Pentecostal church) in Amsterdam until about 1930. It was the center of the first Dutch Pentecostal believers.

What is a Pentecostal church? It is a church that puts strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, as the Bible describes it in the book of Acts. There we read how the first followers of Jesus were together at the Jewish feast of Pentecost: *When the Day of Pentecost had fully*

come, they were all with one accord in one place. (Acts 2:1). Then the Spirit came upon them. Pentecostal believers expect God to work in that way today as well, with healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues, a form of prayer in a language the person praying does not know.

For a long time the movement stayed small. A count later used by researchers arrives at 272 followers in the whole of the Netherlands for 1920. In 1960 there were 5,590. Most Dutch people had never heard of it, and those who had often found it strange.

In 1952 a number of churches joined together in a broederschap, a brotherhood or fellowship of churches. As early as 1948 the Evangelische Alliantie (Evangelical Alliance) had been founded, a fellowship of Protestants from various churches who put personal faith and the Bible first. They were small steps. In the 1950s things began to move.

An American and a boy from Utrecht

In 1958 the American evangelist T.L. Osborn came to the Netherlands. According to an inventory of the archive of the Broederschap van Pinkstergemeenten (Fellowship of Pentecostal Churches), made by the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, his campaign gave the Dutch Pentecostal movement "a tremendous boost." By 1961 the membership of the Fellowship had doubled in two years, to fifty pastors.

New movements arose as well. Karel Hoekendijk led Stromen van Kracht (Streams of Power). Johan Maasbach built up his Wereldzending (World Mission). And Karel's son Ben began to preach too. It was a family of preachers and missionaries, a Christian news agency wrote at his death.

Ben Hoekendijk was born in 1938 in Baarn. According to the life stories written about him, in 1956 he preached on the streets of Utrecht with a youth group, and in 1958 he was involved in Osborn's campaign. In August 1959 he held his first tent campaign of his own, on the Janskerkhof in Utrecht. Those last details come from one life story. According to a news report, the money for the first tents came from the money meant for his wedding.

That same year he married Wiesje Hijink. Her name comes back later in this story, with the songs. The foundation itself tells that in 1959 the two began the interdenominational tent campaigns, in which music played a large part. Week after week there were meetings in big cities, growing out of the revival movement Streams of Power. Wiesje often sang the songs first, and then the audience sang along with enthusiasm.

A magazine called Opwekking

In 1960 Ben Hoekendijk started a magazine. He called it Opwekking. In the language of Christians, an opwekking is a revival, a time in which many people come to faith and church life flourishes.

Around the magazine grew a work with tent campaigns and youth meetings, in the Netherlands and in Belgium. At first it was called Ben Hoekendijk Evangelisatie Campagnes (Ben Hoekendijk Evangelism Campaigns). The reports that appeared when he died say who set it up together: Ben and Wiesje, and his sister Else with her husband Peter Vlug. The office was in Putten, on the Da Costastraat. The foundation itself gives April 1960 as its beginning. According to the English Wikipedia, the work took the name of the magazine in 1974: Opwekking.

Ben also spoke outside the Netherlands. In 1974 he stood on a charismatic world conference in Jerusalem, and in 1976 he spoke at Billy Graham's Eurofest campaign in Brussels. He wrote books, among them, in the English title, *Twelve Jews Find the Messiah*.

From 1972 to 1979 the foundation organized the One Way Days in the Jaarbeurs, the large exhibition center in Utrecht. The first time, according to the foundation, about four thousand young people came. Later that rose to about fifteen thousand. At the first One Way Day, in 1972, Wiesje became the face of the congregational singing. She sang new songs first, and the audience sang them after her.

A family camp with five hundred people

In 1971 about five hundred people came together for a camp on the Pentecost weekend. At that time it was called the Nationale Gezins-Camp meeting, the National Family Camp Meeting. A camp meeting is an American term for a gathering of several days where people sleep in tents and listen to preaching and sing together. According to a Catholic historian, the organizers were looking for an answer to the worldly Pentecost parties of those years.

This is how the foundation tells it: there was a lot of room on the grounds, and the number of visitors quickly grew to five thousand. Later it began to fill up.

Here the sources part ways about the place. The foundation itself writes that it began at De Harskamp, on the Veluwe, a wooded region in the middle of the country, and then moved to De Dikkenberg and De Paasheuvel. A historian at the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (Catholic Documentation Center) wrote in 2026 that the first edition was in Bennekom. According to a journalist in 2018, it began in Bennekom and then went to Harskamp. The English Wikipedia gives 1972 as the first year, and the NOS, the Dutch pub-

lic broadcaster, counted back to 1970 in 2017. Three sources mention the five hundred people. The year 1971 fits the foundation's own count: in 2023 the conference was the fifty-third, in 2026 the fifty-sixth.

A Pentecost conference was nothing new in itself. The Fellowship of Pentecostal Churches had held one for years, and around 1961 an average of a thousand people attended. The family camp of 1971 was a separate initiative, with campers and their children.

The stories also differ about who started it. One source names the couples Hoekendijk and Vlug. Another names Ben Hoekendijk and Kees Goedhart. Probably more people were involved than one name can carry. The NOS summed it up as "a camping trip by a small group of Christians."

I try to imagine what the people at that first camp would have thought if someone had told them that one day twenty thousand people would be at a single service. Honestly, I find that a beautiful beginning. No grand plan, no event agency. Families with tents, a sermon, songs that were not yet in any songbook.

A hill near Vierhouten

From 1973 the conference was held at the De Paasheuvel campsite near Vierhouten, on the Veluwe. It stayed there up to and including 1995.

Growth came quickly. According to Opwekking's own history, there were fifteen thousand visitors in 1983, twenty thousand in 1987 and twenty-five thousand in 1988. After that the number hovered around thirty thousand. Those figures come from the organization itself. I have not found an independent count from those years.

The Pentecostal movement as a whole grew along with it. The same research count I mentioned earlier arrives at 17,480 followers for 1971, 34,190 for 1981 and about seventy thousand for 1989, spread over some five hundred churches. The evangelical movement also became more visible: in 1976 the Evangelische Omroep (EO), a Christian broadcaster, was founded.

A reader wrote in 2023, under an article on the internet, that he had been to Vierhouten twice. What he mainly remembered was the crowds, the cold, the rain and the mud. That too is part of the history of such a weekend.

"Attentie! Band loopt!"

What people often took home from Opwekking were the songs. In the Pentecostal churches of those years, people sang from the Zangbundel van Johannes de Heer or from Glorieklokken, two well-known songbooks. They contained few worship songs, songs in which you sing to God Himself. Wiesje Hoekendijk saw that as a lack. She led the congregational singing and introduced new songs, first Dutch ones, later translations from English. Foreign singers also brought new songs to the meetings.

Wiesje Hoekendijk saw a lack and did something about it. Out of that lack grew a songbook with more than nine hundred songs. Paul wrote to the church in Colossae about *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* (Colossians 3:16). How those three relate to each other would later be talked about a great deal.

In 1978 the first Opwekkingsliederen (Opwekking songs) book appeared, with numbers 1 through 60. The first song was "Hij's de Koning van mijn hart" ("He Is the King of My Heart"). Other songs from the first hour were "Dit is de dag" ("This Is the Day"), "Om-

dat Hij leeft" ("Because He Lives"), "Hiney matov" and "Looft de Here alle gij volken" ("Praise the Lord, All You Nations"). Every year songs were added. By 1990 there were more than three hundred, in 2016 the book had 795 songs, and now there are more than nine hundred. The new songs are sung for the first time every year at the Pentecost Conference. In the weeks that follow, they are heard in churches all over the country.

The songs were recorded as well, and the foundation itself tells how. In the big tent at De Dikkenberg, a tape recorder stood by the stage, with microphones pointed at the audience to capture the congregational singing. Joop Gankema, then a sound technician and later director, announced the start of a recording with three words: "Attentie! Band loopt!" ("Attention! Tape rolling!"). From the early 1990s this was done at the Zangfestijn, a song festival in March, first in De Bron in Dalfsen and since 2009 in De Kroeze Danne in Ambt Delden. There the song "Zend uw vuur" ("Send Your Fire") was recorded, number 467. While the people present were singing it with all their heart, the recording van caught fire through a short circuit. It burned down completely, a replacement came, and in the hall it sounded again: "Attentie! Band loopt!" That is how the foundation tells it. In 2023 CD number 47 was recorded, with thirteen new songs.

One number is missing. In 2007 the foundation skipped number 666. In the Bible book of Revelation that is the number of the beast, and it would have become the last number on all the songbooks and CDs.

Do you ever sing an Opwekking song? Then you are not alone. At first they were sung only in Pentecostal churches. Now they are sung in many other churches in the Netherlands too.

Grounds laid out for scouts

In 1971, the year of the first family camp, another park opened in the Flevopolder: De Flevohof. It was a park about farming and livestock, popular for school trips. Twenty years later it was doing badly, and in 1993 the Flevohof went bankrupt. In the fall of that year the Belgian company Walibi bought the site. On May 7, 1994, it opened as Walibi Flevo, with roller coasters.

The large field next to the park was laid out for scouting in 1994 and 1995. There were two big camps: EuroJam in 1994 and the World Scout Jamboree in 1995, with scouts from all over the world. After that there was a site where tens of thousands of campers could stay.

Opwekking was looking for just such a place. Vierhouten had become too small. The grounds were full, the foundation tells, and it went looking for a new place. In 1996 the Pentecost Conference moved to Biddinghuizen. From that year on, the tents stood in the polder. A photo from 1998 shows singing people on the grounds.

So in 1993 there was no Opwekking in Biddinghuizen yet. That year is sometimes mentioned, but it is the year the Flevohof went bankrupt. Every source I have read gives 1996 for the move.

Mud, heat and a Big Tent

What does such a weekend look like from the inside? A journalist from the magazine Het Goede Leven walked around there in 2018. He described an improvised campsite with simple washing facilities, long lines and long distances between your tent and the meetings. Depending on the weather, it is muddy or very hot. There was a Big Tent for the main meetings, two tents for seminars, concert tents and the Special People Tent.

He also noted the figures the organization gave him: about twenty thousand campers, with some thirty-five thousand day visitors added on Saturday and especially Sunday. The site could hold a maximum of 55,000 people at once. The NOS later reported that there had been about 75,000 visitors in 2018. The difference probably lies in how people are counted: who is there at the same time, or who comes together over four days. All the numbers in this chapter come from the organization, even when a newspaper repeats them.

The theme in 2018 was One Way. We live in a time, Flach said, in which truth has become a relative notion. On the program were, among others, Henk Stoorvogel, Edgar Holder, Gerard de Groot, Kees Goedhart, Martin Koornstra and David de Vos in the Big Tent, a service for the seventieth birthday of Israel, and the writer Adrian Plass in the seminar tent. On Sunday afternoon there was a Sing-in, a large open-air singing service where tens of thousands sang along. On Sunday evening there was a healing service, with a question hour about it on Monday. The face of those services had been Martin Koornstra for years. His view is that it is about discipleship, and that the miracles then come by themselves. God is good, he says, whether He heals us or not. When a miracle happens, he does not become a hero because of it.

The director of the foundation, Ruben Flach, put it this way in 2018: "Opwekking is a little piece of heaven on earth." According to him, it is about meeting one another around the Holy Spirit and speaking freely about Him. The church does not consist of buildings, he said, but of people. Whoever is touched should take that along to his own congregation. Visitors told the journalist that they went home built up and recharged, in spite of mud, sunburn and long walks between the tents.

A visitor of thirty-three, who came for the seventh time, told the NOS in 2022 that he goes there consciously out of his faith. He liked that Christians from different movements meet there. A volunteer of twenty-seven told the NOS what struck her: "Alcohol and drugs are strictly forbidden here." She had had a hard time during the corona period and was looking for contact with the church community. No alcohol is sold. On Sunday morning the visitors celebrate the Lord's Supper, eating the bread and drinking berry juice. Whoever wishes receives a tiny bit of wine. In this way they remember the death of Jesus.

In 2018 an American pastor, Rich Wilkerson, walked onto the stage in a hoodie. He said that it needed a generation that stands up. An interpreter translated every sentence. The audience applauded, some prayed, others listened. A young visitor told the NOS that after a weekend like this he or she goes home with a lot of new knowledge about God, and a girl said she came for joy, passion and fun. Flach called the pastor a typical young person who lives with God.

In the 1990s Ben Hoekendijk withdrew from the work of the foundation. His brother-in-law Peter Vlug had already taken over the leadership in 1990. In 1999 Joop Gankema became director. Visitors to the conference come from many different churches. In 2018 the organization said it did not know exactly how many came from Protestant or Catholic churches, but that it had the feeling they were in the majority.

"Evangelical party"

Not everyone was happy with this growth. A historian at the Katholiek Documentatiecentrum wrote in 2026 that the Catholic press, and the newspaper de Volkskrant as well, wrote critically about it. The phrase he quotes is "evangelical party." Only from

the 1990s on did the Katholieke Charismatische Vernieuwing (Catholic Charismatic Renewal) and the magazine De Bazuin give it more attention.

In Protestant churches there was criticism too, mainly of the songs. The lyrics were said to be too simple, to contain too much praise and too little lament, and to bring people into a quick emotion. Where a band replaced the organ, some found the music too worldly. A journalist noted in 2018 the criticism that the songbook had a one-sided "hosanna" character. The publisher replied that the book was never meant to be the only songbook for a church.

In 2008 the synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt), the Reformed Churches (Liberated), the highest church assembly of that denomination, considered the question whether Opwekking songs could be sung in worship services. The outcome was cautious: at special services or moments they could be sung. A guide came with it, warning against "unbiblical victory theology," the idea that a Christian always goes from victory to victory. In 2009 a limited list of songs appeared. Already in 2008, the Gereformeerde Bond, an orthodox movement within the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church), published a contribution asking: *Are Opwekking songs church songs?*

I do not write this to say who is right. I understand the people who love to sing these songs, and I also understand the people who stay with the Psalms. It says something that the question was taken so seriously. A songbook from a tent on the Veluwe had become a matter for synods.

Something has changed in the songs. According to Wikipedia, more attention is now paid to balance in choosing them. Number 778, "Hoe lang o Heer" ("How long, O Lord"), is a free metrical version of Psalm 13, a psalm full of lament.

An offering of a million

On May 1, 2020, Ben Hoekendijk died in Harderwijk, eighty-one years old. At his death the foundation wrote that God is a God of generations who works through people. In the Christian press he was called the man who had started the magazine, the foundation and the conferences. Kees Goedhart, who according to some sources began the family camp with him, called him a passionate, devoted and strong evangelist, one of the best in the Netherlands.

Ben Hoekendijk had already withdrawn in the 1990s. After that he became a sailor and journalist. He wrote about his voyages across the North Sea and the Mediterranean, and about a solo voyage of thirteen months across the Atlantic Ocean to Spitsbergen. In 2011 he was made a knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau, for his services to evangelism and sailing. His sister Else Vlug, co-founder of the foundation, had died in 2019 at the age of eighty-five. The work went on under Peter Vlug and then under Joop Gankema. Paul wrote about himself and a colleague: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.* (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Three years later, in May 2023, about sixty thousand people came to Biddinghuizen, according to the organization. The theme was "But We See Jesus," after Hebrews 2:9. More than 330,000 people watched online, and most of the meetings and seminars could be watched again until September 1. The offering on Monday raised 1,011,101 euros for mission and evangelism work, a record. In 2025 the organization again reported about sixty thousand visitors. About half camped, and more than half were under thirty.

In 2026 visitors told on the stage what they had experienced. A mother spoke about the death of her eighteen-year-old son in January, after an illness connected with a tumor in his liver. She believed that God had healed him on the other side of life. While

they prayed, she told, he reached out toward heaven. A woman who had tried for years to become pregnant stood on the stage with her husband and told that it had worked. The crowd stood up and cheered. This was reported by the conference director, Lourens du Plessis, who preached on Moses holding up his hands in the battle against Amalek, from Exodus 17. The American pastor Bobby Schuller spoke openly about the struggle around his son with a disability, and about the great miracles he had seen God do. As long as Moses held up his hands, Israel won. Believers still know that battle, he said, and he pointed people to Christ. On the field some danced, and young people sang and prayed deep into the night. There was no campfire, for safety reasons, but there was, according to him, the fire of God's Spirit. The people are tired, he said at the end, but grateful.

Politics was there too: Mirjam Bikker, the leader of the ChristenUnie, a Christian political party, spoke about compassion in the debate on asylum seekers and migration. The conference also received criticism: activists felt that the Palestinian perspective received too little attention. The organization said that gratitude was the prevailing feeling at the end.

When I read these numbers, I am left with a question. Tens of thousands of people choose to sleep in a tent for a long weekend, in mud or heat, to sing, listen and pray. What that means for the ordinary Sunday in their own church back home is something no visitor count can tell.

The same grass, two months later

After the Pentecost weekend the tents go away again. A little over two months later, Lowlands stands on the same grounds, with different music and a different crowd. A visitor to Opwekking told the NOS in 2022 that Lowlands was a bit too busy for him.

If you drive along the Spijkweg on an ordinary day, you see the roller coasters of Walibi and the flat land around them. Of the family camp of 1971, elsewhere in the province of Gelderland, nothing can be seen here. But the songs that were sung back then without a songbook are now heard in churches all over the country.

And every year at Pentecost, the tent pegs go back into the ground.

Go there yourself

The event site lies next to Walibi Holland, at Spijkweg 30 in Biddinghuizen, in the province of Flevoland. It is about eighty hectares in size and is used for large events. The amusement park next to it, the former Flevohof, is open to visitors. Check the Walibi Holland website for opening hours.

If you want to experience the Pentecost weekend itself, you can come as a camper or with a day ticket. Check the website of the Pentecost Conference of Stichting Opwekking for dates, program and registration. A large part of the meetings can also be followed online.

The beginning of the story lies on the Veluwe. Near Vierhouten, at the De Paasheuvel campsite, the conference was held from 1973 up to and including 1995.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (**several independent sources**)**:** the beginning of the Dutch Pentecostal movement in 1907 with Gerrit Polman in Amsterdam; the Osborn campaign of 1958 as a boost; the magazine Opwekking from 1960; the founding by Ben and Wiesje Hoekendijk with Peter and Else Vlug, growing out of the Ben Hoekendijk Evangelisatie Campagnes; a first conference with about five hundred people in the early 1970s; the period at De Paasheuvel near Vier-

houten; the move to the Walibi event site in Biddinghuizen in 1996 because Vierhouten had become too small; the first songbook in 1978; the death of Ben Hoekendijk on May 1, 2020; the 53rd edition in 2023 and the 56th in 2026; the criticism from the Catholic press and the decision of the Liberated synod in 2008.

From the own words or stories of those involved:

- *Ruben Flach* (director), "a little piece of heaven on earth" and his words about the church: from the article in Het Goede Leven (2018).
- *Martin Koornstra*, on discipleship, miracles and God's goodness: from an interview by the EO. His own story is not in it.
- *Joop Gankema* and the fire in the recording van: from the anniversary site of Opwekking itself, without a second source.
- *Lourens du Plessis*, the mother and the woman who became pregnant: from an English-language report by a news site for Christians (Worthy News, 2026). I do not name the visitors; the words are retold.
- *Rich Wilkerson* and the young visitors: NOS, 2018.
- *Visitors of 2022*: NOS, with no people named in this chapter.
- *Kees Goedhart* on Ben Hoekendijk: from the press release of a Christian news agency (BosNewsLife, 2020), in English, retold by me.

Only from Opwekking's own history or a single source: the founding month of April 1960; the name Opwekking from 1974; the attendance at the One Way Days; the growth figures for 1983, 1987 and 1988; the years 1973 up to and including 1995 for Vierhouten; the tent campaign on the Janskerkhof in 1959; the role of Wiesje Hoekendijk in the first songbooks; the first songs of the 1978 book; the recording at De Dikkenberg; the fire during "Zend uw vuur"; that the grounds at Vierhouten were full; all visitor numbers

and the amount of the offering, which come from the organization. Ben's speaking engagements in Jerusalem and Brussels, his books and his sailing voyages come from one news report in English (BosNewsLife, 2020) and from Wikipedia; the knighthood of 2011 appears only on Wikipedia and in that report. That the wedding money went to the first tents appears in that report and nowhere else.

Unconfirmed or disputed:

- *Place of the first conference.* De Harskamp (the foundation) or Bennekom (Katholiek Nieuwsblad, Het Goede Leven), and the order of the first locations.
- *Year of the first conference.* 1971 according to most sources, 1972 or 1970 according to others.
- *Initiators.* The family camp is attributed to Hoekendijk and Vlug, or to Hoekendijk and Goedhart.
- *Year of the move to Biddinghuizen.* 1993 is sometimes mentioned; no source I found supports that.
- *The Lord's Supper.* Earlier texts spoke of grape juice; the NOS reports berry juice and, on request, a little wine.
- *Name of the sister.* Else (most sources) or Els (Katholiek Nieuwsblad).
- *The marriage of Ben Hoekendijk.* According to the Christian press, his withdrawal in the 1990s was connected with his personal life. I do not go into that further in this chapter, because it is not about the moment I am telling.

Interpretation: visitor numbers are counted in different ways, per day, at the same time or over the whole weekend. That is why the figures for the same year differ, as in 2018 (55,000 at the same time against about 75,000 in total). Whether the stories of healing and answered prayer on the stage happened as intended, nobody from outside can test. I pass them on as the people told them.

Sources for this chapter

1. Stichting Opwekking, Het verhaal van Opwekking: 1971
2. Opwekkingsmuziek, Ontstaan van de Opwekkingsliederen
3. Katholiek Nieuwsblad, "Opwekking: van 'evangelisch feestje' naar moment van verbinding" (22 mei 2026)
4. NOS, "Opwekking-festival begint" (4 juni 2022)
5. NOS, "Pinksteren: festivals, festivals en nog eens festivals" (2 juni 2017)
6. Het Goede Leven, "Een stukje hemel op aarde in de polder" (mei 2018)
7. Revive, "Oprichter van stichting Opwekking Ben Hoekendijk (81) overleden" (4 mei 2020)
8. EO, "Ben Hoekendijk op 81-jarige leeftijd overleden"
9. Nederlands Dagblad, "Ben Hoekendijk, mede-oprichter van Opwekking, overleden"
10. Wikipedia, Ben Hoekendijk (starting point)
11. Wikipedia, Opwekkingsliederen (starting point)
12. C. van der Laan, Inventaris archief Broederschap van Pinkstergemeenten, HDC Vrije Universiteit (2020)
13. Joop Vernooij, "Pentecostalism and Migration: The Dutch Case" (2004)
14. Paul van der Laan, "Het appèl van de Pinksterbeweging na 100 jaar" (2006)
15. Evangelical Focus, "Over 60,000 gathered at the Opwekking conference" (2 juni 2023)
16. Livenet, report on Opwekking 2023
17. EO, Pinksterconferentie Opwekking 2024
18. Revive, Pinksterconferentie Opwekking "Ik ben" (22 mei 2026)
19. Groot Nieuws Radio, "Opwekking 2026: minder files, meer verdieping"

20. Mens & Gezondheid, Pinksterconferentie Opwekking: geschiedenis
21. Pinksterconferentie, flyer voor standhouders 2026
22. Wikipedia, Walibi Holland (starting point)
23. Walibi Holland, spreekbeurtpakket 2020
24. Go-Kids Flevo, Walibi Holland
25. Steunpunt Liturgie GKv, notitie "Liederen en gezangen" (2016)
26. G. van den Brink, "Zijn Opwekkingsliederen kerkliederen?" (2008), VU Research Portal
27. Stichting Opwekking, Het verhaal van Opwekking: 1959
28. Stichting Opwekking, Het verhaal van Opwekking: 1978
29. BosNewsLife, Dutch Pentecostal preacher Ben Hoekendijk dies at 81 (mei 2020)
30. EO, Martin Koornstra: God is goed, of Hij ons nu geneest of niet
31. NOS, "Preken in hoodie: tienduizenden mensen bij Opwekking" (2018)
32. Worthy News, Tens of thousands gather at Dutch Pentecost event (2026)
33. Bible.com, Handelingen 2:1 (NKJV)
34. Bible.com, Kolossenzen 3:16 (NKJV)
35. Bible.com, 1 Korinthe 3:6 (NKJV)

Utrecht: fifty-one votes in the Jacobikerk

If you walk along the Sint Jacobsstraat in Utrecht, you will see at number 171 a medieval church with a tower that seems to sit halfway inside the building. On the weathervane is a scallop shell. You come across that shell in other places on the church as well. It is the sign of the pilgrims who walk to Santiago de Compostela. For many Dutch pilgrims that journey begins here, at the Jacobikerk, the Church of Saint James. Around the corner, on the Sint Jacobskerkhof, is the society that helps them on their way.

Inside you see three aisles of equal height, a pulpit from around 1600 and a medieval choir screen that runs the full width of the church. Under the organ lies the gravestone of Hubert Duyfhuys, the first minister to preach here after the church became Protestant around 1580. Before that, the Jacobikerk had been a Catholic parish church for centuries. The Gothic building dates from the end of the thirteenth century. After the Reformation, men like Voetius, Nicolaas Beets and Abraham Kuyper preached here, the same Kuyper who is connected with one of the church splits in this story.

On Sundays a local congregation of the Protestantse Kerk (the Protestant Church in the Netherlands) meets here. There are

concerts and weddings. Nothing in the building recalls Friday, December 12, 2003. Yet on that day seventy-five men and women sat here together and had to decide whether the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church, the country's old national Protestant church) would continue to exist.

By the end of the afternoon the result was in. Fifty-one voted for, twenty-four against. A decision of this weight required a two-thirds majority. That meant there could be no more than twenty-four votes against. The decision just made it.

The story begins more than forty years earlier, in the same city.

Eighteen signatures at Pentecost

To understand why a vote was needed in 2003, you have to know that Protestants in the Netherlands had been divided for a very long time. In 1834 a group led by Rev. Hendrik de Cock in Ulrum, a village in the far north, left the Hervormde Kerk. In the 1880s a second group followed, under Abraham Kuyper. On July 17, 1892, those two groups merged into the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands). From then on there were two large Protestant churches side by side, both going back to the same Reformation.

At Pentecost 1961 a call came to put an end to that. It was signed by nine Hervormde and nine Gereformeerde ministers. All of them worked in evangelism, the work among people outside the church. The plan had grown up around two evangelism magazines, *De Open Deur* and *Onderweg*. Twenty-seven ministers had been invited. Eighteen signed. That is how they got their name: De Achttien, The Eighteen.

Among them were Rev. H.M. Kuitert, Rev. T. Poot, Rev. I.J. van Houte and Rev. F.J. Pop, who later became chairman of the group.

Their message was short. The separation between the two churches, they wrote, could "no longer be tolerated."

Not everyone was pleased. On the Gereformeerde side many reacted mostly with caution. Prof. J. Waterink called the action "an extremely serious derailment." The theologians Hendrikus Berkhof and Herman Ridderbos also had their doubts. Among younger Gereformeerde church members it was different. The booklet that came with the call sold more than ten thousand copies.

Eighteen ministers put their names under a sentence about their own churches.

Saturday, May 26, 1962, the Jaarbeurs

A year later The Eighteen called a congress in the Jaarbeurs, the exhibition center in Utrecht. The motto was "From churches to church." On Saturday, May 26, 1962, more than four thousand five hundred people came, the first national congress of the group. Princess Irene was there. Berkhof, who had earlier had his doubts, gave a speech, as did Prof. W.F. de Gaay Fortman. The day ended with a call to the congregations around the country: start working together locally.

In 1962 the Jaarbeurs had buildings on the Vredenburg, in the middle of the city, and grounds on the Croeselaan. The buildings on the Vredenburg are gone. Which hall they used can no longer be said. What remains is the date.

This day is often seen as the beginning of what would later be called Samen op Weg, Together on the Way. That name stayed attached to the process for forty years.

Eleven Gereformeerde and forty-eight Hervormde

It went slowly. In 1969 young people asked in a report for the churches to be united by 1980 at the latest. That did not happen.

In 1973 the synods of both churches met together for the first time. A synod is the national assembly of a church, with delegates from all over the country, which makes decisions about doctrine and order. Such a joint meeting was informally called a combi-synode, a combined synod.

In some places the local congregation was ahead of the national church. Hervormde and Gereformeerde congregations began holding services together and sometimes also formed a joint kerkenraad, the governing council of a local congregation. For these federated congregations a temporary arrangement was made, the Tussenorde, the interim order.

Wim Kalmijn described in 1999 how that went in an ordinary town, Vlaardingen, in a yearbook of the local historical society. He had worked on the process himself. There too the church landscape was an inheritance. In Vlaardingen the Afscheiding (the Secession of 1834) came in 1848 and the Doleantie (Kuyper's break of the 1880s) in 1887, and in 1920 a merger followed into the Gereformeerde Kerk of Vlaardingen. In the Holy-Midden district, cooperation began on May 18, 1982, after ninety-six percent of the Gereformeerde and ninety-seven percent of the Hervormde members had responded positively. On March 19, 1986, the office-bearers of both churches in the city met together for the first time. In the room were eleven Gereformeerde and forty-eight Hervormde. At the second meeting, on May 20, 1987, there were eighty-two participants. Kalmijn also tells how stubborn habits are: holding on to ten o'clock as the start time of the service he calls a "local superstition." A structure committee issued a report in 1991 with the title *Two and yet one, on the way to 2001*. The church councils adopted it in the spring of 1992. On February 12, 1998, the purchase agreement followed for the Rehobothkerk, which was reopened on July 5, 1998. And at the

farewell of the Immanuel district in 1996, the doves did not fly to the Emmauskerk. Only in April 1999 did a dove land on that church.

Nationally, in November 1986 the two synods declared that their churches were "in a state of reunification." From that same year the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk (the Evangelical Lutheran Church) took part as an observer, at its own request. In 1990 it became a full partner, and from then on the joint assembly was called the Triosynode. From 1988 the Remonstrants, a liberal Protestant church, also took part as observers. They dropped out in 1993.

Putten: "unacceptable"

The hardest part was the church order, the set of rules that lays down how a church is governed and what it stands for. In the early 1990s there was a draft. In Putten, a town on the Veluwe, more than sixteen hundred office-bearers from the circle of the Gereformeerde Bond, the conservative movement within the Hervormde Kerk, came together. Their verdict on the draft: unacceptable.

Even so, the Triosynode adopted it in first reading in 1993, with 123 votes for and 41 against. In 1996 the Comité voor behoud van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Committee for the Preservation of the Dutch Reformed Church) was formed. A year later it again brought eighteen hundred office-bearers together in Putten.

What did the critics want? Some of them had nothing against working together. They wanted a federation or a union, a bond in which the churches would continue to exist side by side. The synods chose a full merger. That choice would remain the issue to the very end. The three churches were also unequal in size. According to an American Christian news site, the Hervormde Kerk represented about fifteen percent of the sixteen million

Dutch people, the Gereformeerde Kerken seven percent and the Lutherans less than one percent.

Perhaps you lived through those years yourself in a Hervormde or Gereformeerde congregation, or heard your parents talk about it. Then you know it was about more than rules.

Friday, December 12, 2003

In 2003 the Triosynode made a promise to the Gereformeerde churches that had doubts. For up to ten years after the merger they could leave the new church without losing their buildings and property. For Hervormde congregations that did not want to join, no such rule was in place. What would happen to their buildings and property had to be settled later. I will come back to that.

Among the Gereformeerde, the church councils were asked what they wanted. Of the 414 churches, 326 answered yes and 31 yes, provided that. Eight said no, unless. Forty-nine said no.

Then came that Friday. The three synods each met in a different church in Utrecht. The Gereformeerde sat in the Nicolaïkerk, the Lutherans in their own Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Hervormde synod in the Jacobikerk.

The evening before, there had been a concert in the Jacobikerk. A student who was looking after the church for a time helped prepare the day. About ten volunteers took care of food and drink for the seventy-five synod members. About three hundred listeners came, and a lot of press. He remembered later that an enormous amount of coffee was drunk that day. There was debate all day long. Only at the end of the afternoon did the vote take place. He remembered tension, and a moment of confusion when the result was read out.

Earlier that day the synod had already adopted an additional proposal: Hervormde congregations could consider themselves fully bound to the Reformed confessions also within the new church. Eight synod members voted against it. Then came the vote itself. The Gereformeerde synod voted in favor with 67 of the 73 votes. The Lutheran synod needed three quarters and easily reached it, with 30 of the 36. Among the Hervormde delegates it was close: 51 of the 75. Three churches had said yes.

The Hervormde chairman, Arie van der Plas, told the NOS, the Dutch public broadcaster, that the conservative members faced the union with great concern. But, as an American Christian news site summarized his words, the unity of the church weighed more heavily. The twenty-four who voted against saw a church split coming. They were proved right.

A year later, in December 2004, a reporter from the Reformatorisch Dagblad, a Christian daily newspaper, went back to the church. The caretaker of that time told him how he had experienced the day. Asked how it felt, he had two words: "Mixed feelings." He was glad that walls were being broken down. He also saw the pain of the people who had voted against. Residents and passersby knew little about it at that moment.

In those words something echoes of what Paul asked of the church in Rome: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* (Romans 12:15). He saw joy and pain at the same time, in the same church, on the same afternoon.

A queen in the Domkerk

That same evening there was a service in the Domkerk, the former cathedral of Utrecht. Queen Beatrix was there, and Minister Piet Hein Donner and the Catholic cardinal Adrianus Simonis also sat in

the church. The chairmen of the three synods signed the Verklaring van Vereniging, the Declaration of Union. The service would be broadcast the following Sunday morning.

In the Jacobikerk lies the gravestone of the man who preached there as the first Protestant minister in the sixteenth century. More than four centuries later, a cardinal of the Catholic Church sat as a guest at the birth of a new Protestant church.

For the people who had voted against, that evening was no celebration.

"The church of the fathers"

What did they object to? Their objections concerned the foundation of the new church. The Protestant Church took over the confessions of all three churches together. Confessions are the old texts in which a church sets down what it believes, such as the Heidelberg Catechism. Added to the Reformed texts were now the Lutheran confessions, the Leuenberg Agreement, a 1973 accord between European Lutheran and Reformed churches, and the Theological Declaration of Barmen from 1934, in which German Christians spoke out against the influence of National Socialism on the church.

For the objectors, this meant that texts which on some points clash with one another and, in their conviction, with the Bible, were given a place in the foundation. They called the new church pluralistic instead of Reformed and saw the merger as a break with "the church of the fathers." The website of the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk puts it this way: dozens of congregations, hundreds of office-bearers and tens of thousands of members could not go along, in conscience. The official confession of the church now also included teachings that, in their view, conflict with the Bible. The same American news site expected that some would also drop out over questions such as

women ministers and the marriage of two men or two women. The new church left the local congregation free on those matters.

A small group of Gereformeerde members also stayed outside the new church, for a different reason. They had nothing against uniting as such. They missed real unity on baptism, marriage and the heart of the gospel. And they feared that the local congregation would lose its freedom to rules imposed from above. Their worries were very concrete: payments to the national church, which in the Gereformeerde Kerken had been voluntary. A church council that would no longer have final responsibility. Ministers who were uncertain about their pensions.

They came together in three meetings. On January 10, 2004, about a hundred and twenty people from more than thirty-four churches sat together in Ermelo. On February 28, about a hundred people from some thirty churches came to Nijkerk. Of the twenty-eight churches represented there, eight had already decided not to go along. They formed an emergency fellowship. On March 27 Garderen followed, with about twenty churches.

Rev. K. Bijleveld, who led the reflection group, looked for an image for the situation and found it in Israel, between the Red Sea and the army of Pharaoh. There was no other way than to accept suffering, he said. C.B. Elsinga of Den Ham was sober about what going along would cost: "We sign for our loss, we regret the damage, we face the risks." Whoever wanted to go along in the new church, the reflection group said, should know that.

Outside that circle others looked on. Rev. A. Moerkerken, editor-in-chief of the weekly paper of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, feared a bitter struggle over church property, as in the Secession of 1834 and the Doleantie of 1886. Rev. G.J. van Aalst, of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, called the situation in the spring of 2004 a drama. He

considered the church order a great expansion of the old foundation, and the distinction between the confessions blurred. To those who said you must obey the synod, he held up Lord's Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism: obeying God more than men. He wrote that the break went right through congregations, families and marriages, and that those involved needed our prayer. He also warned his readers against a quick judgment.

The supporters saw it differently. For them it was about a separation that, as The Eighteen had already written in 1961, could no longer be tolerated. The new church left room for congregations with their own character. Congregations of the Gereformeerde Bond could also remain in it, and the Bond itself continued to exist as a movement within the Protestant Church.

Here I do not take sides. Both groups appealed to faithfulness: the one to the unity of the church, the other to its confession. For both, it came at a cost.

Saturday, May 1, Sunday, May 2

On May 1, 2004, the new church order came into force. From that day on, the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk no longer existed as separate churches. Together they were called the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The first preses, the chairman of the synod, was Rev. Jan-Gerd Heetderks, who had chaired the Gereformeerde synod. The first scriba, the secretary, was Rev. Bas Plaisier, who had held that office among the Hervormde.

On the same Saturday, church councils elsewhere were sitting in emergency meetings. In 's-Grevelduin-Capelle, a village in the province of North Brabant, the Hervormde church council had

decided unanimously not to go along, with much pain. On May 1 it met in a noodclassis, an emergency classis, a temporary regional assembly of congregations that stayed outside the new church. The minister, Rev. K.J. Kaptein, later told the Reformatorisch Dagblad: "The decision of December 12, 2003, became reality on May 1." He also told how he had doubted his calling, and that he later noticed it remained.

A week later, on May 8, six Gereformeerde churches held their first synod in Garderen. They continued as the voortgezette Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, the continued Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. In 2005 they had 2,810 members. The church of Haarlem-West had already been a refuge for people who could not find themselves in the Samen-op-Weg process. The reflection group warned that such a church could acquire a pull on others if it was the only one in the region that did not go along.

On that first Sunday, May 2, the objecting Hervormde members in many places met in services of their own, often in an emergency location such as a sports hall or a community center.

In 's-Grevelduin-Capelle, Kaptein had prepared a sermon on Psalm 79, a psalm of lament. He could not preach it. It became a service about the apostle Thomas, who sees the risen Jesus and calls Him his Lord and his God. Why the sermon changed, he does not tell any further. But where he ended up is clear: with a disciple who first did not believe and then said: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28). On the first Sunday outside the old church fellowship, that service was about Christ Himself. He pleaded for humility and reconciliation, and for unity in the truth, with the Word as the starting point.

In Emst, Rev. A.J. Mensink stood that Sunday before a defeated congregation. He had chosen Psalm 80 as the first psalm. His text came from Exodus. The people of Israel stand on the shore of the Red Sea,

with the water before them and the army of Egypt behind them. *And the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward."* (Exodus 14:15). He looked out over a church with many empty seats, in the consistory and in the pews. A split in his congregation, he said later, could no longer have been prevented. He described sorrow, pain, anger and powerlessness. He pointed to the end of John 21, where Peter is asked about another man's path, and to Philippians 1:18, where Christ is proclaimed. And he also prayed for the people who from now on would sit under the Word elsewhere.

Where would you have sat that Sunday? In a half-empty church you knew, or in a sports hall with people who felt the same as you?

In Katwijk aan Zee, a clash threatened that day over access to the church building. The police stood ready.

Empty hands

The new church set up a Commissie van Bijzondere Zorg, a Committee for Special Care. It began in January 2004 and wrote its final report in 2011. First the committee tried to keep objecting congregations inside. When that did not work, the task became dividing what there was.

In more than a hundred Hervormde congregations, members did not want to go along. For 61 congregations the committee reached a settlement, because a significant share of the members there left. From those 61 congregations about 38,000 people went to the new Hersteld Hervormde Kerk, the Restored Reformed Church. In total more than 40,000 Hervormde members joined it. More than forty million euros changed hands. Nine church buildings became the property of Hersteld Hervormde congregations, and ten historic churches were given to them on long lease. There were nineteen

lawsuits. Fifty-one ministers and 553 church council members were removed from their office in the Protestant Church.

Behind those figures are the names of villages. In Gameren, Goedereede, Sint-Annaland, Sirjansland, Stellendam, Wouterswoude, Heesbeen, Poortvliet and Sint-Maartensdijk, a provision met with refusal or resistance. In Nederhemert the congregation cooperated after all, after a lawsuit. Ouddorp, Aalst, Garderen, Vriezenveen and Nieuwe-Tonge called for special attention. In Ouddorp the small synod first rejected the provision. In Putten, where the office-bearers had come together in the 1990s, the two groups received the Nieuwe Kerk for shared use, for no more than five years.

There was litigation over the name as well. The objectors began with the name Nederlandse Hervormde Gemeente (in restored fellowship), or nationally Hersteld Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk. On August 31, 2004, the two churches agreed that they would call themselves the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk. In 2006 the judge in Arnhem confirmed that this agreement was binding.

In the final report two sides can be heard. From the Hersteld Hervormde corner it says that in 2004, in a legal sense, they suddenly stood with empty hands. The committee itself was accused of theft when it said that the property stayed with the Hervormde congregations. The chairman wrote that a church split is "a dramatic event for everyone involved." He added: "whichever side you are on." The committee made more than nine hundred visits. The treatment was sometimes not very edifying, it wrote, and emotions ran high. Within the committee itself there was pastoral care for one another. It asked in prayer for the guidance and help of God's Spirit, and hoped to contribute to the beginning of healing.

Behind that number are conversations with people on both sides. Paul wrote: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2).

All in all, almost a hundred thousand members of the three churches did not choose the Protestant Church. The largest group went to the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk. A group on Urk, a fishing town that was once an island, joined the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken. Others found a place in the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken.

The Hersteld Hervormde Kerk built up its own denomination with its noodclassis and noodsynode. Its first preses was Rev. Dirk Heemskerk. Reinier van Kooten was scriba in 2004 and 2005. From September 1, 2005, there was its own training for ministers, connected with the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. At the end of 2022 it had about sixty thousand members in 117 congregations in the Netherlands. At the beginning of 2024 the Protestant Church had almost 1.3 million members.

Words on the tower

Go back once more to the Sint Jacobsstraat. On the south side of the tower of the Jacobikerk is an old inscription. It recalls the shelling of 1576, when a cannon stood in the tower aimed at Vredenburg castle, where Spanish soldiers were stationed. The inscription reads: "Godt versacht dat ik bleef staen," old Dutch for, roughly, "God saw to it that I remained standing."

I cannot read that sentence without thinking of 2003. It fits the people who saw their church in the Jacobikerk become part of something new. It also fits the people who walked into a sports hall with their church council because they felt they had to keep standing

where their fathers had stood. Both hoped that God would carry them.

The tower still stands. On top of the weathervane sits the pilgrims' shell. Here people begin their journey to Santiago, a long road they cannot see all at once. Under the organ lies the stone of Duyfhuys, and somewhere in this nave, on a Friday afternoon in December, fifty-one votes were counted.

Go there yourself

The Jacobikerk stands at Sint Jacobsstraat 171 in the old city center of Utrecht. On Sundays a local congregation of the Protestant Church uses the building, and the church is regularly open for concerts and other activities. Inside, look for the choir screen, the pulpit and the gravestone of Hubert Duyfhuys under the organ. Outside you will see the shells and, on the south side of the tower, the inscription about 1576. Check the Jacobikerk website for services and opening times.

Then walk through the city center to the Domkerk on the Domplein, where the Declaration of Union was signed on the evening of December 12, 2003. According to the Domkerk's own website, the church is open to visitors every day, with guided tours and an audio tour. Check the Domkerk website for opening hours.

The Nicolaïkerk, where the Gereformeerde synod voted, is also in Utrecht. The Jaarbeurs of the 1962 congress still exists, but the hall used back then can no longer be identified with certainty.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the call of The Eighteen at Pentecost 1961; the congress in the Utrecht Jaarbeurs with more than 4,500 visitors in 1962; the first joint synod in 1973; the declara-

tion "in a state of reunification" in 1986; Lutheran participation from 1986 and 1990; the votes of December 12, 2003 (Hervormd 51 of 75 in the Jacobikerk, Gereformeerd 67 of 73, Lutheran 30 of 36); the service in the Domkerk with Queen Beatrix and Cardinal Simonis; the birth of the Protestant Church on May 1, 2004; the objections of the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk to the foundation; the figures of the Committee for Special Care; the agreement on the name of August 31, 2004.

Only from tradition or own testimony: the atmosphere in the Jacobikerk on December 12, 2003, with the concert the evening before, the volunteers and the coffee (the memory of the temporary caretaker of that time, told a year later to the Reformatorisch Dagblad); the sermons, the doubt about his calling and the empty seats on May 2, 2004 (told by Rev. Kaptein and Rev. Mensink themselves, in the same newspaper); the objections, meetings and statements of the continued Gereformeerde Kerken (those churches' own description, with the words of Rev. Bijleveld and Rev. Elsinga); the reaction of Rev. Van Aalst (his own article in the weekly paper of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten); the story of Vlaardingen, with the eleven Gereformeerde and forty-eight Hervormde and the doves (the yearbook article by Wim Kalmijn, who was himself involved in the process; I know it through an extensive summary, not through the whole text).

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one reading):

- *Transfer of the Jacobikerk.* The RD article gives 1586, the other sources around 1580.
- *Gereformeerd vote.* The committee and the Dutch Wikipedia give 67 of 73 in favor. An English-language blog that cites the Reformed Ecumenical Council reports 66 for and 6 against.

- *Court in 2006.* The committee names a district court, the Dutch Wikipedia a court of appeal, both in Arnhem, both on May 15, 2006.
- *Number of members of the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk.* More than 40,000 according to the committee; about 57,500 in 2004 according to the Dutch Wikipedia; about 60,500 to 60,900 and 117 or 118 congregations at the end of 2022, varying within a single source.
- *How many members did not go along.* Almost a hundred thousand members of the three churches, according to the Dutch Wikipedia; the committee counts only the more than 40,000 Hervormde members who went to the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk.
- *The decision about Hervormde confession.* The additional proposal of that day appears in the RD article; I have not found it in other sources.
- *The objections about women ministers and marriage.* This comes from one American news site, which expected that some would leave for that reason. The Hersteld Hervormde themselves name the foundation as the main reason.

Only in one source: the threatened clash in Katwijk aan Zee on May 2, 2004, with the police standing ready (only the committee's final report).

Unconfirmed: in which hall of the Jaarbeurs the congress of 1962 was held; whether anything took place in the Jaarbeurs on May 1, 2004 (no source found); I found the inscription on the tower in one source; the doves at the farewell of the Immanuel district (only through the summary of the Vlaardingen yearbook). I know the names of the eighteen ministers only in part.

Interpretation: whether the merger was faithfulness to the unity of the church or a break with its confession is a question of faith on which Protestants in the Netherlands still think differently today.

Sources for this chapter

1. Protestantse Kerk, "Geschiedenis ontstaan Protestantse Kerk in Nederland"
2. Wim Kalmijn, "Samen op weg", jaarboek Historische Vereniging Vlaardingen 1999
3. Tijdschrift Oud-Utrecht 2017, over het Vredenburg en de Jaarbeurs
4. Reformatorisch Dagblad, 8 december 2004, "Het greep me meer aan dan ik verwachtte" (via Digibron)
5. Reformatorisch Dagblad, 24 december 2004, "De pijn van de kerkscheuring" (via Digibron)
6. Commissie van Bijzondere Zorg, Eindverslag (2011)
7. Christian Post, 13 december 2003, "Three Dutch denominations merge"
8. Hersteld Hervormde Kerk, "Historie"
9. Gereformeerdekerken.info, "Het ontstaan van de voortgezette Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland"
10. De Saambinder, April 29, 2004, articles by Rev. G.J. van Aalst and Rev. A. Moerkerken
11. Blog Byzantine Calvinist, January 8, 2004, on the votes (with a reference to the Reformed Ecumenical Council)
12. Wikipedia, "Protestantse Kerk in Nederland"
13. Wikipedia, "Hersteld Hervormde Kerk"
14. Wikipedia, "Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland"
15. Wikipedia (Engels), "Reformed Association in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands"
16. Cultuurschatten, "Utrecht (Jacobikerk)"
17. Discover Utrecht, "Jacobikerk"

18. Wikipedia (Engels), “Jacobikerk”
19. Domkerk Utrecht

Amsterdam-Zuidoost: five church halls behind one front door

On the Bijlmerdreef in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, the southeastern district of Amsterdam, at number 1239, stands a red brick building. There is no tower. No bell hangs there. If you walk past, you see a residential tower thirty-eight meters high, a long low wing with a wavy roof and concrete bay windows with colored glass. That glass is the only hint of a church. The architects meant it as a nod to the stained-glass windows of old churches.

The building is called De Kandelaar, The Lampstand. Behind the front door are five church halls, four small ones and one large one, with room for about nine hundred people in all. There is a day care center, a restaurant and a reception hall with a baptismal font. According to an English-language city guide, fifteen congregations share the building, each at its own time. The Reformatorisch Dagblad, a Christian daily newspaper, gave the same number in 2013: fifteen denominations under one roof.

Which congregations meet there today, I have not been able to find out. I could not open the building's website. But I do know why this building is here. It was built for churches that for years had no place

of their own. They met in parking garages, in business premises and in school classrooms. Their members came from Suriname, the Antilles, Ghana and dozens of other countries.

This is the last chapter of a series about places where the church in the Netherlands took a turn. Most of the places in these books are old. This one dates from 2007.

The city of the future

The Bijlmermeer was meant to be something new. In 1968 the first honeycomb-shaped apartment blocks went up, such as Gliphoeve, under the slogan "The City of the Future." They were intended for middle-class families, in a green and modern neighborhood.

It turned out differently. The first residents found a neighborhood that was not yet finished, with few shops, poor transport links and high rents. Many of them soon left. In the first ten years, many homes stood empty. Space was left over in the parking garages too, as would later become clear.

In that city of the future, hardly anyone had thought of a church. That would later become a problem, and also an opportunity.

Sunday service in an elementary school

In 1971 a young Surinamese minister came to Amsterdam-Zuidoost: Rudy Frank Polanen. He was born on August 5, 1943, in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, had finished secondary school in Zeist and had studied theology in Stuttgart, Germany, with the help of the Evangelische Landeskirche. Now he went to work for the Evangelische Broedergemeente, the Moravian Church.

He worked from the church on the Kerkstraat in the center of Amsterdam. His task was to visit church members, and so he quickly saw that Zuidoost was a district of its own with needs of its own.

He did a great deal of home visiting. In an elementary school in the Bijlmer he began meetings and church services, and they soon drew many visitors. That is how the EBG congregation of Zuidoost came into being, and it grew well. According to the biographical sketch that his congregation circulated after his death, he also talked with the police and with city district officials and visited work and action groups, as an advocate for the residents. He gave talks to police officers, to staff of the city transit company and to teachers, about Suriname, about the migration of Surinamese people to the Netherlands, about customs and sensitivities. The aim was to build understanding.

In the summer of 1973 he went back to Suriname. The church called him back. According to the sketch, members of the Dutch parliament asked questions to have him stay, but the church would not budge.

He became minister in Nieuw-Nickerie, a small town in the west of Suriname. Church, parsonage and clubhouse were restored. An abandoned school became the home for the elderly Huize Francis. In a village farther on, a community building was built. After seven years he became minister-director of the Diakonessenhuis (the Deaconess Hospital) in Paramaribo, where he cared for the spiritual wellbeing of staff and patients and organized concerts and lectures that anyone could attend. He also chaired the governing board of the EBG.

In Suriname, the December murders of 1982 made him more and more an advocate for human rights. In his sermons he spoke out against the military dictatorship. In 1986 the Organisatie voor Gerechtigheid en Vrede (Organization for Justice and Peace) came into being, out of a group of mostly women who met in ecumenical services. Polanen became its chairman. When his family wanted to

leave for the Netherlands in 1989, soldiers first took him away for questioning. The departure was delayed by a week.

These details come from one source, the life story of January 2008 that names his own church as its origin. The picture does fit everything that is known about those years. The first Surinamese Christians in the Bijlmer met wherever there was room.

A church from Herrnhut

If you have read the earlier volumes of this series, you know the Hernhutters, the Moravians. They were Protestant Christians with roots in what is now the Czech Republic, who in the eighteenth century found a home in Herrnhut in Germany. They sent missionaries all over the world. In the Netherlands they found a place in Zeist.

In 1735 the Moravians made their first attempt to work in Suriname, then a Dutch colony in South America. For about one hundred and forty years their missionaries went from plantation to plantation, to people who had been brought there as slaves and forced to work. Out of that work grew the Evangelische Broedergemeente in Suriname, EBG for short.

So a church that had been born in Central Europe came back to the Netherlands by way of Suriname. In Amsterdam the EBG received its first building on the Sarphatikade in 1956. In 1967 came the Immanuelkerk on the Kerkstraat, and in 1994 the Koningskerk in the Watergraafsmeer. The congregation in the Bijlmer was one of the branches of that tree.

You can read this as a detour. You can also read it as a circle. The gospel that once went from Europe to the plantations was brought to Amsterdam two centuries later by the descendants of those people.

Thousands of rooms full of emptiness

On November 25, 1975, Suriname became independent. In the years that followed, a great many Surinamese moved to the Netherlands. AT5, the local Amsterdam television station, speaks of about three hundred thousand within five years. Many of them ended up in Amsterdam.

In parts of the city they were not welcome. There was a policy that kept them out of certain neighborhoods. Meanwhile, apartment blocks stood empty in the Bijlmer. When Surinamese squatters moved into the Gliphoeve I block, sixty percent of the apartments were unoccupied. They squatted more than nine out of ten of the empty homes. In the mid-1970s about 2,100 people lived in Gliphoeve I. Almost nine out of ten were Surinamese.

People from the Antilles also found a home there. In the 1980s Ghanaians followed. Their country was in an economic crisis, and after 1980 about a million Ghanaians had to leave Nigeria. Some of them traveled on to Europe.

The bond between the Netherlands and Ghana is older than those apartment blocks. In 1637 Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen captured Fort Elmina from the Portuguese, and the Dutch West India Company made it one of its largest slave depots. In 1725 an African boy of eight, Jacobus Capitein, was given as a gift to a merchant of that company. He received an education, studied theology and became a minister in Elmina. He defended slavery as compatible with Christian morality. So it is told in the magazine Ons Amsterdam. It is a painful page in the history of the Dutch church, and it belongs to this story.

One of the first Ghanaians in the Bijlmer was Samuel Asante. In 1974 he arrived in Amsterdam for the first time as a sailor, a century after the Dutch had left Ghana. After he signed off his ship he

lived in a boarding house on the Keizersgracht. Through a coffee stand in Sloterdijk he found work at a chemical company, where he stayed for twenty-two years and later helped many fellow countrymen find work. Thanks to a general pardon for working undocumented people who had lived in the Netherlands since 1974, he received a residence permit. After that he was the first of the thirty Ghanaians then living in the Koningshoef block to get a home of his own. He later told Ons Amsterdam that faith lies deep in his community. He prays every morning before he leaves the house.

Those who had gone to church in Ghana wanted to do the same in Amsterdam. Those who had belonged to the EBG in Paramaribo looked for a congregation here. The only question was: where?

"From the outside there was nothing to show"

The answer lay in the parking garages. In 1996 Harry Hamersma wrote an article about the churches of Amsterdam in the journal Streven. He began with a first impression of the Bijlmermeer: two small churches and a mosque for a hundred thousand residents.

That first impression, he wrote, was completely wrong. Underneath the parking garages were many churches. They rented the space from the city's parking authority, the Dienst Parkeerbeheer. On Saturday evenings and on Sundays, he wrote, hymns of praise and amens come toward you from every corner of the neighborhood. The original plan, with its almost identical apartments, left no room for churches, so only the space under the apartment blocks and the garages remained.

He described what he saw. A Ghanaian Assembly of God met under a parking garage, in a space that had once been a health center. The Pentecostal church held services in Dutch, with simultaneous translation into Spanish and English. At the Seventh-day

Adventists everyone came dressed as for a wedding, a welcoming team stood at the door and all the side rooms were in use for Bible groups, catechism classes, choir rehearsals and a nursery. A charismatic African service knew no moment of rest: the preacher put one question after another that ended in "Amen?", and the congregation answered loudly. For the average Dutch person, Hamersma remarked, such a service was an exhausting experience.

Hamersma also mentioned Iglesia Filadelfia, Victory Outreach, Resurrection Power and Damascus Christian Church. Around the Kraaiennest metro station were, among others, a Korean church and a large Pentecostal congregation. Along the Daalwijkdreef was, among others, a Surinamese parish. In Amsterdam alone he counted more than ten Ghanaian churches. So he came to the conclusion that Amsterdam had too many and too few churches at the same time.

About one of those places he wrote a sentence that captures the whole phenomenon: "From the outside there was nothing to show that it was a church."

You could walk past on a Sunday without knowing that behind the concrete wall people were singing and praying.

Jesus said: *For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.* (Matthew 18:20). About a building He says nothing there. The congregations under the parking garages had no tower and no bell, but they came together on Sunday.

The church center De Nieuwe Stad had started that way too. According to Hamersma, it was first a beautiful and functional space under a parking garage. When the surroundings went downhill, the congregation moved to a real church building, where sometimes three services are held at the same time. A report by Ecumenical News International from the years before De Kandelaar was completed

counted more than ninety migrant churches in the neighborhood and still called their services improvised out of necessity: in parking spaces and apartment buildings.

Samuel Lee started a congregation of his own in 1994, in an old, rundown wooden building under a garage. Ghanaians and Nigerians soon joined. He calls it a typical Bijlmer church. In his 2020 book *De Bijbel in de Bijlmer* (The Bible in the Bijlmer), he tells how on Sundays he sees African churchgoers walking by from his window, well dressed and with a Bible in hand. Many members are poor. Some have no residence permit, and many live in a room with others and earn barely four hundred euros a month. More than a hundred and thirty nationalities live there. Lee sees migrant Christians as people who live biblical stories literally: the flight, the life as a stranger, living in a country that is not your own. When he walks with his students through old Amsterdam, past the Walloon Church where sixteenth-century Huguenots found a home, one of them says, looking at the portrait of a Jewish man in a museum: "Perhaps in five hundred years my portrait will hang in a museum too." The student meant the Bijlmer.

Sunday, October 4, just after half past six

On Sunday, October 4, 1992, just after half past six in the evening, an El Al cargo plane crashed into the Bijlmer. The Boeing 747 was on its way from New York to Tel Aviv, with a stopover at Schiphol, Amsterdam's airport. Above the Gooimeer lake, two engines failed. The crew tried to return to Schiphol. The plane plowed into the apartment blocks, right at the corner where Groeneveen joined Kruitberg.

In the first hours, hundreds of deaths were feared. Mayor Ed van Thijn spoke of two hundred and fifty. Five days after the disaster, 111 people were still listed as missing. The official death toll in the

end was 43: the three crew members, one passenger, and people who lived in the apartments. Four hundred households were evacuated. An Amsterdam student wrote later that for weeks you could smell burning and kerosene all over the Bijlmer.

That number has never been undisputed. Many people without residence permits lived in the affected blocks, especially Ghanaians. Van Thijn called on them to come forward and promised that their information would not be used against them. Five days after the disaster, the cabinet had already concluded that there would always be uncertainty about the total. At a gathering around the memorial of 2017, a woman said aloud that she could not believe there were so few. A resident in De Groene Amsterdammer doubts the figure too.

I am not going to put another number against it. I do not have one. But I do know what happened next. According to the current affairs program NOVA, more than two thousand people without papers came forward. In the end, 52 were on the final list of those affected. Minister Kosto agreed that they would receive a residence permit.

According to a blog of the Bijlmer Museum, there was also shelter after the disaster in a church nearby. Victims could also go to the Bijlmer Sportcentrum, where beds had been set up and a bus stood ready.

Eight empty chairs

An archive overview from Beeld en Geluid, the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, lists a report by the EO program Het Elfde Uur. The EO is a Christian broadcaster. The report was about the Pinkstergemeente Bijlmermeer, the Bijlmermeer Pentecostal church. Eight members of that congregation died in the disaster. I have not been able to see that report myself. The number is in the archive description.

Eight people from one congregation. The following Sunday, their seats were empty.

At the grave of his friend Lazarus, there is a short sentence about Jesus: *Jesus wept.* (John 11:35). He who would raise Lazarus a moment later first wept along with the others. For a congregation with eight empty seats, that is no small sentence.

The archive also shows how widely people mourned. There was a memorial service in the synagogue of the Liberal Jewish congregation. Catholic church leaders spoke about the memorials. On October 11 the broadcaster IKON aired a church service. That same day a silent march went through the Bijlmermeer, and there was a memorial ceremony in the RAI, Amsterdam's convention center. In Paramaribo a memorial service was held. Ghanaians held their own days of mourning, with their own rituals. In 1994 researchers described in a psychiatric journal how differently the bereaved mourned. Afro-Surinamese mourning includes eight days of gathering, telling stories, music and prayer. A Surinamese woman did not dare to leave her house because, in her view, the souls of the dead children were still at the place of the disaster. She kept her children indoors.

A week after the official memorial, another memorial service followed in the Bijlmer sports center. According to De Jonge, group leader of the CDA (the Christian Democratic party), this was necessary because there had been no room for a church service during the official memorial.

A familiar voice was also heard. Rev. Polanen, who had started out as a young minister in a Bijlmer classroom, spoke about the disaster in an evening devotion. Since 1990 he had been back in Amsterdam, as minister of the EBG congregation Amsterdam-Stad on the Kerkstraat. In the years before, he had led the Diakonessenhuis in Para-

maribo and chaired the governing board of the EBG. From 1986 he was also chairman of a Surinamese human rights organization, the Organisatie voor Gerechtigheid en Vrede.

After the disaster, Ghanaians set up an umbrella organization, Recogin. One of the reasons was that the media were writing negatively about their community. Asante was one of the three men who made the plan. After two months they came up with a report in which integration came first. According to the magazine Ons Amsterdam, most Ghanaians in Amsterdam gather in one of the African churches in the Bijlmer, and the pastor there is regarded as the leader of the community, who gives advice and brings people back onto the right path. In the years after the disaster, Ghanaians became visible as a group.

At the memorial of 2017, twenty-five years after the disaster, a memorial service in the church center De Nieuwe Stad was part of it. There was singing in English, Dutch and Surinamese. People read out the names of the victims and lit candles. In one corner stood paintings, poems and photos. A man in the church said about the time that had passed: "When you are involved, the distance is zero." For him it was like yesterday. At the monument that day, the deputy mayor spoke of "one plane crash and a collection of countless human disasters." A minister, Rev. Otto Ruff, was still standing by the bereaved and the survivors even then.

When the garages disappear

Also in 1992, the great renewal of the Bijlmermeer began. In the years that followed, almost half of the high-rise blocks were demolished. Gliphoeve was given a new name. Low-rise buildings and owner-occupied homes were built.

Along with the apartment blocks, many parking garages were torn down. For the churches that were in them or under them, that was a hard blow. They had to leave, and there was little to go to.

In 1996 Het Groeiend Monument, the Growing Monument, was unveiled at the site of the disaster, around a tree that had survived the crash. Residents call it the tree that saw everything. Around the tree, people affected by the disaster laid about two thousand tiles, each with a mosaic of its own. Every year on October 4 the disaster is remembered there.

Around the same time, Polanen met a Moluccan colleague. Their churches were struggling with similar problems. From that meeting grew SKIN, Samen Kerk in Nederland (Being Church Together in the Netherlands), a partnership of migrant churches that works closely with the Council of Churches. According to his biographical sketch, Polanen remained chairman until his death. His story touches here on that of dozens of other pastors. They had congregations full of people, and no roof.

In his own congregation in the city, after a long search past empty church buildings, he bought the Koningskerk. He gave the members self-confidence, it says in the text from his church. They turned out to be able to do much more than they thought themselves. The congregation received no subsidy and no money from the mother church in Germany, and all the work was done by volunteers, except by the two ministers.

Five halls, one front door

The housing association Rochdale owned many homes in the Bijlmer. According to the architectural firm that designed De Kandelaar, it became clear during the renewal that the churches played

an important role in holding the neighborhood together. Rochdale wanted to support that.

The design began in 2001. It was developed together with pastors of Ghanaian church communities, with a project leader from the city district and the developer Delta Forte. Architects Ria Smit and Martin Kuitert drew a building in which five congregations could meet at the same time without disturbing one another. Extra soundproofing was added, and separate ventilation, so that the halls could be used at the same time without the residents of the tower being bothered. Music and dance were allowed to sound. In the residential tower came twenty-seven owner-occupied apartments.

On November 29, 2007, De Kandelaar was officially opened by minister André Rouvoet.

The name refers to the lampstand from the Bible, the light in the sanctuary. That is not in the architect's documents. It is my own reading of the name, and you are free to read it differently.

Six years later a reporter from the Reformatorisch Dagblad visited the neighborhood. He wrote that the pastors of about fifty churches met in De Kandelaar every month. Pastor Emmanuel Koney, who led the Pentecostal Council of Churches, expressed the wish for a second Kandelaar. He also said: "God can convert the whole of the Netherlands."

More churches than bars

The same 2013 article gives the numbers. There were about 150 churches in the Bijlmer, more than fifty of them African Pentecostal congregations. Together they drew more than ten thousand churchgoers. People were still meeting in old business premises, in spaces under apartment blocks and along busy roads. The article

called the Maranatha Community Transformation Centre a parking garage church.

Pastor Samuel Lee came to a similar number in his 2020 book. He counted about 150 registered churches in Zuidoost, where there had been around a hundred in the mid-1990s. He quoted a line from Parool journalist Patrick Meershoek: there are more churches than bars in Zuidoost. According to a Volkskrant journalist, thirty percent of the Bijlmer residents were Christian in 2018.

In 2023 NH Nieuws, the regional news service, checked the numbers. According to the Chamber of Commerce, Zuidoost had about 26 bars. Gaetan Mbwete, who helps churches find housing on behalf of SKIN, estimated the number of migrant churches at 100 to 150. According to him, 30 to 50 of them had no space of their own. Some congregations made do with school gyms, community centers or the pastor's home.

Mbwete called this the greatest challenge for migrant churches in Zuidoost. He expected the number of churches without a roof to grow, because they hardly appear in the new building plans, and he asked how the city can make suitable policy without knowing how large the group is. Piet Brinksma of the Amsterdam Council of Christian Leaders said that the redevelopment of Zuidoost does not help the churches. In the past they used empty buildings, garages and business premises. Now everything is being tightened up. Shared church buildings such as Charity's House and De Nieuwe Stad still exist, but those options are running out.

Pastor Raffic Osman of Treasures International Ministries searched for a long time for a place. In the end he chose a small hall in Abcoude. After the move his congregation lost about two thirds of its members. "They find it too expensive or too far away," he said.

The city recognizes the social role of faith communities. It does not think it has a task of its own to house churches. At that time it was working on two new churches, in the K-buurt and in the Paasheuvelweg area, for which the churches themselves had to arrange the building.

The need has not gone away. In the spring of 2025, dozens of church leaders sent an urgent letter to the mayor of Amsterdam. The city acknowledged the problem and said there was no ready-made solution. In early 2026 the Maranatha Community Transformation Center from Zuidoost signed the urgent letter of 63 churches and organizations in Rotterdam, where five churches were out on the street. The alderman responsible wrote to Nieuwsuur that religious organizations do not automatically get priority for land or property. In 2025 construction began in Zuidoost on the C3 church, together with a housing association.

What happened in the Bijlmer is also happening in Rotterdam and other cities. In 2018 the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (the Netherlands Institute for Social Research) estimated that about a million Christians with a migration background live in the Netherlands. At the beginning of 2026, SKIN gave the NOS, the Dutch public broadcaster, the same number, along with an estimate of about 1,200 migrant churches.

Within the old churches the picture is changing too. According to the 2025 study God in Nederland, sixteen percent of the members of the Roman Catholic Church have a migration background. In the Protestant Church in the Netherlands it is eight percent. In the small orthodox Protestant churches it is twenty-three percent.

You often hear that the churches in the Netherlands are emptying. In Zuidoost many churches have the opposite problem: they have people and are looking for a hall.

Polanen wanted to step down as chairman of SKIN shortly before his retirement and his departure for Suriname, in mid-2008. In November 2007 SKIN celebrated its tenth anniversary. He still lived to see the opening of De Kandelaar. Rudy Polanen died on January 21, 2008, less than two months after that opening. He was sixty-four.

Polanen began in 1971 with services in an elementary school. Later he helped set up SKIN, for congregations without a roof. The opening of a building where five congregations can meet at the same time fell just within his lifetime.

What do these stones mean?

This series takes its title from the book of Joshua. When the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan, they had to take twelve stones from the river and pile them up. Then the children would later ask what those stones meant. *When your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?'* (Joshua 4:6).

In the earlier volumes of this series, the stones were often centuries old. Here they are red and new, and the building is younger than many of the people who sing in it.

Maybe you know De Kandelaar only as a building you drive past. What would you answer, if a child asked you what these stones mean?

On the Bijlmerdreef the residential tower stands above the wavy roof. Behind the colored bay windows lie five halls, built so that five congregations can sing there at the same time.

Go there yourself

De Kandelaar stands at Bijlmerdreef 1239 in Amsterdam-Zuidoost. You will recognize the building by its red brick, the residential tower

and the concrete bay windows with colored glass. It is not a museum and is not open to the public. If you want to look inside, you can attend a service of one of the congregations that meet there. In 2017 the foundation Pentecost Revival Church bought the building. That congregation already rented space there and was the largest tenant. I have not been able to find out whether as many congregations meet there now as before. Check the websites of the congregations themselves for services and times.

At the place where the plane crashed in 1992, by the Groeneveen and Kruitberg blocks, lies Het Groeiend Monument. There you will see the tree that saw everything, surrounded by the mosaic tiles of residents and relatives of the victims. Every year on October 4 there is a memorial.

If you want to see the Surinamese branch of the Moravians, you can go to the Koningskerk of the Evangelische Broedergemeente in the Watergraafsmeer. Check the EBG Amsterdam website for services.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the building of the Bijlmermeer from 1968 and the vacancies in the first years; the arrival of many Surinamese after 1975 and the squatters in Gliphoeve; the churches under parking garages in the 1990s; the Bijlmer disaster on October 4, 1992, with an official death toll of 43; the demolition of garages and apartment blocks during the renewal; the building of De Kandelaar for Rochdale, with five church halls, and its opening on November 29, 2007; the Moravian mission in Suriname from 1735; the estimate of about a million migrant Christians in the Netherlands (SCP 2018, SKIN 2026).

Only from tradition or own testimony: Rudy Polanen's work in a Bijlmer school (1971-1973), the questions in the parliament, his

human rights work and his role in the founding of SKIN, all from a biographical sketch with his own congregation as its source; Samuel Asante's story about the first Ghanaians in Koningshoef and about Recogin (Ons Amsterdam); what Harry Hamersma saw and wrote in 1996; Samuel Lee's story about his congregation under the garage and about his students (his book, of which I could only open the preview copy with the first chapter); what Pastor Osman, Gaetan Mbwete and Piet Brinksma told NH Nieuws in 2023; what the man at the memorial service of 2017 said.

Where the sources differ or do not quite fit:

- *The service in De Nieuwe Stad.* In the old version of this chapter it said that this was on the day after the memorial of 2017. In the article I opened again, it says only that the service was part of the memorial of 2017. In the story I follow the article.
- *Five halls or more.* The ENI report speaks of halls for different faiths, including Greek Orthodox, Ghanaian and Iranian, which does not fit the other sources. I have not adopted this.

Unconfirmed: the real number of deaths in the Bijlmer disaster, which many believe is higher than 43; the loss of eight members of the Pinkstergemeente Bijlmermeer (one archive description); the shelter in a church nearby on the day of the disaster (one blog, the church is not named); which and how many congregations meet in De Kandelaar today; the numbers of churches in Zuidoost (100 to 150), which are estimates.

Interpretation: the reading of the name De Kandelaar as a reference to the light in the sanctuary is mine, not the builders'. That Jacobus Capitein defended slavery comes from one article; I mention it because it shows the bond between the Dutch church and Ghana, and I leave the judgment to you.

Sources for this chapter

1. Arcam Architectuurgids, “De Kandelaar”
2. Ria Smit Architecten, project De Kandelaar
3. In Your Pocket Amsterdam, “The Candlestick”
4. Reformatorisch Dagblad, 19 juni 2013, “Parels in de Bijlmer” (via Digibron)
5. Harry Hamersma, kerken in Amsterdam, Streven 63 (1996), via DBNL
6. De Vensterbank, “Biografie ds. Rudy Frank Polanen”, 25 januari 2008
7. Vrienden van Watergraafsmeer, “Welkom in de Koningskerk van de Evangelische Broedergemeente Amsterdam”
8. AT5, “Na 1975 werd de Bijlmer het nieuwe thuis voor Surinamers”
9. VPRO, “Hoe komt de Bijlmer eigenlijk aan die smet op z’n naam?” (2021)
10. Ons Amsterdam, “Trotse Ghanezen” (28 november 2011)
11. Beeld en Geluid Wiki, “Bijlmerramp”
12. De Groene Amsterdammer, “Relieken van een ramp”
13. Bijlmermuseum, “De Bijlmerramp van 1992”
14. Samuel Lee, De Bijbel in de Bijlmer (Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2020), inkijkexemplaar
15. NH Nieuws, 3 maart 2023, “In Amsterdam-Zuidoost zitten meer kerken dan cafés”
16. NOS, 8 februari 2026, “Migrantenkerken groeien, maar vinden steeds moeilijker onderdak”
17. Madelon Grant, “Nederlandse christenen met een niet-westerse migratieachtergrond”, Religie & Samenleving 20 (2025)
18. PropertyNL, 14 november 2017, “Kerkgenootschap koopt De Kandelaar in Amsterdam-Zuidoost”

19. Tijdschrift voor Psychiatrie, “Cultural and religious aspects of grief and trauma after a plane crash in the Netherlands” (1994)
20. Presbyterian Record (ENI), over het kerkencentrum in de Bijlmer
21. Hart van Nederland, 4 oktober 2017, “Niet alleen flats gehavend bij Bijlmerramp”
22. Cultureel Persbureau, personal account of the Bijlmer disaster (2022)

Afterword

Eight places, from Utrecht in 1853 to Amsterdam-Zuidoost today. A cathedral that brought down a cabinet. The door of a consistory room. A church in Assen where a synod ruled on a talking serpent. Five o'clock in the afternoon on a street in Echt. A hall in Noordwijkerhout where celibacy was put to a vote. Five hundred campers and a field in the polder. Fifty-one votes in a church in Utrecht. And five church halls behind one front door in the Bijlmer.

With that, this series is complete. Twenty-four places, from a monk who crossed the sea around 690 to the churches of people who, in our own time, came here from every corner of the world. If you visit them all, you travel through the whole country: from Dokkum to 's-Hertogenbosch and from Brielle to Ulrum.

What has stayed with me most is how often faith in the Netherlands began small and came under pressure. A church in an old fort. A house that someone gave away. An attic above a living room. An inn in a village in Groningen. A school in the Bijlmer. And how often people who wanted the same thing, to serve God, still could not bear one another. That too belongs to these stones.

In this last volume the sources were sometimes closer than ever, and still a great deal remained uncertain. Who said what, exactly. How many people were there. What would have happened if someone had chosen differently. I have left those questions standing. What is certain is enough.

Perhaps one of these places is just around the corner from you. Go there. Take your children or grandchildren with you. And when they ask what these stones mean, tell them.

When your children ask in time to come, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' (Joshua 4:6)