

‘Faith & Places’ — Churches in Holland & The Hague



At the end of last century the St. Jacob's Church in The Hague (inset) was set to be demolished. Parking spaces were needed, stores, offices and apartments. In place of the church one of those would arise. The Dutch were taking their leave from the church in a massive way.

Now Dutch government is asking for the help of churches to help cover all kinds of problems that society faces. Data has shown that churches are 2-4x more effective than government in solving social problems. Data has shown that churches are the best generators of entrepreneurship.

Data has shown that the most volunteers in Dutch society come from church people. The Dutch are the most generous in the world of giving, building on its christian heritage of giving throughout the centuries. Even a Dutch handbook on crowdfunding names the church as the example of crowdfunding: *‘The crowdfunding concept is relatively new. But the phenomenon that is designated by the word — that a group of people make a project financially possible — is as old as the church itself.’* The handbook then explains how the church worked and thus how crowdfunding works.

SOLD-SELLING-TO BE SOLD

Four out of five Europeans want church buildings to surviveⁱⁱ. Even so in the past forty years the Dutch have sold 1.300 churches of which 300 were demolished. There was even a contest by a national newspaper last year: pick the most beautiful demolished church.ⁱⁱⁱ Right now we are in a stretch of ten years in which 1.200 more churches are to be sold. Just in The Hague alone there are about 10 church buildings for sale. New estimates expect 800 to 1.000 more churches to be sold after that.^{iv}

The reason for this massive change is varied: secularisation beings cited as the most logic explanation. This was done on a wave of ‘freedom’ seeking, freedom from church, freedom from church rules, freedom from dogma’s and so forth. In a workshop held by the Dutch Protestant Church of South-Holland a Dutch protestant CEO of an international company said his generation ‘shook of the church, found their freedom and are happy about it’. In virtually the next sentence he asked the catholic dean of The Hague why churches are empty. I was absolutely astounded. Off course the catholic dean replied neatly: well the abuse by the catholic priests has hurt us much. Even so a catholic church real estate leader said to me: we are happy the Polish catholics use our church. Then more or less smugly: ‘we don’t believe like that any more, we did 50 years ago’.

Another main reason we are seeing in The Hague is a new spiritualisation (as opposed to secularisation), where Dutch people are looking for a new form of spirituality except inside the christian church. There is a tendency to support anything spiritual. For instance as a Dutch church closed in an area of The Hague migrant churches were ‘thrown out’, only for the buildig to be sold to become a Mosque. This is happening in other cities in Holland as well, and will continue to happen. One church in The Hague was to be sold, it was sold to become a Hindu institute even though a christian church had tried to buy it. Another church was rented for a New Age center. One of the ruling Dutch christian parties in The Hague (CDA: Christian Democratic Appeal, nationally the largest) supported the coming of the largest Hindu cluster of Temples in Europe^v, but told me to go

somewhere else when I asked their support for the issue of church buildings in The Hague for migrant Christians^{vi}.

Even so we see a new need arising. 'New Christianity' as I would call it. There is a renewal of Dutch Christianity in The Hague as in for instance the former white Pentecostal church now called the City Life Church. Formerly it was a dying Pentecostal church with only about forty old members. Now it is a thriving young church (18-30 year olds) connected to the Australian Hillsong Network. They have bought an old Roman Catholic church, changed its interior and now hold three services in the church.^{vii} Next to that there are missionary movements in Holland springing up within the old Dutch churches. These pioneer churches such as from the Dutch Protestant Church have various kinds of services for various groups and use the old church infrastructure^{viii}. Next to that are the migrant churches who are growing and often are in need of church building space. This year in The Hague a white Dutch church was closed and even before it was closed the church was reopened by an African church. There are also missionary churches from various countries in The Hague, so called church plants. These start in various places from hotels to renting historic church buildings in the morning^{ix}. They will need more permanent places of worship and fellowship and one is already looking to buy a church building in a year's time.

This 'new Christianity' does not necessarily constrict itself to church buildings but can be found in all kinds of buildings. Often there is not enough space for them and they meet in old offices, old schools, skating halls or various places where ever possible. Sometimes they rent from Dutch churches and when the Dutch churches close you find there were sometimes 4 to 5 different churches in one building. In one church in The Hague that was closing there were five churches: a Dutch, Ghanaese, Chinese, Brazilian and Hindostani. Only the Chinese church remained. Holland has 1,3 million migrant Christians (500.000 Western migrants such as Polish, and 800.000 from the rest of the world).

VICTORY OUTREACH

Victory Outreach is a church with an American background. Currently I am working with them. They moved to their present location ten years ago. They are in a school and have to leave it at a moment's notice. Currently we are looking to give them housing in an abandoned Dutch church which needs to be bought at a steep price. Otherwise it is back to abandoned offices or the such. The church does much valuable street work and its members have suffered from the 2008 financial crisis as many churches have also. Even though research has shown that migrant churches save the local government of The Hague € 17 million on a yearly base the local government will not work with churches (directly) as there is a separation of church and state held in a particular way in The Hague. Recently the Platform of International and Migrant Churches (PIM) has sprouted in The Hague and it is hoped they can help these churches be of further help in The Hague and the other way round.

In The Hague there are between 5 and 10 churches for sale right now. Five Protestant churches, one or two from the Christian Reformed church, one or two Roman Catholic churches, a church of the Salvation Army (being sold after a hundred years) and a church owned by the local government. The city council of The Hague has said in years gone by: we need 20.000 square meters of religious space. The city does not help with that, churches are being sold and migrant churches have been moving around the city trying to find space in the past decades. According to SKIN, the platform for migrant churches, the nr. 1 need of these churches is church space.^x This space has a steep price.

Drs. Rev Rens Schalkwijk VDM
The Hague, 3rd December 2014

© RevRens® — International Theological Consultancy

ⁱ **Blom, Erwin** (2012) *Crowdfunding, realisser je droom zonder bank of subsidie*. The Hague ('Crowdfunding, make your dream come true without bank or subsidy')

ⁱⁱ <http://www.frh-europe.org/eu-poll-result/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Site of the contest and the results: <http://www.mooistegeslooptekerk.nl/>

^{iv} 2.000 churches are to be sold in the next 25 years according to new estimates.

^v 'The cooperation between the city council and the Hindu and Sikh communities for the building of three temples is a good example of this' (in Dutch, point 4 last part: 'De samenwerking tussen stadsbestuur en de Hindoe en Sikh gemeenschappen ten behoeve van de bouw van drie tempels is een goed voorbeeld.'

<http://www.cdadenhaag.nl/onderwerpen/religie-levensbeschouwing-en-spiritualiteit>)

^{vi} Said to me personally at a meeting between CDA and churches in The Hague on the issue of voting boxes being banned from churches by the Mayor of The Hague, the former Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Jozias van Aartsen.

^{vii} <http://www.clcdenhaag.nl/>

^{viii} <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/missionair/missionair/Paginas/default.aspx>

^{ix} It was the first time since decades that this historic church, turned conference center, was again in use on Sundays as a church.

^x Page 7 of SKIN's plan 2012-2015,

http://media.wix.com/ugd/b0a256_ba0003afc29a303a4e32059d7f88d757.pdf