

# Reuse of Abandoned Churches in the Netherlands

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## 1 ABSTRACT

Churches for sale, quite unthinkable only fifty years ago, but nowadays a harsh reality. Plenty of choice, as you can see on websites like [www.redres.nl](http://www.redres.nl) or [www.reliplan.nl](http://www.reliplan.nl), the leading real estate agencies that specialize in selling churches. Important medieval city churches, landmarks in the countryside or postwar buildings in the suburbs, if you want one, you can buy it in the Netherlands. Every type of building is available, but mostly with a lot of different restrictive conditions attached. Finding new forms of use therefore is a difficult and time-consuming affair.

From 'Domus Dei' to real estate. How did it get this far en how do we deal with the problem of abandoned churches and the reuse of this type of building in the Netherlands? In this paper I will try to answer these questions. I want to outline the different policies, tell about the Dutch approach and show some interesting solutions. But before I do, let me first give a global impression of the situation and some facts and figures.

## 2 SOCIETY IS CHANGING

In the last twenty-five years Dutch society has changed dramatically. The population has grown from 15 to 17 million inhabitants, prosperity has increased, more people live on their own and more people leave the countryside because of unemployment and a lack of facilities. Traditional religious values are vanishing and the ongoing secularization is causing financial problems for the Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes. A shrinking group of (mostly elderly) people has to take care of the maintenance and conservation of about 6,500 churches, including the most important – and most expensive- 2,700 church buildings, listed as national, historical monuments.

In 2004 there was a merger of the three main Dutch Protestant Churches. This Protestant Church in the Netherlands is the country's leading denomination in the North and West, other than in the South, which is predominantly Catholic. The Catholic Church is also reorganizing, resulting in fewer parishes. For instance, in the archdiocese of Utrecht the number of parishes fell from 316 to 49. These processes have led to a large number of closures – usually of non-listed, often younger buildings as these have no grants for maintenance and are easier to sell.

## 3 CHURCH AND STATE

In the Netherlands there has been a strict and clear separation between Church and State since 1795. The government does not interfere in ecclesiastical matters and the Church takes care of its own personnel and buildings. Churches are owned by the local parishes or congregations. They have to take care of their property and only if a church is listed as a national monument there are State grants available for restoration and maintenance (for 6 years, up to 50 % of 3 % of the reconstruction costs). Demolishing listed churches is not allowed, so selling for reuse is often the only option once these churches have been abandoned.

## 4 ECCLESIASTICAL POLICY

Selling churches is a problem for Catholics, more than for Protestants. This difference results from their divergent views on the religious value of the building. For Protestants the building itself is mainly functional, the place to meet, the place for reflection and necessary for preaching God's Word. It is not a consecrated, sacred place and therefore does not have the religious importance that it has for Catholics.

Another important factor is the difference in the way the Protestants and Catholics are organized. Protestant congregations have a governing body for areas of common interest, the General Synod. The Synod, for instance, takes care of the education of the clergy or draws up church ordinances and regulations. But the local congregations are independent, have their own governing authority and can make their own decisions. So if a church cannot be used for worship anymore, the local congregation decides what will happen to the building, mostly in addition to the general, ecclesiastical rules. The Roman Catholic Church has another, more centralistic organizational structure. Even though the local parish owns the building, according to the

ecclesiastical rules the bishop eventually decides if a parish is viable and he decides on whether the building should be sold, reused, or demolished.

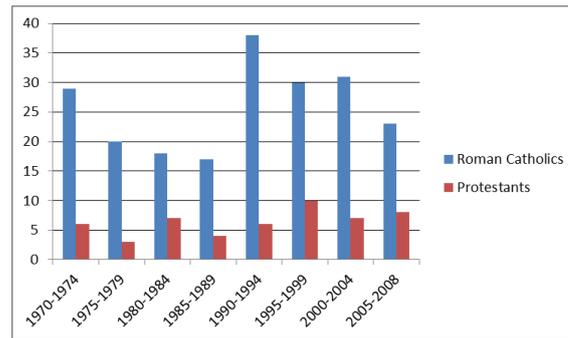


Fig. 1: Demolished churches in the Netherlands 1970-2008. (Source: N. Roeterdink e.a. Haarlem, 2008)

Their organizations, processes and responsibilities may differ, but what both denominations have in common is that they fear ‘unworthy’ new functions and ‘improper’ use after a church has been sold. Because of this the Dutch bishops and the General Synod declared their policy and visions on abandoned churches and formulated various conditions for churches on sale. In short: new community functions like health centers, libraries, schools, and day care centers for children are fine, but only if they respect the religious and historic values of the buildings. Preferably no commercial or profane functions. Likewise, non-Christian religions are not preferred by Protestants, and with regard to Catholic churches not even allowed. This last point of view is based on a few negative experiences in the past.

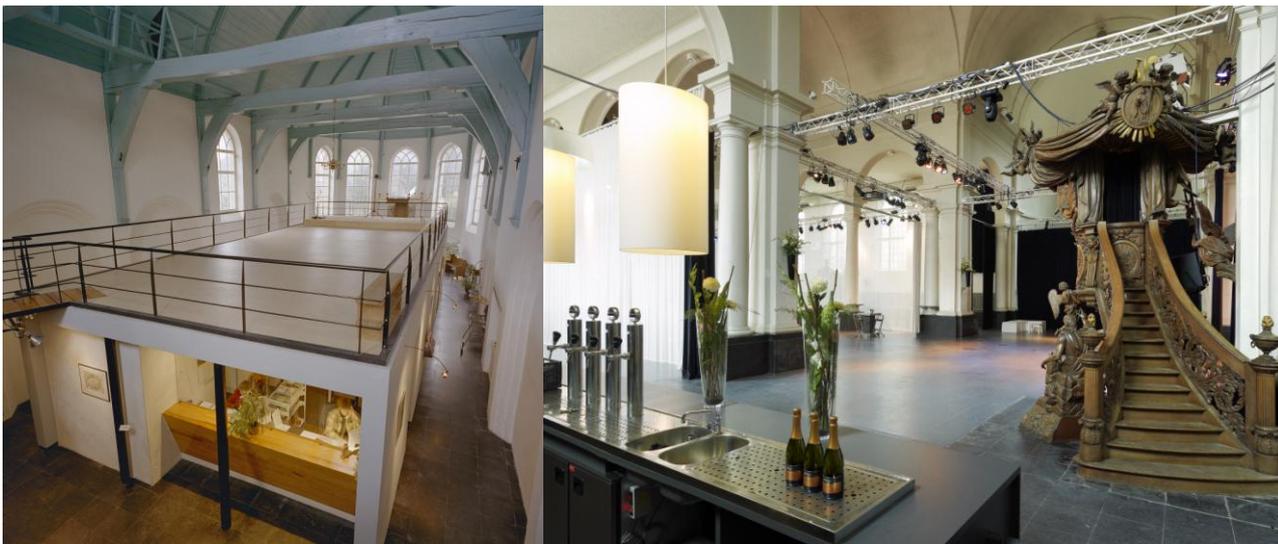


Fig. 2: Community functions, ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’. Left, Brielle St. Jacobschurch, wonderful converted into a General Practitioners Practice. Right, church of St. John Baptist in Roosendaal, since 2007 partycentre and in cultural use.

## 5 2008, YEAR OF RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

These documents were written in 2008, the national Year of Religious Heritage. This public initiative had two main goals. First to make the authorities and the general public aware of the important social role and cultural, historical and religious values of churches. And second, to make them aware of the large quantity of (upcoming) abandoned churches – including their interiors and religious objects – and the need to do something on this societal problem. A lot of local and national events took place. The website [www.reliwiki.nl](http://www.reliwiki.nl), with information about all the churches in the Netherlands, was launched and the organizing committee published *Geloof in de toekomst* (Faith in the future), a strategic document with facts and figures, important issues, analyses and recommendations that was presented to the government.<sup>1</sup>

The Year of Religious Heritage had its positive effects. Many books and guidelines were published about processes, policy, regulations or best practices, etc. New funds and possibilities for grants appeared and new solutions and instruments were developed by the national government, provinces, local authorities or by

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.religieuserfgoed.nl/doc/GelooftoekomstWEB.PDF>

private initiative. The national government for instance raised their heritage budgets and invested in the restoration and maintenance of churches. As a result today up to 90 % of the listed churches is in a good state of maintenance.

## 5.1 Effects

### 5.1.1 Governmental

In our ‘A Future For’ series of guidelines, the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency has published two church brochures. One is about how to deal with changing historic churches in religious use, the other is about new use in abandoned churches. The latter brochure contains all kinds of information about governmental and ecclesiastical policies, laws and regulations, heritage aspects, communication, the process of converting churches and the range of functions and design principles.<sup>2</sup>

A revolving fund was installed to stimulate shared use/multifunctional use in listed churches. The National Restoration Fund, the principal bank of the Cultural Heritage Agency, offers low-interest loans, up to € 50,000, especially for adjustments and facilities in churches to make them useful for more than just religious purposes.<sup>3</sup> The municipality of Utrecht has also possibilities for non-listed buildings. They encourage additional use and reuse and give grants for measures that contribute to a better exploitation.<sup>4</sup>

Commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects were developed in a joint project by the Churches, heritage institutions and the National Museum for Christian Art and Culture – Museum Catharijneconvent. This instrument helps to deal with the surplus of religious objects when churches have to be closed.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 3: Left governmental brochures. Right, the church of Groede. Multifunctional use made possible by the low-interest loan of The National Restoration Fund.

### 5.1.2 Provincial and local authorities

Not only the national government, but also provincial and local authorities have taken their responsibility after 2008. Provinces like Noord-Brabant, Limburg, Zeeland, Gelderland and Friesland started extensive church inventories and used the results for their heritage policy. For example the predominantly Protestant province of Friesland in the North. This rural province has 647,000 inhabitants and about 770 churches, mostly in towns and small villages. A lot of them are threatened or already abandoned. A number of 240 churches are still converted and 45 of these are owned by a private trust that acquires historic churches, exploits and maintains them. To understand the extent of the existing and upcoming church problems the provincial government started an inventory. They gathered all kinds of information, from heritage value,

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/organisatie/publicaties-van-rijksdienst/toekomst-voor>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.restauratiefonds.nl/restaureren/kerken/Kerkennevenfunctielening/Paginas/default.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.utrecht.nl/images/DSO/monumenten/Monumenten/Monumentenbeleid/Folder\\_Kerkenregeling\\_18dec08.pdf](http://www.utrecht.nl/images/DSO/monumenten/Monumenten/Monumentenbeleid/Folder_Kerkenregeling_18dec08.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hrre.nl/assets/Uploads/Guidelines-on-Ways-of-Dealing-with-Religious-Objects-1.1.pdf>

maintenance costs, the financial situation up to the amount of church members. Some of the conclusions were shocking. For instance 25 % of the churches are owned by congregations who have less than 100 members. At least 85 congregations expect serious financial problems within 5 years and 219 within 10 years. Maintaining their church on the long run is not possible. Because of these outcomes the province has installed a 'Deltateam'. This team consists of four regional specialists; a heritage consultant, an architect, a financial advisor and a social community expert, who consult the small communities and help them to find solutions and new functions for churches under threat.

Interesting and successful initiatives are also found on a local level. In an increasing number of cities the civil and ecclesiastical authorities collaborate in so-called church visions. The church vision answers questions like: which parishes must be merged, which churches remain in religious use, which churches can be converted and which churches can be demolished. The document contains an inventory of all the churches, analyses (religious values, heritage values, spatial, functional, etc.) of the buildings, and an overview of needs and opportunities of the district or neighborhood. As soon as a church is threatened or abandoned, the vision helps to make more well-considered decisions on conservation, reuse or demolition. Church visions can be recorded in zoning regulations. Recently the city and deanery of Heerlen for example researched all their religious heritage. Data was collected about use, parish prognosis, monumental value and reuse opportunities (square meters, parking places, etc.). A number of 44 churches have been described and valued. In the next step Heerlen City Council and the Church authorities draw up their church and heritage policy together.

Similar projects are run in Bergen op Zoom, Amsterdam, Helmond and The Hague. In the last two cities the City Council decided to buy abandoned churches. In The Hague the Protestant Juliana church from 1926, situated in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood, was bought by stadsherstel. Converting the church into a social community center in 2006 had a positive effect on the immediate area. The same could be seen in Helmond where a Catholic postwar church, in 2003 converted into a theatre, is part of an upgrading process of the neighborhood. A vibrant health center in the same city, initiated by the municipality and developers, is found in the Leonardus church.

### 5.1.3 Private initiative

Some private initiatives are also important, successful or promising. Since 1981 we have the Vereniging van Beheerders van Monumentale Kerkgebouwen. This national association for owners and managers of historic church buildings is committed to the proper management and use of monumental church buildings. They facilitate professionalism and educate their members in the upkeep and exploitation of the churches used for congresses, concerts, exhibitions or other manifestations. Very successful is the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, a trust already 40 years old that acquires old churches in the province of Groningen and takes care of them. They own, protect and exploit 70 churches in the province of Groningen.



Fig. 3: The abandoned church of Oosterwijtwerd still has its important interior thanks to Stichting Oude Groninger kerken.

They have a team of professional employees who educate volunteers, involve the local population, arrange activities or performances and are very keen on fundraising and getting legacies. Trusts of this kind, but a lot smaller, can also be found in five further provinces. Recently a new trust that operates on a national scale was founded. This ‘Church and Cloisters’ trust buys, converts and exploits churches and cloisters and has its roots in BOEI, a private non-profit organization for redeveloping industrial heritage. Their know-how in real estate, finance, exploitation and heritage helps them to find new functions and creative solutions. Like Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken they are very active in fundraising and one of their sponsors is the National Bank Lottery.

## 6 RELIGIOUS HERITAGE AND REDEVELOPMENT, NEW STEPS

Despite all these initiatives and trusts the problems keep growing. Due to the financial crisis, not only churches are abandoned, also other heritage such as town halls are at risk as well. This increases the competition for churches and makes it more difficult to find new functions. The national government has considered the huge task of redevelopment both in its Policy Document on Architecture and in its new policy on heritage management. Redevelopment has become one of the main pillars of policy. Because of this in 2010 the National Redevelopment Programme started and also a new subsidy system for stimulating the redevelopment of monuments was introduced. This system consist of two parts. First the ‘wind- and watertight scheme’, devised to prevent demolition or prolonged vacancy and to promote the sustainable use of valuable objects. And second, the possibility of granting redevelopment plan feasibility studies, for property owners to help them explore the options for redevelopment.

More governmental action in favor of Dutch religious heritage started last year. The director of the Cultural Heritage Agency, Cees van’t Veen, noticed that central direction and coordination in addressing the problems failed, but is strongly needed. This point and the next step in the process were discussed in several meetings with national key players and stakeholders. Essential is commitment of all partners and the development of a national agenda for religious heritage. Specific themes like financing, heritage selection, regulations, policies, etc. must be part of that agenda.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reuse of churches is not a new phenomenon, but more than ever it has become an urgent and very complex issue in which religious opinions, cultural awareness, emotional attachments, rational and economic arguments all play a part. Because of the large quantity of abandoned churches, the lack of money and the lack of worthy new functions, it will be difficult to convert them all. I think we have to choose, but in a well-considered and communicated way, based on mutual respect and trust.

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