

Sanctuary as a moving practice The dynamics between diaconia, liturgy and politics during the Church Asylum in The Hague, 2018–2019

Erica Meijers

Protestant Theological University, The Netherlands
p.e.m.meijers@pthu.nl

Abstract

In the winter of 2018–2019, a refugee family threatened with deportation from the Netherlands, found sanctuary in a church in The Hague. The police weren't allowed to enter the building during a church service; this led to a period of three-month non-stop worshipping, causing vivid debates in both church and society. The sanctuary brought together the public presence of faith, often expressed in diaconal work, and the hidden, intimate spirituality that is associated with worshipping. Words usually spoken during Sunday services, and deeds frequently performed out of sight in diaconal practices, met during the sanctuary, brought together by political policy. This situation makes the sanctuary suitable to explore the dynamics between Diaconia, Liturgy and Politics, the three constitutional elements of the sanctuary in The Hague. The results are based on research in the archives of the sanctuary and empirical research during and after the sanctuary, interviewing both organizers and participants about their experience within this triangle. The article aims to find some answers to the question how diaconal theology contribute to a Church which is relevant in public life. First, the article describes the sanctuary as a diaconal practice in relation to its political context, it then turns to the role of Liturgy during the sanctuary, and finally it envisions the connection between Liturgy and Diaconia in the particular political context of the sanctuary.

Keywords

Diakonia; sanctuary; political theology; liturgy; refugees

1. Introduction

In the winter of 2018–2019, dramatist Anoenk Nuyens visited the social-democratic politician and former minister of Development Cooperation Jan Pronk as part of her research for her upcoming play about today's

deeply disturbing societal questions. She no longer felt at home in a world flooded with so many crises. Nuyens was not interested in generating new questions. Rather, she hoped to find answers that would restore her outlook on life. At the end of her visit with mr. Pronk, she was still hungry for those answers, which the almost eighty-year-old politician – who had dedicated his life to the struggle for equality – could not provide. He was a self-declared pessimist. In a last desperate attempt, Nuyens asked Pronk: “When was the last time you experienced hope?” To her surprise, he said: “Last night. In a church here in The Hague where an ongoing church service is protecting a family from Armenia who have exhausted all legal remedies.” That same evening he took her to the church, a small chapel named Bethel, and left her at the doorstep. Except for the minister, there was only one person in the chapel, who was happy to be replaced by Nuyens. She was not used to going to church and felt a bit uncomfortable. But after a while she realized that she didn’t have to do anything. Her being there was enough; it ensured the continuity of the church service and thus provided sanctuary for the family. Unexpectedly, this touched her deeply. All her unrest and self-centred discomfort dropped away from her, so she tells in her play. There was nothing she had to prove. Being there, in that place, was enough.¹

This narration of Anoeke Nuyens touches the heart of the experience of many people who visited the Bethel chapel during the sanctuary. They were moved, while sitting motionless in the chapel. Afterwards, they often spoke about the Church Asylum as a revival of the social and political relevance of the church.² Spokesperson and coordinator of the sanctuary, Derk Stegeman, expressed this as follows: “So, it is possible, it is possible that the church makes politics move. We have been participating in a church who not only testified in the public forum, but also translated words into deeds

1 Nuyens, Pronk (Unpublished Theatre Play, 2019). Also Max Arian, “Er zijn. Toneel: Pronk.” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3(2020) [Online]. Available: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/er-zijn>.

2 Willem van der Meiden and Derk Stegeman, *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel* (Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon, 2020), 20. Practically all of our interviewees and the surveys confirmed this.

and manifested itself as a movement for compassion and justice. (...) We did what we had to do and we did this as *ekkleisia*, as church.”³

The sanctuary brought together the public presence of faith, often expressed in diaconal work, and the hidden, intimate spirituality that is mainly associated with worshipping. Words usually spoken during Sunday services, and deeds frequently performed out of sight in diaconal practices, met during the sanctuary, brought together by political policy.

In this chapter I will explore the dynamics between those three constitutional elements of the sanctuary in The Hague: diaconia, liturgy and politics, in order to find some answers to how diaconal theology can contribute to a church which is relevant in public life.

How did organizers and participants express their experience of this triangle? First, I will describe the sanctuary as a diaconal practice in relation to its political context, then I will turn to the role of liturgy during the sanctuary, and finally I will envision the connection between liturgy and diaconia in the particular political context of the sanctuary.

2. Research methods

So far, only one book has been published on the sanctuary: *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel* (“The Miraculous sanctuary”), which mainly brings together contributions of the organizers. For this chapter, I therefore relied on other sources: archives of the sanctuary, liturgies of the church service, articles in the daily press, blogs, and social media. To put these findings in perspective, I had several conversations with organizers, volunteers, and participants of the sanctuary. I interviewed six persons closely involved in the organization of the sanctuary. Since they all performed a public role during the sanctuary, they appear with their full names, which is why all of them commented on an earlier version of this article. Eighteen active participants in the worship service, most of them ministers, were interviewed. Their names will not appear. They came from different churches and denominations, such as The Protestant Church of The Netherlands, The Old Catholic Church, The Dutch Reformed Church, two independent Ecumenical churches. One was

3 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 26.

a spiritual caretaker, and some were lay pastors with other professions. Due to the circumstances caused by Covid-19, most of them were interviewed in online sessions, some individually, some during focus group sessions.⁴

Finally, I rely on my own observations during the sanctuary, which I visited twice: once as a churchgoer and once as a minister.⁵ The perspective of this article can therefore be characterized as an inside perspective, reflecting on experiences of those who supported and participated in the sanctuary, including myself. The perspective of the family, which of course can shed a different light on the experiences during the sanctuary, remains outside the perspective of this article.

Two online surveys were conducted. One was mainly designed to find ministers willing to be interviewed and will not be cited here. The second survey was distributed to those attending the book presentation of *The Miraculous sanctuary* in the Bethel Chapel in January 2020, who had all been involved in the sanctuary in varying degrees. The aim of this survey was to verify some presumed views of the participants about the sanctuary that had arisen from media coverage of the sanctuary and my own observations and conversations with participants and organizers.

3. The sanctuary as a diaconal practice in its political context

The sanctuary in the Bethel Chapel in The Hague started on October 26, 2018. Two days earlier, there had been – in the form of an urgent phone call – a knock on the door of the Protestant Church of The Hague by a refugee family with three children from Armenia, who were already hiding for several weeks in their own church in Katwijk but couldn't stay there anymore. They were under a real and direct threat of being expelled from the Netherlands. A decision had to be taken quickly. A small group of representatives of the Protestant Church of The Hague, its Diaconal Board

4 Part of the interviews were conducted together with or only by my master's student Thelma Schoon (TS). This will be indicated when relevant. All interviews were originally in Dutch. The citations are translated by the author.

5 Erica Meijers, "Spirituele Dimensies van een ruimte: een buurtcantate in Amsterdam en in Bethel," in Willem van der Meiden and Derk Stegeman (eds.), *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel* (Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon, 2020), 56–64.

and Executive Organization studied the situation of the family concerned, who had been waiting years for the final decision on asylum and now had to leave the country.⁶ The representatives concluded injustice had been done to them and their return to Armenia would endanger them. The Protestant Church of The Hague is officially known as the “City of Peace and Justice,” and The Protestant Church of The Hague felt it their duty to remind the government of their responsibility towards vulnerable people.⁷ The family was brought secretly from the church in Katwijk to the Bethel Chapel in The Hague in order to prevent the possibility of their arrest on the only highway between the two cities.⁸ They stayed in the former sexton’s apartment just above the chapel.

The Protestant Church of The Hague and its diaconal board took formal responsibility for the sanctuary in the Bethel Chapel in accordance with guidelines of the Dutch Council of Churches on Church Asylum, which states Church Asylum is a local decision.⁹ The organization and coordination were carried out by Stek,¹⁰ its executive agency, which is one of the bigger diaconal organizations in the Netherlands. Derk Stegeman, at the time deputy director of Stek, managed the practical aspects of the sanctuary and Theo Hetteema, chair of the general Council of the Protestant Church of The Hague, handled the administrative side. Together they acted as spokespersons. The director of Stek, Ineke Bakker, supported the asylum, but chose to maintain some distance from the daily work in order to keep an eye on the interests of Stek as an organization and to focus on the political

-
- 6 The family had been involved in an asylum procedure since their arrival in the country. The Court had found them in the right twice, but the State had fought this decision. After seven years, the final outcome of this process was that they had to leave. They then applied for the Children’s Amnesty Regulation. This was denied after almost two years, in a period that the judge had forbidden their expulsion. *Dat wonderlijke Kerkasiel*, 21 and 95. Derk Stegeman, *Het Vermoeden*. EO Television, Dec. 2, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://portal.eo.nl/programmas/tv/het-vermoeden/gemist/2018/12/02-derk-stegeman>. [Online]; Interview February 12, 2018, Interview Bakker December 9, 2020.
- 7 Interview Hetteema, June 15, 2020 (TS).
- 8 Interview Hetteema (TS).
- 9 *Overwegingen rond kerkasiel van de Raad van Kerken*. (rev ed., Amersfoort: Raad van Kerken in Nederland, 2004).
- 10 In Dutch, Stek roughly translates as “a place to feel at home,” and is an acronym for Foundation for City and Church.

lobby behind the scenes.¹¹ Stek had the basic diaconal structure necessary to ensure the sanctuary could be organized properly.¹² Thus, formally, the sanctuary was a diaconal practice.

More importantly, all elements of a diaconal practice as described in the following definition of diaconia were present during the sanctuary: “Diaconia is the practice of churches and other groups and movements inspired by the Gospel to prevent, end, diminish and/or endure the suffering and social distress of individuals and groups, and to create just societal structures in church and society.”¹³

The organizers engaged with this family to relieve their suffering and to prevent more hardship by standing up against their expulsion from the Netherlands. They gave them shelter, fed them, and made all kinds of arrangements for their safety and well-being. While doing this, they underlined the fact that a lot more families were in the same situation, engaging themselves politically and asking others to do the same to create more just, societal structures.

3.1. Children’s amnesty

The goal of the sanctuary, as the first press statement says, was to “create time and space for a dialogue with the authorities,” not to “organize” a residence permit.¹⁴ In the same statement the initiators declared that by protecting this particular family they were pleading for a righteous application of the so called “Children’s Amnesty,” a government regulation which was the last resort for this family.¹⁵ As a response to the long procedures and backlog at the IND (Service for Immigration and Naturalization), children and their families were granted a residence permit when they had been living in the Netherlands for five years or longer¹⁶. This regulation became known as

11 Interview Bakker.

12 Interview Bakker.

13 Hub Crijns, *Barmhartigheid en gerechtigheid: Handboek diaconiewetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), 13. Translated from Dutch by author.

14 First Press statement, Oct. 26, 2018 (www.protestantsekerkdenhaag.nl/kerkasielweek1).

15 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 20.

16 Definitieve Regeling Langdurig Verblijvende Kinderen (accessed October 19, 2020). Definitieve Regeling Langdurig Verblijvende Kinderen. Online: <https://ind.nl/over-ind/Paginas/Alles-over-de-Regeling-langdurig-verblijvende-kinderen.aspxv>.

Children’s Amnesty because it was considered an act of grace, an exception to the asylum laws. The State Secretary responsible for immigration had the discretionary power to grant this Amnesty and did so in hundreds of cases since its activation in 2013.

But after the 2017 elections, this aspect of Children’s Amnesty became a point of fierce debate between the four parties that were to form a coalition. The two biggest parties wanted to stop Children’s Amnesty all together, (the conservative-liberal VVD and Christian democratic CDA), while the two others – social-liberal D66 and Christen Unie respectively – wanted to continue it or even make it more generous. Finally, the regulation was kept, but interpreted very strictly: those who wanted to apply for Amnesty had to cooperate with the authorities, which until then had meant not to give false information. But from now on it would mean to cooperate in leaving the country. Invoking Children’s Amnesty was thus interpreted as a refusal to cooperate. From that moment on, less than ten percent of those who applied were accepted. The family in the Bethel belonged to the other ninety percent, which at the time of the sanctuary was believed to concern around 200 families.¹⁷

This political situation shows an unwelcoming climate for refugees and asylum seekers. This situation had developed over a long period, which dates back to the 1990s, when populist and radical right-wing parties became part of the Dutch political landscape. Others have pointed to xenophobic tendencies in European culture as such.¹⁸ On several occasions, churches stirred up the debate around asylum and immigration policies by facilitating Sanctuaries, around fifty since the 1980s.¹⁹ The sanctuary in The Hague was in keeping with this tradition of bringing injustice out into

17 Press statement October 26, 2018. Protestant Church of The Hague; *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 14. After the Church Asylum it became known that it concerned 1,100 children. Kinderpardon: helft van 1100 kinderen mag in Nederland blijven. NOS nieuws, Feb. 2, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2322685-kinderpardon-helft-van-1100-kinderen-mag-in-nederland-blijven.html> [Accessed: Oct. 20, 2020].

18 Linda Polman, *Niemand wil ze hebben: Europa en zijn vluchtelingen* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Jurgen Maas, 2019)

19 There have been around fifty different cases of sanctuary in the Netherlands. (List of Sanctuaries, archive INLIA, a faith-based organization specialized in supporting rejected asylum seekers.)

the open and inviting the political arena to react, this time on the issue of Children's Amnesty. To make hidden suffering visible to the world is part of the diaconal engagement of churches.

This had an immediate effect in the city of The Hague, where the sanctuary took place. Local populist parties in The Hague opposed the Church Asylum, but without success.²⁰ National politicians also followed the sanctuary closely, because of its political importance: politicians of several parties visited the Chapel, some openly, others incognito.²¹

The plea to put Children's Amnesty on the political agenda was supported widely by churches in the Netherlands, who have been asking for a more humane policy for asylum seekers for years.²² Both the Dutch Council of Churches²³ and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) supported the plea. René de Reuver, General Secretary of the PCN, very quickly spoke out in support of the sanctuary in The Hague. His support was later confirmed by the Synodal Executive Board (moderamen).²⁴ De Reuver led an hour of the worship service in the first days of the sanctuary. He spoke about the Good Samaritan and said: "If people knock at your door in peril, you do not say: there are rules and we have to look first if they have been met. No, you open your doors and look after them (...)." ²⁵ He pointed to Matthew 25: "By receiving you as a family, we receive Christ." De

20 It was discovered that the politician responsible for the proposition to enter the Church and expel the family, had received her own residence permit thanks to the previous Amnesty for Asylum seekers. Axel Veldhuizen, "Groep de Mos heeft een geloofwaardigheidsprobleem." *Algemeen Dagblad*, November 4, 2018.

Also Interview Stegeman October 2, 2020.

21 Interviews Bakker, Stegeman, Hettema, October 8, 2020.

22 *Overwegingen rond kerkasiel van de Raad van Kerken in Nederland; Geloven voorbij grenzen. Over de kerkelijke betrokkenheid bij vluchtelingen en asielzoekers. Bezinning 61* (Amersfoort: Raad van Kerken in Nederland, 2019). During the sanctuary, De Reuver published *Van Migrant tot Naaste*.

23 Press announcement Dutch Council of Churches, 5.12.2018.

24 Interview De Reuver, 25.3.2021.

25 Maaike van Houten, "Het kerkasiel in de Bethelkapel werkte eerder verbindend dan splijtend." *Trouw*, 30.1.2019 (online), January 31, 2019 (in print). Also De Reuvers statement in October 2018 on the website of the Protestant Church: "The care for the stranger is a common thread in the Christian tradition. As protestant church we try to be followers of Jesus. For Jesus every human being is important, especially children." [Online]. Available: <https://pkn.kerk.dev/verdieping/de-protestantse-kerk-het-kinderpardon-en-kerkasiel/> [Accessed: 14.8.2020].

Reuver further supported the sanctuary by talking to the Roman Catholic Bishops and the Christian Democratic party (CDA).²⁶ Support came from international churches and church bodies²⁷ as well as from local ministers from liberal to orthodox churches all over the country. They came to The Hague to help keep the sanctuary's continuous service going. Just like De Reuver, they often pointed to Matthew 25 as a reason for their support.²⁸

3.2. Ecclesial citizenship

An important incentive for the widespread support among ministers was its outspoken ecclesial character. Behind the scenes, the organizers talked to political parties, members of parliament and to the government, but the public messages of the sanctuary never had an activist tone or referred to party politics. Theo Hetteema: "A lot of journalists who came were disappointed: it was just one of those dull church services they remembered from their youth. No one was painting political slogans on banners. And we did not allow them to disturb the worship in any way."²⁹ Journalists were only admitted to the Chapel "if they left their equipment and statements outside and sat there quietly like everybody else."³⁰

It meant a lot to the participants, who were both church and non-church members, that it was the church who stood up for this family and

26 Interview De Reuver.

27 The community of Taizé supported the Church Asylum, two ministers from a Mennonite Church in Ohio travelled to the Netherlands especially to show their support. They visited the Chapel on Martin Luther King's day (21.1.2019) (Theo Hetteema, "Lachen en geweën: Maandenlang vieren in de Haagse Bethelkapel." *Laeatare: Tijdschrift voor liturgie en kerkmuziek*, 35, no. 3 (2019), 9). The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) sent a letter of solidarity. Philip Vinod Peacock, WCRC executive secretary for justice and witness, and Hanns Lessing, WCRC executive secretary for communion and theology, worshipped in Bethel on 17.12.2018.

28 A statement to which the respondents had to react in the survey was: "The liturgy connected the suffering of Christ with the suffering of refugees and asylum seekers." On a scale of 1 (I do not agree) to 5 (I agree completely) 59 of the 65 respondents reacted to this statement, where 32 percent chose 3, 39 percent chose 4, and 22 percent chose 5. Matthew 25 was regularly mentioned during the interviews.

29 Interview Hetteema.

30 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 29. Also Stegeman in *Het Vermoeden*, February 2, 2018. This program caused a lot of positive reactions and a lot of new ministers inscribed to lead part of the service. *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 17. Also interviews Hetteema and Stegeman.

Children’s Amnesty. “This is what church is really about,” was an often-heard comment. A minister said: “I notice that church and society have been growing apart during the last years, but thanks to the Church Asylum they have met again on a decisive intersection.”³¹ This was confirmed by the survey, which showed that 95 percent of the respondents³² agreed or fully agreed with the thesis that the sanctuary was church at her best, bringing worshipping, serving, learning and sharing together.

Some, however, both in church and society, raised questions about the authority of the church to question decisions of the government.³³ Theo Hetteema reacted as follows: “We did what every citizen should do: we were not indifferent. The sanctuary reminded the government of her responsibility to take care of its citizens and not let those who ask for asylum wait for five years or longer, which stresses and harms them. We were no subversives; we were model citizens. (...) Being obedient means to respond to the call of a situation. Romans 13 is about helping under protest, which to me is the essence of diaconia.”³⁴ According to his fellow spokesperson, Derk Stegeman, “Every authority makes mistakes, since we are all fallible. This thought is actually the essence of democratic law. This is why Church Asylum is a democratic instrument.”³⁵ Most of the respondents echoed this view, some being more moderate, others more radical. But they all considered it the responsibility of the church to speak up and act when injustice is done, with or without success. Ineke Bakker put it like this: “It was absolutely non-violent and fragile. It could have failed and we were very aware of this. What did we do? We were just a small group of praying people.” She is of the opinion that it was exactly this fact which attracted ministers and churchgoers and made the sanctuary disturbing for

31 Interview September 23, 2020.

32 The second survey was distributed to 150 people, of which 65 participated.

33 E.g., Hans Goslinga, “Het kerkasiel ondergraaft het vertrouwen in de democratische rechtsstaat.” *Trouw*, November 4, 2018; Maaïke van Houten, “Theologisch elftal: Kerkasiel is als een noodventiel.” *Trouw*, October 25, 2018. Hendro Munsterman, “De Korte: bisschoppen kozen voor diplomatie.” *Nederlands Dagblad*, February 2, 2019. Despite this lack of official support, Roman Catholic priests and pastoral workers participated in the church service.

34 Interview Hetteema (TS).

35 Stegeman, Presentation at the Dutch Diaconal Circle, September 13, 2019.

politicians, especially for confessional parties whose members participated in the church service.³⁶

3.3. Denouement

As the weeks went by and nothing in the political arena changed, despite new evidence which had been gathered by the organizers of the sanctuary,³⁷ the pressure on the Christian Democrats increased. If they would change their position, there would be a majority within the government in favour of an effectuation of Children's Amnesty. Behind the scenes lobbying and growing pressure from party members in support of the sanctuary eventually made it happen.³⁸ Even though other events contributed to the growing political unrest around Children's Amnesty,³⁹ the sanctuary played a decisive role in this change of position, according to Theo

36 Interview Bakker.

37 INLIA had organized a factfinding mission in Armenia. The Secretary of State denied having received new information, although the spokesmen of the sanctuary were convinced a dossier with new facts was laying at his desk as he was speaking. *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 18 and 22. Also: Stegeman, presentation for the Circle of Diaconal Studies. According to Hetteema, the government wanted to avoid social unrest about yet another case of asylum seekers (earlier cases: public support for the family of Mauro in 2017 and the children Howick and Lilly in 2018 had more or less forced the state secretary to use his discretionary power) with two important political elections ahead (Provincial Councils and European Parliament). Hetteema (TS) and (EM). *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 40.

38 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 23. Interview Bakker and De Reuver. Rein Willems, former senator for the CDA and President of the Board of Stek, played an important role in the lobby within the CDA.

39 A lot of events happened in a short time: 1. The political congress of the Christen Unie demanded a more generous Children's Amnesty. 2. A very critical dissertation on Asylum Law was published: Karen Geertsema, *Rechterlijke toetsing in het asielrecht: Een juridisch onderzoek naar de intensiteit van de rechterlijke toets in de Nederlandse asielprocedure van 2001-2015*. Den Haag: Boom juridisch, (2018), 3. Forty scientists (with neuropsychologist Erik Scherder as the leading voice) and quite a few organizations published a *Schadenota* (damage bill), concluding children in long lasting asylum procedures were heavily damaged, both psychologically and neurologically. 4. The parliament summoned the government to solve internal problems within the Service for Immigration and Naturalisation (IND), causing waiting periods up to almost a year. 5. TV presenter Tim Hofman presented a petition with 250,000 signatures for a more generous Children's Amnesty to the parliament, after the broadcasting of his documentary *Terug naar Je Eige Land. (Back to your own country)* about the fate of children who had to return to their country of origin. All these events stirred up the debate in the period of the sanctuary.

Hettema.⁴⁰ The news came out on 19 January 2019,⁴¹ causing euphoria among the supporters of the sanctuary. After ten days of negotiations, the government officially agreed to reassess the existing dossiers for Children's Amnesty and accept new applications. Much to the distress of the initiators and supporters of the sanctuary and several politicians,⁴² this outcome had a political price: in exchange for Children's Amnesty, the usual number of accepted refugees coming in through the United Nations would be reduced from 750 to 500. This would be the very last Children's Amnesty and the discretionary power of the state secretary was abolished: graceful exceptions to the asylum law would no longer be permitted. To some of the respondents, this outcome was a call for more action. For others it was a reason to doubt whether the sanctuary had been a good cause after all.

After this decision, the family in the Bethel was no longer under threat of being expelled. As soon as this was certain, the initiators decided to end the sanctuary on 30 January 2019. The family received a residence permit two months later.⁴³

3.4. Conclusion

What can be concluded from this first part on diaconia and politics in the case of the sanctuary in The Hague? Both the direct help to a family in need and the prophetic call for justice to the government received broad support in the Dutch churches. It was confirmed this was a task connected to the very identity of the church, even if there were different views on how far the questioning of government policies could go.

The sanctuary raised questions about the limits of ecclesial public and political engagement. It left the participants wondering about the transient character of attention for a cause. The hardship of refugees, which for a moment had been visible to all, would soon return to the margins. It made the tension visible between the willingness to help a particular family, in comparison to underlying structures which often remain unchanged. It

40 Interview Hettema (EM).

41 "CDA is om: versoepel het kinderpardon."

42 "In Den Haag is niemand echt blij". Eventually half of the ca 1100 minors concerned received a status.

43 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 20 and 24.

brought up the imbalance in power between those who give help and those who receive help, something I didn't discuss, but that definitely played a role during the sanctuary.⁴⁴ These are all familiar issues in diaconal theology. Usually, they remain within the realm of diaconal practices, far from the daily life of congregations. During the sanctuary, however, they were connected to a discussion about the identity of the church and were discussed widely. The interviewees and respondents mentioned their longing for a stronger societal engagement of the church. Like dramatist Anoeck Nuyens, they often said they were overwhelmed by the crises sweeping over our societies and felt – to say the least – uneasy vis-à-vis the growing attitude of indifference or even hostility toward refugees and migrants. The support for the sanctuary can be interpreted as a longing for a church which takes a relevant stand in those crises. Therefore, the ecclesial character of the sanctuary seems to be an important feature. The non-stop church service made it undeniable this was not an initiative of some (Christian) campaign group, but that the very identity of the church was touched by the fate of this family and through them, by all whose lives would be changed by a Children's Amnesty.

This takes us to the role of liturgy during the sanctuary. Diaconia is known as a serving practice, inside and outside the church. During the liturgy, deacons prepare the table of the Lord and go around to collect gifts.⁴⁵ But this time it seemed to be the other way around: liturgy served diaconia in its role of serving a family in need, as well as in its prophetic role towards the government. This reversal of roles provoked debate.

4. Liturgy, diaconia and politics

What started out as a diaconal activity, immediately became a liturgical enterprise as well. The Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service (Dienst Terugkeer en Vertrek) had let the family know they were no longer safe

44 In the interviews with the initiators (Bakker, Stegeman and Hetteema) and some of the participants, this topic was discussed. It demands an analysis which is not possible in the frame of this article.

45 Cu. E. Meijers, 'For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table'. The Encounter of Eucharist and Diaconia During a Sanctuary in the Netherlands, *Ecclesial Practices*, 9 (2), December 2022, 165-185. Brill, DOI: 10.1163/22144471-bja10041

in the church in Katwijk, if there was no religious service in progress. This was the first time in the Netherlands the only legal base for Church Asylum was carried out to the letter of the law: the state is not allowed to intervene during a religious service.⁴⁶ In earlier cases of sanctuary in the Netherlands, a bible and prayer book were always at hand in case the police would come. This time, it was not enough. For the organizers this was a sign of a hardening attitude toward refugees and an attempt to make it impossible to continue the sanctuary.⁴⁷ The church in Katwijk, not far from the Hague, could not (and possibly wouldn't⁴⁸) provide for such an ongoing religious service, which was why the family turned to the bigger Protestant Church of The Hague for help.

The church service started Friday the 26th of October 2018 at 1:30 p.m. and ended Wednesday the 30th of January 2019 at 2:45 p.m. To be exact, the worship service lasted 2,306 hours and 15 minutes.⁴⁹

The religious service became an indispensable part of diaconal practice, in this case a sanctuary. "Everything became liturgy: from conversations to the eating of mandarins after being awake during a long night. liturgy became the decisive power of the Church Asylum,"⁵⁰ Theo Hetteema wrote. It cannot be denied that it was the novelty of this ongoing religious service that contributed to the publicity about the sanctuary, even worldwide. The church service also became a mobilizing force of the sanctuary: ministers were asked for help and came in large numbers.⁵¹ This touches the most controversial element of the sanctuary: it exerted political pressure by means of liturgy.

46 *Algemene wet op het binnentreden*, art 12.

47 Interview Hetteema (TS). Interview Bakker.

48 Van Houten, "Het kerkasiel in de Bethelkapel werkte eerder verbindend dan splijtend" In her correspondence, she explained that the church in Katwijk didn't want to organize an ongoing service because this was regarded as a political means opposing the government.

49 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 102.

50 Hetteema, "Lachen en gewezen", 11.

51 There were 980 different ministers (including lay ministers) from different denominations and churches, and about 12,000 registered visitors and 150 volunteers, who helped to organize, bring food, clean up, coordinate the schedule for the service, and keep the neighbors happy. *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 102-103.

4.1. Praise God

It was for this reason that the Roman Catholic Bishop Conference could not support the sanctuary, even though they did support the plea for Children's Amnesty. Gerard de Korte, responsible for Church and Society within the Bishops Conference, explained in a daily newspaper: "... we doubt whether it is a good idea for churches to lobby with prayer services of which you can ask yourself whether they were really held for the glory of God."⁵² Similar doubts were uttered by Marcel Barnard, professor for liturgy at the Protestant Theological University. Like the bishops, he supported the plea for Children's Amnesty, but felt ambivalent about deploying the worship service "as an instrument to prevent the government from carrying out her duty." He admitted every church service also has diaconal aspects, but "The first goal of worshipping is to honour God."⁵³ Similar doubts were voiced in parishes and congregations, as the interviewees reported. Some of them had those doubts themselves, before coming to Bethel. That is why most of them prepared their contributions carefully. A minister admitted the critical questions were an extra stimulus to keep the liturgy as pure as possible. "It should never become a charade," he said. He didn't deny the political implications, but also didn't see the worship service as a political manifestation. "It was the worshipping itself that created a safe place," he said, "We filled the hours, but we did it praying to a God who cares about refugees and children, reading relevant texts about justice and compassion and reflecting on them."⁵⁴ Since the only means to protect the family was to maintain a continuous church service, the participants strongly felt their worshipping really mattered. One of the ministers said: "We should worship more often in very concrete contexts like these. Liturgy is always diaconal, since it asks us: what can I do for others? (...) In which face do I dare to recognize Christ? In that sense, diaconia really is praising God."⁵⁵

In this context the biblical texts came alive, as several ministers noticed. The presence of the family, who often participated in the service, contributed to this experience. A minister who had been apprehensive herself before

52 Munsterman, "De Korte: bisschoppen kozen voor diplomatie."

53 Barnard, "De eredienst als wapen in de strijd," 6.

54 Focus group interview September 25, 2020.

55 Interview November 18 (TS).

coming, expressed it like this: “We read words from the first eucharistic prayer, which I seldomly pray because it is so long and formal, but which I had chosen exactly for that reason. It read: ‘remember all who are present here. Release and liberate them. Fill them with salvation and keep them eternally.’ These texts gave me goose bumps because they were so accurate in that situation.”⁵⁶ It was possibly because of experiences like this that both the interviewees and respondents of the survey answered the question “Do you think the sanctuary unjustly used liturgy for a political goal?” with a firm no.⁵⁷ The organizers formulated it even stronger. Derk Stegeman: “We pray to and sing and talk about the God who looks after vulnerable people. If our worshipping concretely contributes to their protection, it touches the very essence of liturgy.”⁵⁸ To him, “Worshipping is born out of a cry to God from our depths, like Jonah cried out in the big fish. And that is exactly what we did during the Church Asylum.”⁵⁹ Theo Hetteema called this the “prophetic role of liturgy.”⁶⁰

The intense worshipping day and night, with people from different places, both geographically and theologically, became the very drive of the sanctuary. Halfway through the Church Asylum, Derk Stegeman noted in one of his newsletters: “When we decided to organize this non-stop worship service, it felt like a heavy burden and a big responsibility. (...) By now we know better: without worshipping, we would never have been able to persevere. The service has become our bonfire, around which we assemble, (...) were we (literally and metaphorically) break the bread and share it. Around this fire of warmth and light the sanctuary has developed

56 Interview November 18 (TS). Popular Bible texts were often related to refugees or strangers: Genesis, many Psalms, Ruth, Canticle and Maria’s Magnificence, Isaiah and Esther. Popular songs were *Nada te turbe*, *Dans nos obscurités* and *Ubi caritas*. Ministers and churchgoers also often referred to Anne Frank and other stories from World War II and to stories about fleeing from their own family. (Archive Church Asylum Stek, liturgy folders)

57 Of the 65 survey respondents, 89 percent disagreed strongly, and the other 11 percent just disagreed.

58 Archive Kerkasiel Stek, newsletters. [Online]. Available: <https://dag6.nl/nieuws/2ec19193-40d9-4102-88fc-9b9dadd6502f/een-kerkdienst-gebruiken-als-politiek-drukmiddel-kan-dat-wel.html> (accessed Oct. 20, 2020). Bakker used similar words in her interview.

59 Stegeman, Presentation at diaconal circle and interview.

60 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 37-46.

itself. Around this fire we wake, wait, and stay awake because we do not want to resign.”⁶¹

4.2. Hope

After Christmas, when the Secretary of State had openly declined to use his discretionary power despite the emergence of new information in the case of the family, the situation looked hopeless to everybody. But not to former minister of Development Cooperation Jan Pronk, who volunteered during the sanctuary as a doorman: “The hope of the sanctuary was that people wanted to engage just by being there. We did not overstep our boundaries; we did what we always do as a church. That was why I was sure that we would win this. Because I know the other side very well. They lose. Hope is something you make like this, together. And you do not have to do much for it, you just have to be somewhere.” Most of the ministers were less confident. They spoke of hope against hope, that was brought to them by praying, sharing bread and wine, and reading the Psalms. The aspect of community, created through worshipping, gave hope as well. One of the ministers said: “the worshipping was real, it was about the connection between people, about the hope for a different future.”⁶²

Just like the political context of the sanctuary brought alive biblical texts, it also accentuated the eschatological aspects of worshipping. At this point, politics as an endeavour to change the world for the better, and faith as the longing for a world of peace and justice touched each other, just like liturgy as a ritual of enacting hope and diaconia as a daily activity of hope strengthened each other during the sanctuary. Several interviewees referred to the sanctuary as a sign, or a moment of God’s Kingdom, or simply as an experience of hope. Others were more reluctant to do so since they didn’t want to claim God’s support for the sanctuary. The theological and denominational differences between the participants included different positions toward eschatological questions. Ineke Bakker acknowledged the risks of misusing liturgy here, but also pointed to the need to experience the Kingdom during worship in this situation: “You cannot say: God is here. You always have to make clear that it is your own

61 *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel*, 94 (Newsletter 2; December 17, 2018.)

62 Focus group interview September 25, 2020.

experience, and you can be mistaken. (...) But if you never ever experience a trace of God, then it becomes a charade. Then we fool ourselves. You want to recognize it, but you also have to remain critical since you can always derail.”⁶³ One interviewee pointed out liturgy always has a political character: “If you do not engage, you also make a political decision. If the liturgy is a place where we can learn what the Kingdom of God is about and experience it already, even if it is not yet here, then liturgy has done justice to all its different aspects.”⁶⁴ Many different voices were heard among the participants of the sanctuary, and many stories were told by people who had a strong experience during the sanctuary, which they often connected to the Kingdom of God.

5. Diaconia, liturgy and politics

What can be said, based on the experiences and statements of both organizers and participants, about the dynamics between diaconia, liturgy and politics during the sanctuary in The Hague?

Politics and diaconia seem to be more familiar with each other than politics and liturgy, even though there is always a game of proximity and distance which has to be played out carefully. Both are explicitly involved with design and organization of society. The fact that the sanctuary was officially and visibly a matter of the church, brought diaconal issues concerning the relation to the government and the public arena more in the open, connecting them to the identity of the church. The participants of the sanctuary welcomed this as a sign of the relevance of the church in today’s social and political matters.

With regards to the more controversial relation between liturgy and politics, the critical voices warning against the instrumentalization of liturgy for political goals were acknowledged, but the experiences of the interviewees point to a different perspective: no contradiction or incompatibility between glorifying God and political engagement was experienced. Their engagement was carried by the liturgy, giving the

63 Interview Bakker.

64 Interview November 23, 2020 (TS).

message to the public domain its distinct form: by doing what is part of the most intimate identity of the church, political pressure was built. This accentuated the political aspect of liturgy: during a worship service, the world of God's design is remembered and imagined, as an antitype of the world today. This liturgical feature was experienced more strongly during the sanctuary and gave hope to the participants, which helped to keep the sanctuary going.

Finally, it can be concluded that the relationship between diaconia and liturgy was essential to the sanctuary. The diaconal act of offering hospitality to strangers was not possible without the liturgy; both the political and diaconal context gave the liturgy its power. The question I brought up earlier – who is, or who should be serving who in the relationship between diaconia and liturgy – proved to be the wrong question. They were inextricably entangled: the engagement with this family was expressed both in liturgical and diaconal service. By praying, solidarity was performed, and by standing up for Children's Amnesty, God was honoured. In doing so, a temporary ecumenical community was built, in which differences were accepted, bread, hopes and sorrows were shared, and in which one could just dwell without having to do anything or prove anything. Being there was enough.

As a result, both the diaconal, liturgical, and communal identities of the church started to move during the sanctuary, shedding new light on the relations between them. Diaconia, often focused on what is to be done, was reminded that it can be enough to be present. Liturgy was reminded of its worldly power and its role to spiritually encourage the Church to engage with the marginalized. The church was reminded that community can be open and diverse when it is not directed to itself.

The relationship between diaconia and liturgy became vital and dynamic because, humanly and politically, something was at stake. These dynamics between diaconia, liturgy and politics during the sanctuary intensified the eschatological power of the Christian community.

Not only was a family in distress protected by worshipping, but the possibility of another reality emerged; one in which no one has to flee, or fear being expelled.

Bibliography

Published sources

- Arian, Max. Er zijn. Toneel: Pronk. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3(2020) [Online]. Available: <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/er-zijn>.
- Bakker, Ineke 2020. Wederkerigheid én afhankelijkheid. Het Haagse kerkasiel in diaconaal perspectief. *Handelingen. Tijdschrift voor praktische theologie en religiewetenschap*, 47(2):47–51.
- Barnard, Marcel 2005. *Liturgiek als wetenschap van christelijke riten en symbolen*. Amsterdam: Vossiuspers AUP.
- . 2018. De eredienst als wapen in de strijd. *Woord en Dienst*, 67(12):16.
- Geertsema, Karen 2018. *Rechterlijke toetsing in het asielrecht: Een juridisch onderzoek naar de intensiteit van de rechterlijke toets in de Nederlandse asielprocedure van 2001-2015*. Den Haag: Boom juridisch.
- Geloven voorbij grenzen. Over de kerkelijke betrokkenheid bij vluchtelingen en asielzoekers*. Bezinning 61. Amersfoort: Raad van Kerken in Nederland, 2019.
- Crijns, Hub et.al. 2004. *Barmhartigheid en gerechtigheid: Handboek diaconiewetenschap*. Kampen: Kok.
- Hettema, Theo 2019. Lachen en geweent: Maandenlang vieren in de Haagse Bethelkapel. In *Laeatare. Tijdschrift voor liturgie en kerkmuziek*, 35(3):4–12.
- . 2019. Zeven wegen naar Bethel. *Tussenruimte. Tijdschrift voor missionaire en interculturele theologie*, 12(3):16–18.
- . 2020. Kerkasiel: profetische liturgie en de kerk van de toekomst. *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel*, edited by Willem van der Meiden and Derk Stegeman. Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon. 37–46.
- Kranemann, Benedikt et al. 2006. *Die diakonale Dimension der Liturgie*. Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder.

- Meijers, Erica 2008. *Blanke broeders, zwarte vreemden: De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland en de apartheid in Zuid-Afrika 1948-1977*. Hilversum: Verloren.
- . 2020. Spirituele Dimensies van een ruimte: een buurtcantate in Amsterdam en in Bethel. In *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel*, edited by Willem van der Meiden and Derk Stegeman. Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon. 56–64.
- . 2022. ‘For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table’. The Encounter of Eucharist and Diaconia During a Sanctuary in the Netherlands, *Ecclesial Practices*, 9 (2), 165-185. Brill, DOI: 10.1163/22144471-bja10041
- Meiden, W. van der, and Stegeman, D. 2020. *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel*. Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon.
- Ongehoord onrecht in het vreemdelingenrecht*, report of the Netherlands Association of Specialized Immigration Attorneys (SVMA) and the Association of Migration and Asylum Lawyers (VAJN), April 2021.
- Overwegingen rond kerkasiel van de Raad van Kerken*. Oecumenische bezinning 1999, 17. Amersfoort: Raad van Kerken in Nederland, 2004. (revised edition).
- Peijnenburg, Erna 2019. Op de draagkracht van hun vleugels. *Tussenruimte. Tijdschrift voor missionaire en interculturele theologie*, 12(3):19–21.
- Polman, Linda 2019. *Niemand wil ze hebben: Europa en zijn vluchtelingen*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Jurgen Maas.
- Reuver, R. de, and Nagy, D. 2018. *Van Migrant tot Naaste: Plaatsmaken voor jezelf*. Utrecht: Kok, 2018.
- Rouwhorst, G 2019. De intrinsieke band tussen liturgie en diaconie. In *Vieren en delen. De verhouding tussen liturgie en diaconie*, edited by Gerard Rouwhorst and Louis van Tongeren. Berne: Berne Media. 27–46.

Schadenote gewortelde kinderen. [Online]. Available. <https://www.rug.nl/news/2018/nieuwsberichten/1206-schadenota-geworteldekinderen-def.pdf>

Stegeman, Derk 2020. Geloven als grensoverschrijding: het kerkasiel in Bethel als pelgrimage. In *Dat wonderlijke kerkasiel: De non-stop viering in de Haagse Bethelkapel*, edited by Willem van der Meiden and Derk Stegeman. Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon. 26–36.

Vis, Jurjen 2017. *Diaconie: vijf eeuwen armenzorg in Den Haag*. Amsterdam: Boom.

Zenger, Erich 2006. Ich finde Wohlgefallen an Liebe, nicht an Opfer (Hos 6,6): Ersttestamentische Stellungnahmen zum Verhältnis von Kult und Ethos. In *Die diakonale Dimension der Liturgie*, edited by Benedikt Kraneman et al. Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder Verlag. 16–30.

Consulted media

Printed newspapers

CDA is om: versoepel het kinderpardon. *Algemeen Dagblad*, January 19, 2019.

Goslinga, Hans. Het kerkasiel ondergraaft het vertrouwen in de democratische rechtsstaat. Column, *Trouw*, November 4, 2018.

Houten, Maaïke van. Theologisch elftal: Kerkasiel is als een noodventiel. *Trouw*, October 25, 2018.

Houten, Maaïke van. Het kerkasiel in de Bethelkapel werkte eerder verbindend dan splijtend. *Trouw*, 30.1.2019 (online), January 31, 2019 (in print).

In Den Haag is niemand echt blij. *Trouw*, January 31, 2019.

Munsterman, Hendro. De Korte: bisschoppen kozen voor diplomatie. *Nederlands Dagblad*, February 2, 2019.

Veldhuizen Axel. Groep de Mos heeft een geloofwaardigheidsprobleem. *Algemeen Dagblad*, November 4, 2018.

Online media, radio, and television

De protestantse Kerk, het kinderpardon en het kerkasiel. (no date: October 2018) [Online]. Available: <https://pkn.kerk.dev/verdieping/de-protestantse-kerk-het-kinderpardon-en-kerkasiel/>

Tim Hofman biedt Kamer handtekeningen voor kinderpardon aan, NOS nieuwssite Dec. 11, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2263022-tim-hofman-biedt-kamer-handtekeningen-voor-kinderpardon-aan.html>

Kinderpardon: helft van 1100 kinderen mag in Nederlands blijven”, NOS nieuwssite Dec. 12, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2322685-kinderpardon-helft-van-1100-kinderen-mag-in-nederland-blijven>.

Interview Derk Stegeman. *Het Vermoeden*. EO Television, Dec. 2, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://portal.eo.nl/programmas/tv/het-vermoeden/gemist/2018/12/02-derk-stegeman>. [Online]. Available: <https://wrcr.ch/news/continuing-dutch-worship-service-a-testament-of-faith>

Kerkasiel. In *Onvoltooid Verleden Tijd*. VPRO Radio, Dec. 9, 2018. [Online]. Available: https://www.vpro.nl/spel~RBX_VPRO_14998878~kerkasiel~.html

Kinderpardon: helft van 1100 kinderen mag in Nederland blijven. *NOS nieuws*, Feb. 2, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2322685-kinderpardon-helft-van-1100-kinderen-mag-in-nederland-blijven.html> [Accessed: Oct. 20, 2020].

Other documents

Algemene wet op het binnentreden, art 12. Cf. [Online]. Available: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0006763/2010-07-01>.

Definitieve Regeling Langdurig Verblijvende Kinderen.

Online: <https://ind.nl/over-ind/Paginas/Alles-over-de-Regeling-langdurig-verblijvende-kinderen.aspxv>.

Motie over voldoende capaciteit bij de IND, Nov. 7, 2018. [Online].
Available: <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2018Z20381&did=2018D53210> [Accessed: April 1, 2021].

Worshipstatement WCRC. Online: [Online]. Available: <http://wrc.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-12-17-HagueWorshipStatement.pdf>

Press announcement Dutch Council of Churches, Dec. 5, 2018. [Online].
Available: <https://www.raadvanckerken.nl/nieuws/2018/12/raad-pas-regeling-kinderpardon-toe/>

Archive church asylum

[Online]. Available: <https://www.protestantsekerkdenhaag.nl/kerkasielweek1/>

Archive Stek Kerkasiel, impressions and newsletters.

Archive Stek Kerkasiel, folders with liturgies.

Archive Stek Kerkasiel, clippings of media coverage.

Archive Stek Kerkasiel, social media groups of the organizers during the sanctuary.

Archive INLIA, documents concerning the start of INLIA and lists of earlier Sanctuaries.

Other unpublished sources

Anoek Nuyens, *Pronk*, 2019 (Theatre Play).

Derk Stegeman, Presentation about the sanctuary for the Circle of Diaconal Studies, September 13, 2019.

Observations Erica Meijers during the Church Asylum.

Theo Hetteema. Calling of the Church in a post-secular age, lecture IRTI, July 4, 2019. unpublished conference paper.

—. Presentation about the sanctuary in Breda, January 2, 2020.