

Religious heritage & tourism: case Dorpskerk Huizum

A lecture by Peter de Haan for Stenden students on 13-3-2019

Hello, my name is Peter de Haan, I am chairman of the local committee that is responsible for the exploitation of this building.

I welcome you as students of the Stenden university for tourism and heard that you will pay attention this week to regional marketing and the role of cultural heritage. Because most students are from elsewhere I heard I will speak English. Please, forgive me the possible errors I will make in that language.

I will tell you some things about this church and the historical and present function. After that I will say some words about religious heritage in general and I will finish with some remarks about the relation between tourism and this building.

First something about this place. We are in the oldest monument of the city of Leeuwarden, the church was built in the 12th century as a catholic church like all medieval churches. We know the age of the church because of remains of tuff in the walls. The tuff stone came from the Eifel in present Germany and that was used until the 13th century. The church was dedicated to John the Baptist. The tower dates from the 13th century and has bells from 1529 and 1582. They were caught during World War II but were found back in the harbor of Hamburg and replaced after the war. The small rosettes in the wood of the ceiling are medieval Passion symbols. The choir was added in the fifteenth century.

You see here also a piscina, used by the priest for ritual washing of hands and sacred vessels after Mass; the water flowed away into the churchyard through a little drain in the wall.

Some of the furniture here are pre-Reformation. The showpiece of the church is the pulpit, dating from the sixteenth century. It's the oldest one in Friesland. Around the upper edge is a text from the Latin Bible and is saying in English: "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins." The rail around the pulpit was meant for baptismal purposes, dated in the Golden Century.

Opposite the pulpit, along the north wall, are three canopied gentlemen's pews or benches. The most right one is dated from the pre-Reformation period and bears also a Latin text: ("Arbor ex fructu, et Leo ex ungue, agnoscitur: The three is known by its fruit, and the lion by his claw"). Also Erasmus used that saying, he meant that a masterpiece is immediately recognisable. The present arrangement of choir was created during a restoration in 1961.

You will see here on the floor many tombstones, most of which are from the sixteenth and seventeenth century. They commemorate priests and ministers, noble gentlemen and administrative and military figures. There are here also some little children's tombstones. The organ on the west gallery, with a white case and bronze-coloured ornaments, dates from 1849 and was built by L. van Dam. Members of this famous organ builders are buried outside the church.

On the south wall you will also see a new ornament that was revealed short time ago. That's a bronze relief, a plaque dedicated to the famous Dutch poet Jan Slauerhoff (later the object will be illuminated). Why did we add this plaque to the church interior? Well, his longest poem consisting of 34 strophes was about the funeral of his father here in Huizum. He describes not only the relationship he had with his father but also all the aspects before, during and after the funeral that took place here. Last year we have dedicated to that specific poem a theatreplay, both outside at the graveyard and here in the church, an exhibition with Dutch and German artists, a walking tour etc. And we published a book with that poem in ten languages, from German to Russian, from English to Chinese. That all was fitting a Cultural Capital of Europe, we thought.

Let's organise a small lottery now: I have here that book. The person who will give the right answer first will get this book as present. OK ??

My question is: what was the name of that famous poet?

Outside the church we have an old graveyard around the church and the cemetery of the local government as direct neighbour. At the old graveyard there is a small building that used to be a bier house. I don't mean of course a house where you can drink beer but a building where dead people were laid out before their funeral. It was built in 1875 for dead people who were homeless or for who had an infectious illness. If you like I could open the door afterwards and you could have a look there: I call this building our *hidden secret*.

Now I arrived at the second part of my talk: the situation of religious heritage in general. One of the main sources I used is the website of Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), an organisation settled in Brussels.

In the Netherlands, it is expected that within 10 years two-thirds of the churches will close and that the current 150 monasteries will be reduced to five. The diocese of Utrecht aims to reduce its 300 churches to 20. If you considerate this figures you see the amazing urgency of this issue.

The rhythm varies depending on the country, region or denomination, but the tendency is clear all over Europe.

While the main underlying cause is reduced religious observance, other factors are also at work – mercantilism, which requires that decisions should be made on quantitative, measurable outcomes; pressures on government spending; urban development and insensitive planning decisions; the need to raise money to pay off debts; the reluctance of church tax payers to sign up, as their parents did, to a lifetime's allegiance....

More fundamental trends include a decline in the appreciation of some traditional values; Europe's reluctance to look to its historic roots; a breakdown in local communities; reduced commitment to public space; a loss of interest in history, a dismissal of all that is not immediate useful...

While religious buildings are in materially better condition than they have been for over a century, their management is often under-resourced and ill trained to respond with energy to the challenges of the 21st century.

The changes that are urgently required are not always recognised by the main stakeholders, to put it friendly: the religious bodies whose principal objectives lie with the spiritual needs of their flocks rather than in the upkeep of historic buildings; governments trying to cut spending; regional authorities arbitrating insufficient resources; historic monument bodies mostly having to raise money for the preservation of the many monuments all over Europe.

While multiple closures appear inevitable, care needs to be taken to ensure that there is proper and full consultation of all parties including the non-church going public before any decision is taken. That's by the way an interesting paradox: while most people don't go anymore to their church, they tend to be angry and very concerned if and when the church would disappear from their environment.

Anyhow: giving the trends of losing the church function all alternatives need to be examined

including part sale, new uses, sharing with other denominations... Buildings of outstanding architectural or historic interest cannot be closed. Suitable management structures, therefore, need to be developed to ensure their future long-term well-being.

Development plans need to be drawn up that permit communities to explore the potential of their local heritage and to understand how best this can be exploited.

The sector's enormous potential is already demonstrated by the success of sites such as Notre-Dame, the Acropolis, Westminster Abbey, the Jewish Synagogue in Amsterdam or by the millions of pilgrims making their way to St Jacques de Compostelle.

Here, the challenge is not how to increase numbers – the Mont St Michel has had more visitors in the past five years than in the whole of the Middle Ages – but how to divert tourists to smaller, less known churches. The difficulties of keeping buildings welcoming, informative and open, combined with a lack of an effective way of charging for entrance mean that Europe's wider religious heritage is seriously under-represented in tourist offices.

Attitudes towards the use of religious buildings for activities other than worship vary around Europe, but to many it would appear that, as congregations decline, opening buildings to appropriate non-worship activities such as concerts is worthwhile and certainly preferable to closure.

Britain, whose places of worship receive no state funding, provides many interesting examples. Of note is the tiny St Leonard's Yarpole, which, serving a village of only 28 inhabitants, houses both a Post Office and a Health Centre while retaining its sacred space. At the other end of the scale, the huge redundant Church of All Souls, Bolton, has recently reopened as a mixed-use community centre filled with innovative 'pods' to provide necessary floor space. More famous is London's St Martin-in-the-Fields, which, following a £36 million renovation scheme, employs 200 people in a variety of social outreach programmes. McKinsey estimate at 1.6 million the number of volunteers using faith buildings in the UK for non-worship activities with needy groups such as immigrants, the unemployed, the young, and the sick - numbers far outweighing any other volunteer group in the country.

Efforts should be concentrated on discussing the potential use for buildings, on 'marketing' them to the worshipping and the non-worshipping public and on implementing the organisational and physical changes required.

There is no single recipe as you can read at the website of FRH.

Many churches do not have access to government funding and have developed successful mixed professional and volunteer management teams that promote the use of their buildings for non-faith activities as well as keeping them open for worship. We find all over Europe different business models that merit serious comparative study.

First it's important to concentrate energy in encouraging churches to remain open and welcoming and to provide accessible information to visitors in the church itself but also via various marketing instruments. Several examples demonstrate that churches can be 'marketed'. Interestingly most of the visitors in those cases were local or regional.... There are further examples of visitors being encouraged to purchase single tickets, giving access to a number of churches and thus diversifying their interest. This model suits best the

larger tourist destinations. I doubt if this will work here in Friesland but the more churches would participate in that model, the more it could be an interesting idea in the long term.

But local boards of churches need professional support from heritage associations, stakeholders and governments to help local churches to prepare business plans, to forecast future use and revenues, and to plan resource needs and spending on repairs. It's also important that churches work together. If dozens or hundreds of churches would cooperate in marketing, they can present themselves together in a regional context as the biggest museum of the whole region.

Maintenance is a chronic problem in religious buildings where, often, major repairs could have been avoided if suitable protection, particularly from water ingress, had been provided earlier. So, it's also important to promote training in maintenance and the formalisation of maintenance plans.

If we open churches for secular purposes we have to be aware of the content, the valuable artefacts in the church. Risks are theft and neglect. Some have the view that churches should be proud of their possessions, put them on display and keep churches open. This view maintains that a determined thief will cause more damage by breaking into a locked building. At the other extreme are those who believe that artefacts should best be locked up and that inventories should be kept secret as otherwise they provide a 'thief's shopping list'. In our case: we have locked up all our silver artefacts in a safe and show them only during a very special occasion. Other churches have given them in loan to museums.

Here we consider now the possibility of opening of the church, also without supervision of a person, an attendant. Countries as Germany and Denmark have good experiences with that 'open without supervision' model: theft looks there not a major problem so far. Another solution could be to group the artefacts within a single protected but visible place in the church, thus ensuring that they are both satisfactorily maintained and protected and on exhibition to visitors. In many cases the protection and promotion of artefacts represent as big a challenge to the sector as the maintenance of the buildings themselves.

A problem that I see with marketing is that volunteers of churches are mostly 60 years or older and less used to social media, while using of social media as marketing tool is a must nowadays. *Maybe you have solutions for this problem in practise?*

Another practical problem in many churches is that they need WC's and kitchen facilities for the new function. Often it's not possible to carry out that in an old medieval church: in our case we are very lucky to have a sidebuilding available with those during concerts etc. very necessary facilities.

Money is everywhere a key issue. An interesting initiative in the UK is the annual bicycle ride round local churches that, by encouraging individual sponsorship, raises an annual € 2 million for church repairs. Prizes are sometimes also given to reward worthwhile adaptations of religious buildings or successful restoration of artefacts. Selling of some artefacts from the same like silver artefacts would be for me an option but at the moment that's totally unthinkable.

A small organisation as the FRH is a good beginning in Europe for international exchange of knowledge and for developing future policies in support of Europe's religious heritage. They

bring members together, to help them to understand their underlying complementarities despite differences of language, region and culture and assist them, as appropriate, to work together to develop cross-border projects, so that each does not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

The EU has, historically, placed little weight on the place of culture as a binding force in the European ideal. Happily, this situation is beginning to change. While currently only 0.15% of the EU’s budget is spent on culture, the initial draft for the next six year spending programme shows a welcome increase with an allocation of €1.85 billion to ‘Creative Europe’. This reflects the decision, in the EU’s foreign policy, that one of its three focus areas is ‘reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage’.

I agree with FRH that the bias given to discussion about culture is still regrettable. Europe’s religious heritage – the 500,000 buildings themselves, churches, chapels, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals, monasteries, convents: their contents, furnishings, monuments, sculptures, paintings, frescos, silver, vestments, libraries: the architects, artists & musicians they have inspired over the centuries: their record of national, local and individual history dating back well over a 1,000 years – which represents a unique and essential part of Europe’s cultural identity is still largely ignored! Hopefully those attitudes are, although slowly so far, beginning to change.

In 2015, the European parliament approved a paper with a final version that included the statement: Religious heritage is one of the pillars of European culture and identity. It is the largest “museum” in Europe and covers every corner of the continent’.

Last year in the European Year of Cultural Heritage the FRH was organising the ‘Torch’ initiative. That means that a treasure box is being carried around Europe collecting individual testimonies from local personalities about religious buildings. The Torch, which started here during an international celebration in January last year, has reached already 9 different cities all over Europe. My own testimony was also put in that treasure box. We are proud that the start of that international project was here in the oldest monument of the European Capital of Europe in 2018.

You have seen: the challenges facing religious heritage are complex and diverse. We need young people with an open mind like you to think with us about the future, also in tourist respect, of religious heritage and the question how to adapt this successfully to the constraints of the upcoming century.

The arguments as to why religious heritage is important need to be clearly made.

- **Social Value:** Religious buildings bind communities together through the worship and non-worship activities that take place within them. They are often the only public buildings remaining.
- **Economic Value:** Places of worship attract visitors from afar and from nearby. Religious buildings represent five out of ten of Europe’s most visited sites and make a major contribution to tourism GDP.
- **Environmental value:** Their physical presence in the cityscape or rural environment as landscape landmarks enlivens all who pass by.

- Cultural value: Sacred buildings, their contents and their history represent, and by far, the biggest single portfolio of Europe's historic patrimony.

How to organise developing greater use of religious buildings, promoting religious heritage tourism in practice?

Particularly promising is the development of volunteer support groups, which not only work to preserve this heritage but also help to bring social cohesion to both rural and urban areas. All over Europe, associations are being set up, often in support of single buildings. I heard you will visit these days also the Frisian association (SAFT). A good idea. Such associations benefit from the unpaid enthusiasm of determined individuals, not always worshippers, for whom their religious building represents an important treasure of local or family history and a centre of community value.

In our case: most volunteers here are not member of any religious community but they 'go' for the importance of this building as cultural and historical heritage, being aware that this building was during centuries a place for crying during funerals and laughing during weddings.

To give another local illustration: this church became after the transition from church to cultural center after many years emptiness again the social heart of this part of the town. More than 90% of the volunteers live very nearby, within 750 meters, and discovered many new friends in their own environment. That's indeed the social value of this church. The church is 800 years old but never visited in that long period so many people and so often the church in the last 5 years after disappearing of the religion function. Another paradox!

Speaking about our volunteers, our social capital: About 70 volunteers are active for our church but we need always new volunteers. We have working committees for preparing concerts, lectures, expositions, public relations, maintenance of the building and cemetery and also need a lot of hosts and hostesses. It's really dynamic to see the changes in the files of volunteers: some will only do a small, limited job, others are constantly occupied with the church. It's important to give all of them the feeling that **THEY** are the real heroes. So, we organise each year parties for them to underline that fact. Without volunteers we could close the church immediately.

There are events that attract also people of middle age but to be honest for this young audience: most visitors and volunteers are 50 plus of age. I would like to ask you all an interesting key question for us: how could we make the church also attractive for younger people, *how could we make such a medieval monument more sexy??*

OK, lets go back to the general trends.

The Internet contains an ever-increasing wealth of information about individual churches and their contents. A FRH project as Religiana sets out to link this into a simplified standardised format that will allow travellers to see at a glance the religious heritage present within a locality, to help search by specific interest, to see when buildings are open and to obtain feedback from other visitors. We as Dorpskerk Huizum have sent yesterday our information to that website (thanks to the preparation of this lecture).

A chance also are the traditional pilgrimage routes that have criss- crossed Europe for over a millennium. They are attracting increasing numbers. Religiana sets out to provide information on the buildings to be visited on such routes, and help in the development of itineraries. The promotion website will also provide a platform to publicise events in religious buildings with multilingual information. Aim is to increase the number of visitors to the largest Museum of Europe.

The third part of my talk is focussing of the relation between tourism and religious heritage on our own church as frame of reference.

First, we speak earlier about visitors than about tourists. We are aware that our cultural program is mainly interesting for people from our own city and region. Of course our cultural events are published in all event calendars, the regional media etc.

Our first base, however, is the group of people who read our newsletter every two months. That are more than 1000 readers. I think it's very important for every church in transition to invest in such a basic network of people who feel involved in or are committed to the church, being the first circle of interested people around us.

Mostly we can welcome a more than sufficient audience during our concerts and lectures. We are proud on that because we have always to compete with several other cultural events in Leeuwarden at the same time.

By the way: Leeuwarden has a very high ranking in the event index in our country. There is not another city where so many cultural events *pro inhabitant* take place as Leeuwarden. So, we might be a small city (with 115.000 inhabitants) but in cultural respect it's here kicking and alive.

Back to our church: when we attract people from all over the region we are very satisfied. But in special occasions we inform also national media. An example was the great commemoration of Mata Hari, exactly 100 years after she was shot by the French in WWI and the presentation of 3 books about Slauerhoff last year. During such special occasions and last year in the summer we could also welcome people from outside Friesland.

Each year we participate in Tsjerkepaad, a Frisian word voor Church Tour. More than 200 churches are open for the public on Saturday afternoon during the summer months, also this church. But our experience is that when we organise small, additional events during those days a lot more people will bring a visit. Besides the exposition that can be admired I speak about small events as organizing during those summer months a nature-educative walk in the environment, an organ concert, a guiding tour over the cemetery or poetry. I think that that is the main reason why we booked visitors records in the last years.

Another reason is that we made efforts to be part of special routes for walkers, cyclists, pilgrims etc. So, we are part now of bicycle- and walking routes (one is the famous Eleven Cities Walking Tour), the route with 51 poems in the pavement of the streets in Leeuwarden, we got a place in the a walking route along religious heritage of Leeuwarden and we built a landing stage for the boats that use the waterway in the Wirdumervaart along the church; that waterway is since last year connected with the watersportareas outside Leeuwarden. We hope to welcome this year a lot of water tourists in the hope they will make a stop and visit our church. The National Railways in our country published very popular walking routes for train

travellers. One of them is passing our church. That's also why we could welcome more tourists from outside Friesland than before.

We took also the initiative to write and publish a book with a walking tour around the church with all historical information. Next June we hope to welcome all the inhabitants when we will present the book about our and their environment. We hope to sell a lot of the 1000 books that will be printed and of course to strengthen our relationship with our neighbourhood. We want to stay in touch with them and with the rest of the world. Both connections are important, not only one of them.

My message is that to attract people from the region and outside it's a must to have a good, active base, with roots in the local society and to have a constant open mind in finding new connections with the great world by a good policy of public relations, organizing surprising events and by participating in greater networks as the Heritage association we are part of, FRH etc.

Our church is a little bit hiddenly located in the town, that requires extra efforts to make and keep the church well-known. Thanks to our initiatives we have succeeded generally spoken. One of our extra efforts with a positive result was to become an official wedding location of the municipality.

By the way: our two main sources of income are not the cultural events (we are happy to play budget – neutral) but rental of the church for weddings AND, even more important, funerals and other rent incomes. We present our church as a city oasis, specially in summertime it's beautiful here with the park and the water next to the church.

A disadvantage of our hidden location is from touristic point of view that we are not part of the city centre. That makes that it's always necessary to ask the Tourist Information to give also attention to the oldest monument in town. Most marketing expressions by tourist offices (maps, flyers etc.) are limited to the boundaries of the old city center. That's understandable because there is the place where the action is. Nevertheless it's our duty to give resistance: after all a walk from the city centre through the great Potmarge area to our church will cost only 15 minutes....

We are aware that working on our reputation with the purpose that the church itself and the events are known by visitors or tourists is a constant challenge. To have a website and to be active with press reports is not enough. Additional efforts (see e.g. the app from Izitravel, click on 'Dorpskerk Huizum' for more information) and a surprising and even a little bit provoking cultural program can help of course but also cooperation with other churches.

Next year our Heritage Association, the SAFT, will celebrate her 50th anniversary. That's a good moment to make a collective program and to present all those small and mid size churches as the largest museum of Friesland. When you will visit that association you will hear more about the development of their plans, I think.

In our case I think we did a lot during the last 5 years to make a success of this you can say 'reborn' church and we face in an optimistic mood new challenges but generally spoken it's clear that the challenge for Europe and our country is really immense: I mentioned in my talk that two-thirds of the churches in this country will close within 10 years. You cannot make everywhere a theatre.

So, this item deserves really more priority in terms of political attention, finance, skills in marketing and public relations etc. And there is a real need for cooperation at both regional and national levels and for students tourism who are willing to pay attention to this important item in their later professional life and will find new and to look for surprising solutions.....

This is the end of my talk. I hope you have learned a little bit about the necessity to protect and promote religious heritage and about our efforts to do here our 'own job'.

Feel invited to ask me questions if you like....