

Article

# “This Is My Place”. (Hi)Storytelling Churches in the Northern Netherlands †

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**Abstract:** This article proposes storytelling as a tool to return historic church buildings to the people in today’s secularized society. It starts by recognizing the unique qualities shared by most historic churches, namely that they are (1) different from most other buildings, (2) unusually old, and (3) are often characterized by beautiful exteriors and interiors. The argument builds on the storytelling strategies that were chosen in two recent book projects (co-)written by the author of this article, on historic churches in the northern Dutch provinces of Frisia (Fryslân) and Groningen. Among the many stories “told” by the Frisian and Groningen churches and their interiors, three categories are specifically highlighted. First, the religious aspect of the buildings’ history, from which most of its forms, fittings, and imagery are derived, and which increasingly needs to be explained in a largely post-Christian society. Second, churches tell us local histories, because they were the communities’ most public space for centuries, and a room for social representation. Finally, third, local history is always “glocal”, because it is interwoven with multiple connections to other places far and near. Researching, cherishing, and telling these stories are powerful means to engage communities in the future preservation of their old churches as religious and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** religious heritage; historic churches; storytelling; religious history; glocal history; churches of Frisia (The Netherlands); churches of Groningen (The Netherlands); book projects



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## 1. Secular Europe and Its Religious Heritage

In 2018, I noted a quote from Simon Jenkins, the author of the bestseller *England’s Thousand Best Churches* (1999): “Cultural heritage is not about having more, it is about being more”.<sup>1</sup> He spoke these words during a conference at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 2018, organized by the heritage organization Future for Religious Heritage (FRH) in the framework of the European Year of Cultural Heritage.<sup>2</sup> Jenkins painted a daunting picture of the state of religious heritage in Britain in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Since the 1960s, church attendance in England has steadily dropped by around 1% each year, leaving churches in many towns and villages “redundant”. Of Britain’s c. 10,000 medieval churches, for example, an estimated 5000 are now practically unused. Jenkins laments this development, not for religious but rather for cultural-historical reasons. In this way, he argues, the special character of churches as public space and as the collective art galleries of towns and villages is lost: “For a community to say of their largest and oldest building: ‘this is not my place’, is a true crisis”.<sup>3</sup> In a manner not unlike propositions made by Alain de Botton in his thought-provoking *Religion for Atheists* (De Botton 2012), Jenkins considers Christianity as “the biggest problem” in the reclaiming of church buildings for

the community. Instead of “keeping to bang on about God”, the aim should be to bring churches back, with or without religion, to where they began—with the people.

Churches have always been public space, because they were open for all men and women, old and young, rich and poor. This is why Peter Aiers, acting director of The Churches Conservation Trust, eloquently described churches as “the most democratic of all monuments”.<sup>4</sup> However, the perception of their ownership has greatly shifted over the centuries. From the Middle Ages onwards, it was the community who built and maintained churches, and who hired religious specialists—ordained priests or trained reverends—to operate them de facto as their “personnel”. It was the lay community who called the shots, although it must be noted that the real power always narrowed down to the socio-economic elites. A number of events and developments over the following centuries gradually anchored control over religious buildings and their use with higher echelons such as central church authorities or—as happened in France after the Revolution—with the State.<sup>5</sup> This meant that local communities gradually lost their sense of ownership to more distant, abstract entities.<sup>6</sup> Resulting from the separation of Church and State and the privatization of religion that gained ground during the nineteenth century, what was once public domain became exclusive religious space.<sup>7</sup> Instead of hiring religious specialists, from that point onwards the people followed their rules and asked permission to do things there. In many places where, in modern days, the church as an institution withdraws from buildings, the sense of ownership is void, and many churches, sadly, end up on the market as private real estate.<sup>8</sup>

How can we restore the traditional public nature of church buildings and make communities embrace them as “theirs” again? I think we should start by acknowledging and utilizing three unique assets shared by most, if not all, historic churches, namely that they are (1) different, (2) old, and (3) beautiful. The fascinating “otherness” of churches is only reinforced by the decline of Christianity, as their appearance, atmosphere, and purpose have become so different from everyday life for many. In recent decades, therefore, old churches have become the ultimate “hétérotopies”, or “other spaces”, a term coined by Michael Foucault to indicate spaces that relate to other dimensions (Foucault 1984, 1986).<sup>9</sup> Part of this “otherness” is obviously bound up with the references the church architecture and imagery make to the metaphysical, but the same can also be said of their mere age, because old walls and old sculptures with faded paintings always fascinate and are larger than life. As tangible relics of history—churches are usually the oldest preserved buildings in European towns and villages—they provide the most immediate access to the past that is widely available. Through the ages, finally, the eminent status of churches has prompted communities to embellish their interiors, turning them into what Simon Jenkins has called “the art galleries of towns and villages”.<sup>10</sup>

It is the artistic aspect that makes old churches particularly attractive to a large audience, from traditional believers to atheists. Religious heritage figures prominently among the most visited sites of Europe: before the 2019 fire, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris received over thirteen million visitors per year, and the Dom in Cologne, six million. Cathedrals and their symbolic value have been particularly successful in attracting the masses. Some certainly come to attend Mass, but the vast majority of visitors enters the buildings to admire the majestic Gothic architecture so familiar from the 20 euro bill. Medieval churches are widely cherished as symbols of the identity of communities large and small. Cologne, for example, calls itself briefly “Domstadt” (“Cathedral city”), and the Tuscan city of Pisa is epitomized by its famous leaning belltower. The cityscapes of towns including Prague, Lübeck, Salisbury, Strasbourg, and Burgos would be simply unrecognizable without their soaring church spires. Additionally, the collections of some of Europe’s greatest museums, including the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence all largely consist of religious art. While the Louvre received over ten million visitors in 2018, the Vatican Museums welcomed almost seven million in 2019. Many of the artworks found there originally served as liturgical furnishings, such as altarpieces, reliquaries, and liturgical vessels. As a

conclusion, we may state that Europe's art history cannot be understood if churches and the tradition that built and used them, i.e., Christianity, are ignored.

Beyond the history of art and architecture, churches also reflect many other facets of history, through tombs and monuments, heraldry, pews, benches, and so on, that provide a mirror of the socio-economic reality of past societies. Furthermore, much of the microhistory of towns and villages is filed in written records preserved in church archives.<sup>11</sup> Many churches therefore provide the best who's who of local history. One reason for churches to have preserved the past so well is that they provided a relatively protected environment for objects and documents to survive. Valuables, rarities, and official documents were often stored in churches to safeguard their preservation, turning them into important forerunners of the modern museum. The preserving aspect of churches is closely bound up with their typically slow turnover of developments, which is evolutionary rather than revolutionary.<sup>12</sup> Their building could stretch over many generations, and the liturgy has followed the same basic structure for over a thousand years. One might say that, of all places, things probably have the best chance to survive in functioning churches, even if they are practically forgotten. All the above-mentioned aspects make old churches essential to our knowledge of Europe's religious, social, economic, and artistic past. This sensation was aptly expressed by Theodor Fontane who, in 1878, characterized village churches as "the only bearers of our *entire* history" (italics original), charged as they are with "the magic of historical continuity" (Fontane 1980, p. 37).<sup>13</sup>

In order to preserve Europe's religious heritage as a legacy for the future, researching and telling their history and their stories are essential, because the general public cannot be expected to care for a heritage it has no access to or knowledge about. As a result, ensuring that churches are both physically and intellectually accessible is a central task of all heritage specialists and academic scholars, in addition to restorers, caretakers, etc. Although digging up and selecting the histories and stories that deserve to be told is clearly the task of trained historians, voicing them may involve many more. An excellent tool in communicating these is storytelling: narrating, in an engaging, inspiring, and understandable manner, the history of churches and of the people that built, augmented, furnished, decorated, used, maintained, and thus preserved them, a history that is part of our collective cultural past. Churches inform us in a variety of ways—textually, visibly, tangibly—about the lives of past generations, of individuals and their living conditions, their beliefs, hopes and fears, their views on life and death, and their moral outlook. Since religion by definition relates to the most encompassing existential questions in life, studying religious heritage enhances our understanding of the basic cultural tenets of past societies; or, as Roy Strong so cogently put it in his *Little History of the English Country Church*, with regard to medieval churches: "Church interiors add to our knowledge of what occupied the medieval mind" (Strong 2012, p. 44).

Beyond the biographies of persons that played a role in the history of every church, the building itself and its fittings can also be said to possess a "biography". The concept of a "cultural biography of objects" was developed within the field of archaeology (Gosden and Marshall 1999), whereas an influential paper about the dense semiotics of things was published by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (Kopytoff 1988). Ironically, archaeology and anthropology may become increasingly important for storytelling churches in societies in which a growing majority are not regular churchgoers or non-believers. It is particularly through material culture—built forms, fixtures, sculptures, paintings, utensils—that the stories of churches can be told. As Richard M. Carp observed: "One advantage of material culture studies is that it gives us access to all strata of a culture. At most times and places, only certain elites—usually men—produced texts, while women, the poor and even slaves created material culture. Material culture may at first seem to be the study of a collection of things—artifacts. Actually, material culture is much more than that, although the whole can be derived from artifacts, for each thing implies a set of material activities and significations that interact with the artifact and one another and which mediate a cultural landscape. Any artifact entails a dynamic pattern of actions, persons, skills, technologies,

social formations and other artifacts whose similar patterns partially overlap with one another. The interactive panoply of these interacting arrays is a cultural landscape" (Carp 2011, pp. 474–75).

Academia is still strongly organized along disciplinary lines, however, and truly encompassing studies that include both written and material or visual sources are rare. In 1989, the British church historian Robert Whiting rightly noted that: "Among the potential sources of evidence most frequently under-utilized in conventional histories are the extant art and architecture of parish churches" (Whiting 1989, p. 3). Thirty years later, on the waves of the so-called material, spatial, and visual turns in the humanities, much progress has been made in filling the traditional chasm between religious studies and the study of art and material culture.<sup>14</sup> Illustrative of this are publications by Colleen McDannell (McDannell 1995), David Morgan (Morgan 2005), Caroline Walker Bynum (Walker Bynum 2011) and Birgit Meyer (Meyer 2012; Houtman and Meyer 2012), and many contributions to the journal *Material Religion*, published since 2005. However, these innovative approaches have, to date, been mainly applied to images and objects and less to church buildings and their furnishings. The longest tradition in the cultural reading of old churches is no doubt found in Britain, where John Betjeman (1906–1984) may be regarded as the founding father of the genre (Betjeman 1958).<sup>15</sup> Some characteristic titles, in addition to Simon Jenkins' mentioned 1999 bestseller, include Roy Strong's *Little History of the English Country Church* (Strong 2012), William Whyte's *Unlocking the Church* (Whyte 2017) and Allan Doig's *A History of the Church through its Buildings* (Doig 2020).<sup>16</sup> Most recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, BBC Radio 3 broadcast a series of "Churchcrawls in Solitude" with Oxford Church History professor Diarmaid MacCulloch.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Two Book Projects in the Northern Netherlands

The two northernmost of the twelve Dutch provinces, Groningen and Frisia (Fryslân/Friesland), possess a dense landscape of historic churches. Many were built during the Middle Ages and were taken over by Calvinists during the sixteenth century. Most churches are situated in small communities in the countryside. Church towers serve as beacons in the wide, open coastal plains where the economy traditionally revolved around agriculture and trade. From the 1960s onwards, many churches came under growing financial pressure because of secularization and dwindling church attendance, which was aggravated by the fact that in the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde kerk) every community is economically autonomous (there are no dioceses) and independent from the state. These circumstances have resulted in a large number of churches, in the North as elsewhere in the Netherlands, becoming "redundant". Where churches are not demolished, they often undergo processes of "adaptive transformation". Together with Britain, the Netherlands has seen the highest number of churches put to permanent new functions of all European countries. Many buildings that started life as churches are now used for housing, office space, health-centers, shops, and even bars and discos. The pressure is high, even on the most remarkable of all monuments: of one hundred selected historical church interiors published in a beautiful book in 2016, six have since changed owners and/or purposes (Reinstra et al. 2016).<sup>18</sup>

As early as 1969, the University of Groningen theologian and church art expert Dr Regnerus Steensma (1937–2012) and several kindred spirits established a foundation to take ownership of endangered old churches in Groningen, called the Stichting Oude Groninger kerken. The foundation's statutory aim was formulated as: "to preserve the province's historic churches and increase awareness of them".<sup>19</sup> This initiative was followed one year later by a similar start up in Steensma's native Frisia, the Stichting Alde Fryske tsjerken.<sup>20</sup> Both foundations have grown into professional heritage organizations with a permanent staff and thousands of supporters each, who pay an annual fee.<sup>21</sup> Most of the foundations' income is generated by inheritances and bequests, and the national and local governments provide additional support for occasional restorations and necessary maintenance. Currently, the Groningen foundation owns about one hundred church

buildings, whereas the Frisian foundation is the holder of fifty-five. Both foundations are strictly non-religious and approach the churches as cultural heritage, following the commitment to preserve the buildings and their interiors in their historically grown state. Although the churches can be rented for any purpose, as long as it remains compatible with their heritage value, they are not transformed or put to permanent new functions; theoretically, it is possible to hold a church service in each building at all times.

From the outset, furthermore, both foundations have placed a strong emphasis on research and publications about historic churches. Both have issued periodicals since the start of their existence, which have served as prominent platforms of scholarly research carried out into the old Groningen and Frisian churches.<sup>22</sup> Two of the latest publications are beautifully produced books aimed at telling the story of the two provinces' historical churches to a wider public, one on Frisia and one on Groningen. In both cases, I was invited as (co-)author.<sup>23</sup> The Frisian book, published in three languages as *De Friese Elfkerkentocht—The Frisian Eleven Churches Tour—Die friesische Elfkirchentour*, appeared in 2018 in the framework of the European Year of Cultural Heritage and on the occasion of the Frisian capital Leeuwarden being the European Capital of Culture (Kroesen 2018) (Figure 1). The book focuses on medieval church buildings with richly furnished, well-preserved Protestant interiors as mirrors of Frisian cultural history between c. 1200 and c. 1800. An introduction to Frisian church history is followed by short explanatory texts on the eleven best Frisian churches, presented in the manner of a tour. The number eleven refers to the Frisian “Elfstedentocht”, a traditional speed skating race between the province's eleven historic towns. The 112 page book is richly illustrated with photographs from the archive of the foundation's founding father, the late Regnerus Steensma.



Figure 1. Justin Kroesen, *The Frisian Eleven Churches Tour*, 2018, book cover.

Whereas the Frisian book is presented as a thematic travel guide aimed at Dutch and foreign visitors, the Groningen book *Ode aan de oude Groninger kerken* (“Ode to the Old Groningen churches”) (Figure 2) is primarily intended for residents of the province itself and others that feel a strong attachment to the region.<sup>24</sup> It was published on the occasion of the Groningen foundation’s fiftieth anniversary in 2019 and includes texts on all the organization’s (then) ninety-four churches (De Vos and Kroesen 2019). Each church is treated in the manner of a diptych consisting of a personal impression of the building and the site by the literary journalist and writer Marjoleine de Vos, followed by a loosely academic account of the churches’ history and art provided by the author of this article. While De Vos concentrates on aspects such as aesthetics, atmosphere, remarkable features, and personal encounters, my texts focus on each church’s most outstanding cultural-historical features, based on past research. Both approaches are separately visualized by two photographers, Bo Scheeringa and Jim Ernst, whose pictures accompany all texts. The book is shaped as a large format coffee table book of 408 pages and was almost immediately sold out after a pre-registering campaign, illustrating the public interest for (expensive: EUR 70) publications on religious heritage.<sup>25</sup> A luxury signed edition inside a gold-colored cassette was also produced.



**Figure 2.** Marjoleine de Vos and Justin Kroesen, *Ode aan de Groninger kerken*, 2019, book cover.

In my texts for both publications, I attempted to utilize the church building, its furnishings, and the lives of historical figures connected to them as points of access into the cultural history of the northern Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> Depending on the most remarkable characteristics of each church, the emphasis may shift from the site where the church is situated, the buildings’ architectural features, and the art and iconography found in its interior, to the biographies of individuals that played a role in their history. The stories told about each church roughly address three aspects or dimensions, always from a cultural-historical perspective: (1) the religious aspect, (2) the local context, and (3) the wider European or even global context. These three approaches, which obviously may overlap, correspond to the growing knowledge gap concerning the religious factor in cultural history

on the one hand and present the churches as the local communities' "3D-history books" on the other.<sup>27</sup> The many often untold stories great and small that surround the churches help to position and understand these monuments, in both their site-specific micro- and wider macro-contexts. The wider aim is to bring the churches (back) to the minds of the community whose efforts and willingness to spend money for their preservation are essential to their future survival.

### 3. Religious Stories

Several years ago, at a conference, Prof. Barbara Schellewald from Basle (Switzerland) noted that explaining Christianity in a secularized world requires an anthropological approach, with the old church in the role of an exotic tribe's sacrificial site. Explaining the complicated, layered religious history of the northern Netherlands runs as a thread through many of the texts in both books. All churches were Catholic until the late sixteenth century, when the region transitioned to Calvinism—Frisia in 1580 and Groningen in 1594. As a result of Protestant iconoclasm, medieval church furnishings are rare today. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new Protestant furnishings were installed, some of which are surprisingly exuberant. In many church communities, the landed nobility acquired a central role, as reflected by their tombs, pews, and hatchments that now fill many church interiors. The "Batavian Revolution" of 1795 subsequently affected the position of the nobility and entailed a modest new wave of destruction. Through the centuries, Dutch Protestantism has been characterized by schisms, which led to a rich variety of separate churches, and Judaism also found its place in the religious landscape from the seventeenth century onward. Explaining this history and the stereotypes that surround these movements and events is a recurring element in many of the short texts in both the Groningen and the Frisian churches book.

Some unremarkable Protestant churches possess a remarkable Catholic history. The eighteenth-century church at Solwerd (Groningen), for example, is the successor of a medieval chapel built on the site where a shining Host should have appeared in a ditch, a miracle that sparked a regional pilgrimage tradition that reminds us of the vanished devotional culture of the Catholic past; interestingly, the practice proved difficult to extinguish after the Reformation (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 292). The most important missing link in the church landscape of the northern Netherlands today is the approximately one hundred monasteries, of all sizes, that once existed in these coastal lands. In Wittewierum (Groningen), underneath the present nineteenth-century church, the remains of the former monastery church of Bloemhof appeared during excavations in 2001. Its reconstruction evokes a monumental three-aisled brick building not unlike surviving churches in northern Germany, including Segeberg (Schleswig-Holstein) (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 380). Monks from Bloemhof served several parish churches in the surrounding region, including Krewerd. The short chapter about this small thirteenth-century church interprets its interior as a reflection of the monastery church, which may explain the presence of a monumental brick rood screen and a late medieval organ; whereas, of the monastery, only archaeological traces are left, the screen and organ in the village church are both preserved (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 144) (Figure 3).

Rood screens and lofts are reminders of the traditional separation of the clergy and the people in medieval churches, a topic which is addressed in the chapter about the church at Holwierde and its remarkable Gothic wooden screen of a type mostly found in Britain (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 128). When the wooden pulpit in Woltersum (Groningen) was repainted in 1964, the panels of its drum were found to be late medieval, showing a series of painted Passion scenes (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 384). An element that is relatively often found is the piscina, a wall niche in which the priest washed his hands after Mass to ensure that no crumb of the Host would become profanized. Examples of such walled "lavabos" (a term of liturgical origin, as is explained in the text) are still found in Krewerd, Leermens, and Stitswerd in Groningen, and in Huizum in Frisia (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 144, 156, 300; Kroesen 2018, p. 57). Medieval wall paintings survive in a

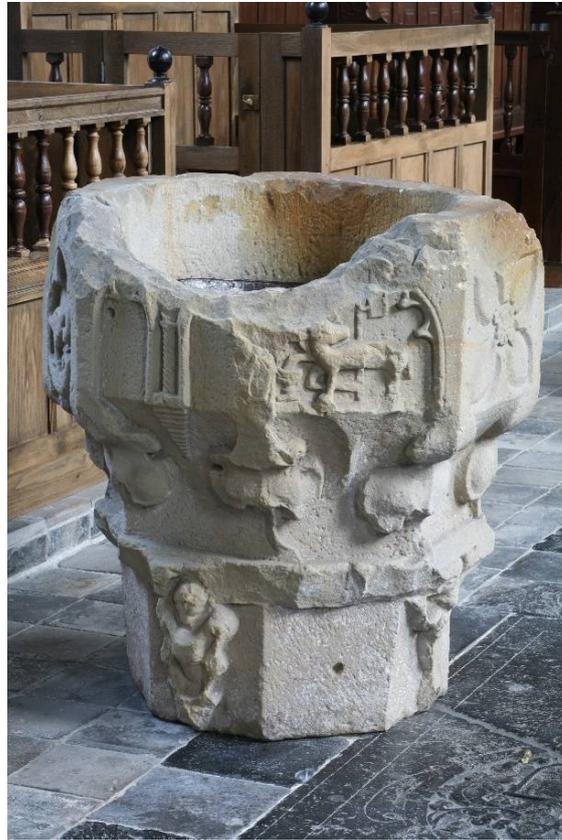
considerable number of churches in both Frisia (Hegebeintum) and Groningen (Bierum, Middelstum, Noordbroek) (Kroesen 2018, p. 50; De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 44, 184, 220). In Noordbroek, the vaults display an entire painted program that follows the road from Sin, visualized by Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree in Paradise at the west end, via St Christopher who protected against sudden death, to the Last Judgement and Salvation offered by the Man of Sorrows in the chancel (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 220). This painted program, characterized in the book as “Groningen’s own Sistine Chapel”, summarizes the medieval concept of Redemption.



**Figure 3.** The rood loft (c. 1300) and organ (1531) in the small parish church of Krewerd (Groningen) reflect monastic church interiors (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

A pivotal moment in the religious history of the northern Netherlands was the transition to Calvinism, which was often accompanied by acts of iconoclasm. A surviving eyewitness report from Oosternieland informs us of the treasures that were lost in this small Groningen country church: a missal and several other books, a tabernacle, and a chancel screen. The altar slab was symbolically profanized as a doorstep (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 244). The church in Frisian Buitenpost possesses a heavy stone font with sculpted reliefs in the Gothic style that offers an impression of what this basic element to any parish church looked like (Kroesen 2018, p. 36) (Figure 4). The octagonal bowl shows St Peter and St Paul, a Pelican as the symbol of Christ, and the Lamb of God, from whose chest a jet of blood flows into a chalice as the symbol of the Eucharist. At the same time, its present, heavily damaged state also informs us about the violent abolition of the Catholic cult. The chancel of Leegkerk (Groningen) carries the traces of its use by both Catholics, in the shape of wall niches that served as a tabernacle and piscina, and Calvinists, by wooden panels reading the Ten Commandments and the numbers of the Psalms that were sung during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 152). In

Meedhuizen (Groningen), the silver chalice of 1639, remarkably, held the memory of the church's Catholic patron saint Laurence alive by means of an engraved portrait (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 176).



**Figure 4.** The stone baptismal font in Buitenpost (Frisia) was carved during the 15th century and heavily damaged during the 16th (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

Several churches illustrate how the room left behind by the now removed Catholic altar was soon filled with memorials for the landed nobility. In Midwolde (Groningen), the chancel was fully usurped by the nobles of the nearby Nienoord manor during the first decades after the Reformation (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 192). A block-shaped memorial tomb with a life-sized recumbent figure of Carel Hieronymus van In- en Knip-huisen (d. 1664) fills most of the east wall, whereas an elevated gallery pew painted with heraldry sits on the north side as a true VIP skybox (Figure 5). It must be added that the same nobles also donated the essential elements for the Calvinist liturgy to the church, namely a Baroque Communion table, pulpit, and organ. For the Calvinists, the preaching of the Word was the core of the church service, as aptly illustrated by the octagonal church dating from 1660–1665 in Sappemeer (Groningen), which is described in a chapter entitled “Gathered around the Word” (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 280). The pulpit took over the role of the altar and its retable as the primary image bearer in church space. Frisian pulpits in Kimsward (1695) and Sexbierum (1768) both show a carved program following theological arguments (Kroesen 2018, pp. 64–65, 87). In Sexbierum, this centers on Christian virtues and the role of Christ in human Salvation, whereas the pulpit in Kimsward explores the intricate relationship between motifs in the Old and New Testaments, stressing the contrast in terms of Law vs. Gospel.



**Figure 5.** Midwolde (Groningen), interior looking east with an elevated pew (left) and a marble tomb filling the chancel (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

Religious minorities enjoyed a certain amount of tolerance in the Dutch Republic, as long as they did not manifest themselves in public space. An important Christian minority alongside the public Dutch reformed church was that of the Anabaptists or Mennonites. The last term refers to the founder of their movement, the Frisian ex-priest Menno Simons (1496–1561), who was the only Dutch-born sixteenth-century Reformer. The Mennonites laid considerable emphasis on ethical principles in their teachings and their churches and liturgy were characterized by a strong strive for austerity. The Mennonite church (in Dutch: *vermaning*, “admonition”) in Grijpskerk (Groningen) is typically situated in a hidden location, down a narrow alley (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 100). Inside, however, two eighteenth-century brass lecterns eloquently illustrate the Mennonite paradox: because of their zeal and frugality, some Mennonites acquired considerable wealth. A second, non-Christian minority that was increasingly tolerated in the Dutch Republic was Judaism. The Groningen foundation possesses two historic synagogues, in Appingedam and Groningen (capital) (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 28, 112). Both monuments now primarily serve as memorials to their communities that were deported and killed during World War II. The buildings were put to different purposes after the war, and were recently restored and turned into places of memory for the once thriving Jewish community in Groningen.

#### 4. Local Stories

Old churches were referred to earlier as the “3D history books of towns and villages”, implying that they primarily inform us on local history. In Niehove (Groningen), the medieval church sits perfectly at the core of the village’s radiant structure, as a spider in a web, illustrating its central role in the community throughout the centuries (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 200). The architectural history of churches reflects demographic developments, whereas tombs and memorials keep the memory of remarkable individuals alive. In several Groningen churches, including Den Ham, the grave-strewn floors inside the building and in the cemetery surrounding it together provide a historical who’s who of the parish (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 56).<sup>28</sup> The grave poetry found on tombstones in places such as Thesinge and Leermens (Groningen) mirror the views on life and death among past generations. In Leermens, the rhyme on the stone of Anje O. Groot (d. 1889) expresses little hope: “Exhausted by a high age, emaciated by disease and pain, she had to descend into the grave, and be a prey of the worms” (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 155). In Beerta, also in Groningen, the inscription on the slab for churchwarden Derk Aeitens

(d. 1796) reads almost as a biography of the deceased, mentioning his forty years in service, the four wives he married for better and for worse, and his conversion at the age of thirty-three. Because Christ cured his soul, Aeitens is said—not quite conforming to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination—to be now plaiting crowns of joy in Heaven (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 40).

In some instances, the church building itself is a reminder of the special status of the village in certain phases of its history. In the now small village of Baflo (Groningen), for example, the sizable church is reminiscent of it being one of the first six Christian churches founded in the late eighth century. Its pastors had the status of deans over the surrounding parishes (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 32). The Neo-Gothic plaster that now covers the medieval walls of the church at nearby Usquert conceals its long history, which also started in the eighth century (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 340). The vita of the missionary bishop, Saint-Liudger, narrates how he prayed in a wooden chapel there, together with the blind poet Bernlef, who accompanied him on his wanderings, which is one of the oldest textual references to a church in the Netherlands. Some Groningen village churches are the only survivals of mighty medieval monasteries. In Thesinge, the small village church is the chancel of a former church of the double Benedictine abbey of Germania, which belonged to the wealthiest in the northern Netherlands before the Reformation (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 312) (Figure 6). The richly decorated brick walls of the village church in nearby Garmerwolde evoke the grandness of such abbey churches, although this particular church only served as a parish church (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 88). It may serve as a testimony to the remarkable skills, wealth, and ambitions of this small farmers' community in Groningen around the middle of the thirteenth century.



**Figure 6.** Thesinge (Groningen)—the present church is the only remnant of a Benedictine monastery church built in the late 13th century (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

The location of churches also tells a history of many centuries that, in the Netherlands, is closely connected to the struggle against water. In Frisian Hegebeintum, the church is situated at the top of an 8.8 m high mound, a so-called *terp*, an artificial hill erected by the coastal dwellers as a protection against floods (Kroesen 2018, p. 50) (Figure 7). Archaeological excavations have unearthed a history that goes back to long before the present twelfth-century church, into the Roman period. In the eastern part of Groningen, some churches had predecessors elsewhere, showing how some villages were moved

because of the rising water level. In Beerta, the Gothic church was partly built with tuff stones from the abandoned predecessor in Ulsda, now submerged in the waves of the Dollard estuary (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 40). The soil in the new location also proved to be unstable, as the vaults cracked and collapsed during church service on 3 August 1783; fortunately, all churchgoers escaped just in time. The nineteenth-century church in Den Horn in swampy western Groningen succeeded a medieval predecessor in an abandoned nearby village (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 60). Because it was intended to serve two villages, it was built in the middle. The preserved minutes of the church council meeting of 1862 show that the decision was made during a tumultuous meeting, with one latecomer tipping the vote in favor of the present location.



**Figure 7.** Hegebeintum (Frisia), the 12th-century church sits on top of an 8.8 m high mound, called a “terp” (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

Many churches bear the mark of the most prominent members of the local community. In Oosterwiltwerd, the small church was transformed into a memorial space for the local energetic nobleman Gijsbert Herman Ripperda (1639–1695), who acquired the local manor at the age of twenty-one (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 248). He had the church re-furnished before he embarked upon the renovation of his manor, and he also founded a poorhouse. In return, he transformed the apse into his grave chapel, and his family pew, the Communion chalice, and even the silver bell under the alms pouch all bear his coat of arms. Noble pews became a characteristic feature of Protestant churches during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Frisian Marssum, they fill the entire room, as the result of a veritable “pew war” between the village’s most prominent families that was fought out in the most public of all spaces—the church (Kroesen 2018, pp. 79–80). In Harkstede (Groningen), the Gothic style of the village church is elusive. It was only built in the seventeenth century at the behest of Henric Piccardt (1636–1712), a new arrival among the Groningen nobility (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 120). He had the medieval church knocked down and replaced by a cross-shaped building that was primarily intended as a memorial to himself: the facade carries his coat of arms, and under the entire church sits a grave cellar. The Gothic style was used to suggest a longer history than he could actually boast of.

Churches obviously also carry the memory of the reverends who served the local community throughout the centuries. Some were true celebrities, including the pietist reverend of Midwolda (Groningen), Wilhelmus Schortinghuis (1700–1750), who was widely known for his mesmerizing orthodox sermons (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 188). In

Midwolde, further west, Reverend Nathan Bollardt came into conflict with the previously mentioned local nobleman Carel Hieronymus van In- en Kniphuisen in 1675, who had him removed to the church of the nearby hamlet of Lettelbert (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 160). Both church buildings illustrate that this was a clear degrade, from a Romanesque church with a tall steeple to an early Gothic, towerless roadside chapel. In Grootegast (Groningen), the inscribed Communion chalice from 1764 mentions the then recently deceased reverend Jan Berends Smook, who was famous throughout the country for having served the local church for no less than fifty-eight years (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 116). Moreover, he survived a nightly burglary at the age of seventy-seven, in which his servant was strangled to death. The memory of another brave minister in a very different period of history is found in the church of Nieuw-Beerta in eastern Groningen (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 208). Reverend Bastiaan Jan Ader (1909–1944), who had won the hearts of many youngsters in his parish, was sadly executed during World War II for his activities in the resistance against the Nazi occupation.

Although churches are often perceived as places of peace, the history of many is connected to wars and military activity. In Tinallinge (Groningen), on the walls under the organ loft, are loose-handed drawings of several battle scenes with varied weaponry (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 316). The machinery and the dress of the figures depicted suggest that they date to the start of the Eighty Years War (1568–1648) in which the Dutch liberated themselves from Spanish rule. The drawings were possibly carried out by prisoners-of-war who were locked up in the church; at the start of that war, the Groningen countryside was the scene of some fierce battles. The church in the fortified town of Oudeschans at Groningen's eastern border was erected by the central government of the Dutch Republic in The Hague to serve the military regiment that was stationed there (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 264). A grave slab in Louis XV-style in the church floor remembers the commander, Jan Gerard Georg van Maneil (+1770). In Frisian Buitenpost, the colorful memorial hatchment of Martinus Acronius (d. 1780) hanging from the chancel wall features a rich collection of war attributes: a plumed helmet, gloves, spurs, a sword, and a coat of mail, lances, cannon barrels, drums, and pestles for pushing home gunpowder (Kroesen 2018, pp. 37–38). A crack in the marble slab of the Communion table in Obergum (Groningen) is said to have been caused by the impact of the rifle butt of a French soldier in Napoleon's army (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 232).

Many churches and their interiors mirror social hierarchies and their dynamics over time. In Zuurdijk (Groningen), agriculture brought considerable wealth to many families during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the village at that time has been aptly characterized as a "farmers' republic" (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 400). Many grave slabs in the church floor and on the churchyard are decorated with a panoply of death symbols (a willow, scythe, winged sandglass) and a plethora of farming utensils (a flail, hayfork, plough, etc.) (Figure 8). In nearby Ulrum, in 1834, social tensions led to the so-called Afscheiding ("secession") of the orthodox "gereformeerden", who split away from the—in their view—too liberal Dutch Reformed Church (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 336). The interior of the thirteenth-century brick church, and particularly the mid-eighteenth-century oak pulpit, are a memorial to Reverend Hendrik de Cock (1801–1842), who was the leader of this important schism in the history of Dutch Protestantism. The industrious "gereformeerden", who were called "kleine luyden" ("little people") in a depreciatory manner, quickly organized themselves and added large buildings to the church landscape during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their imposing church in Bedum and the expressionist buildings in Onderdendam and Westeremden are illustrations of the quick emancipation of the Christian working class in Groningen during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 36, 240, 356).



**Figure 8.** Zuurdijk (Groningen), tombstone of Jan Jakobs Bos (†1871) in the cemetery showing several farmers' tools: harrow, spade, flail, and plough (photo: Jim Ernst).

## 5. Global Stories

Many stories told by old churches are essentially “glocal”: in addition to local history, most churches also reflect how communities were connected to other, sometimes astonishingly distant, places. Firstly, because natural stone is lacking in these regions, many of the building materials in Groningen and Frisia were brought from elsewhere, sometimes by nature; when a tall steeple was erected in Tolbert (Groningen) during the thirteenth century, it was founded on granite boulders deposited here from Scandinavia during the latest ice age, some 150,000 years ago (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 320). The tuff stone that was used to build Romanesque churches was imported from the German Eifel and shipped north over the rivers Mosel, Rhine, and IJssel. Naves of tuff are found in Kimsward (Frisia) (Figure 9) and Holwierde (Groningen), for example. In Holwierde, the tympanums above the transept entrances were hewn in red sandstone that was probably brought from the German Odenwald further south along the Rhine (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 128). Grave slabs for the well-to-do also had to be imported. A slab in Weidum (Frisia) remembering the parish priest Tiebbe van Unia (d. 1523) was made of stone imported from the island of Öland, off the Swedish east coast (Kroesen 2018, p. 92). Several further sculpted grave slabs in the floor of the same church are hewn in “blue stone” imported from Namur on the river Meuse in present-day Belgium. Many church bells in Groningen and Frisian churches were cast by bell casters from France, including the famous seventeenth-century brothers François and Pierre Hemony.

The architectural style reflected by the medieval churches in Groningen and Frisia has always followed foreign models. With the imported tuff stone came architectural traditions from the Rhineland that, in turn, reflect a clear inspiration from church building in northern Italy, especially Lombardy. The text about the Romanesque church of Zuidwolde (Groningen) is entitled “A Lombardic Tower on the Banks of the Boterdiep” (a river in Groningen) (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 396). After the production of brick from Groningen and Frisian sea clay started in the second half of the twelfth century, churches were still designed following foreign styles and fashions. The richly decorated late Romanesque apse in Oldenzijl (Groningen) is clearly inspired on Cologne models that were here “translated” into brick, whereas the church at nearby Breede has a western gable that shows similarity to the northern German “Backsteingotik” (“brick Gothic”) (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 48). The exuberant late Romanesque building tradition in the

Groningen countryside was clearly rooted in Westphalia, some two hundred kilometers to the southeast. This connection had existed ever since Christianity had been introduced by the missionary bishop St Liudger of Westphalian Münster in the eighth century. Until the sixteenth century, most of Groningen would remain part of that diocese. Not surprising, therefore, is the import of baptismal fonts from the quarries at Bentheim in that area, for example in Bierum and Termunten (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 44, 304).



**Figure 9.** The north wall of the nave in Kimswerd (Frisia) was erected around 1100 in tuff stone brought from the Eifel region in Germany (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

During the Middle Ages, Groningen and Frisia belonged to the unified Catholic church that created a pan-European religious community. While the parish of Leermens chose St Donatus, Bishop of Italian Arezzo, as its patron saint, the church of Termunten (Groningen) was dedicated to St Ursus of Solothurn, a member of the Roman Theban Legion who died during a battle in the Swiss Alps (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, pp. 156, 304). Both churches may have possessed relics of these rather uncommon saints. The previously mentioned monastery church in Thesinge (Groningen) (Figure 6) reflects architectural influences from the Rhineland and Westphalia, and surviving illuminated manuscripts produced in its scriptorium are preserved in libraries in Groningen, Deventer, Ghent, and Copenhagen. Hence, the corresponding chapter is entitled “Rests of a Monastery with Distant Connections” (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 312). Academic culture also provided international networks. The Humanist scholar Rudolf Agricola (1443–1485), who lectured at the University of Heidelberg, was born Roelof Huisman in the small Groningen village of Baflo, as the (bastard) son of the local parish dean (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 32). Scholarly culture was not necessarily a distant reality for rural communities. A pew in the church at Frisian Huizum carries a sophisticated Latin inscription reading *arbor ex fructu, et leo ex ungue, agnoscitur* (“One knows the tree from its fruit and the lion from its claw”), composed from a passage in Matthew 12:33 and a proverb that is found in writings of Erasmus (Kroesen 2018, pp. 57–58).

Long-distance connections often stem from the lives of nobles, who have always travelled for a variety of reasons. In the late Gothic church at Middelstum (Groningen), during the seventeenth century, a church chronicle was painted on the north wall of the chancel immediately above the surviving medieval Sacrament niche (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 184) (Figure 10). The text records how the church was erected after the safe return from the Holy Land by the knight Onno van Ewsum in the year 1458, and how

he had gained the title “Ridder van Cipren” (“Knight of Cyprus”) on the way home. The influence of the travelling nobility increased even further after the Reformation. In Wetsinge (Groningen), the current nineteenth-century church is the successor of an earlier church that had a peculiar Danish connection. The grave cellar under the chancel of that church held the tomb of Henrick Ruse (1624–1679), the son of a minister from Ruinen in the province of Drenthe, south of Groningen, who became an engineer after a military career that had brought him as far as the Balcans to fight the Turks. In 1661, he started working for the Danish King Frederic III, who asked him to build the fortifications around Copenhagen. His activities earned him the rank of Knight of the Order of the Dannebrog. After conflicts in Kalmar (Sweden) and Trondheim (Norway), he returned to his native Netherlands, where he bought the Onsta Manor near Wetsinge (Groningen), which came with a cellar in the local church (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 140). A stained-glass window featured his coat of arms showing the Danish flag.

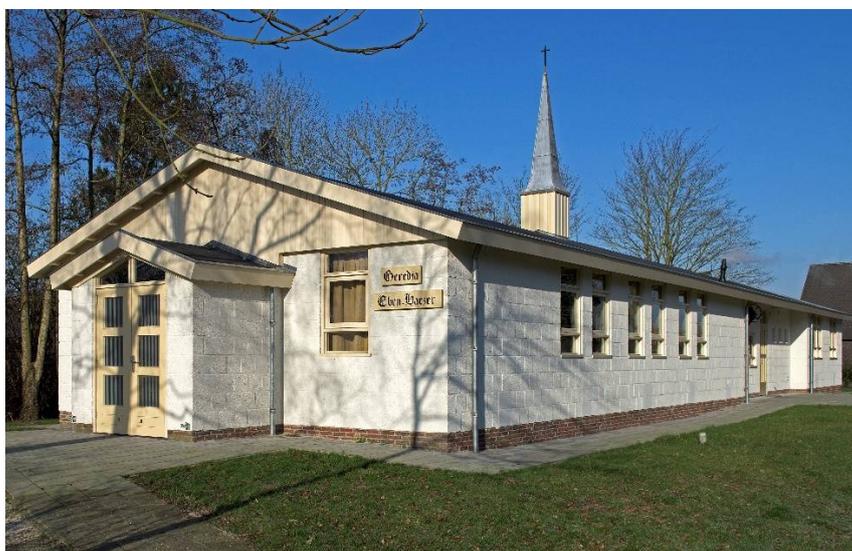


**Figure 10.** Middelstum (Groningen), 17th-century church chronicle painted on the north wall of the chancel above a late medieval Sacrament niche (photo: Regnerus Steensma archive).

The grave cellar under the church in Oldehove (Groningen) contains the elegant sandstone sarcophagus of an Austrian countess, Margaretha von Cobenzl, who died in 1730 (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 236). She was the wife of Ludolf Luit Ripperda, a local nobleman who became the Spanish Ambassador in Vienna. His father, Johan Willem Ripperda (1682–1737), had had an even more successful diplomatic career. Born on the manor Englumborg in Oldehove into a (secretly) Catholic noble family, he was appointed as the Ambassador of the Dutch Republic in Spain, a position that required him to confess to Calvinism. When the Spanish King, who recognized his qualities, offered him the position of minister, he quickly converted back again. Now known by the name of “Juan Guillermo Riperdá”, he became the Spanish Ambassador in Vienna and then First

Minister under King Felipe V. After a conflict that led to imprisonment in the Alcázar of Segovia in 1726, he escaped to Morocco, where he gained the trust of Sultan Abdallah and converted once again, now to Islam. After a failed attack on the Spanish fortress of Ceuta, the Groningen-born nobleman died in the Moroccan town of Tetouan. The sarcophagus of his daughter-in-law, the Austrian countess Margaretha, sank into oblivion until it came to light again during a restoration in 1970.

Dutch colonial history is also found in the churches of Groningen and Frisia. A grave slab in Feerwerd (Groningen) remembers Reverend Dr Samuel Folckeri, who died in 1664 after serving the local church for twenty-seven years, and four years in the Dutch colony of Pernambuco, in the northeast of present-day Brazil (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 76). In Niekerk, also in Groningen, an inscription above the west entrance dated in 1628 mentions that the church was renovated when the “Zilvervloot” (“Silver fleet”) was seized (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 204). This is a reference to the conquest of the Spanish Armada by the Dutch corsair Piet Hein (1577–1629) off the Cuban coast. The fact that the conquest was mentioned suggests that the local lord, Evert Lewe, who was a stakeholder of the Dutch West Indies Company, invested the dividend he had received in the renovation of “his” church. In Appingedam, we find the youngest of all “old Groningen churches”, namely the Moluccans’ church, a simple wooden prefab building erected in 1960 (De Vos and Kroesen 2019, p. 24) (Figure 11). After Indonesia had gained independence from the Netherlands in 1949, Moluccan fighters who had supported the Dutch moved to the Netherlands in 1950–1951. They were housed in camps and later in separate quarters, such as in Appingedam, as long as their own independent state had not been founded. This was never realized, however, and so a temporary facility became permanent and finally gained heritage status.



**Figure 11.** Appingedam (Groningen), the “semi-permanent” Moluccans’ church from 1960 is a reminder of their struggle for an independent state (photo: Jim Ernst).

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to show how old churches can be utilized as storytelling goldmines; the focus on two provinces in the northern Netherlands could be exchanged with that on any other region in Europe. Having served as the public space of local communities, old churches are replete with stories great and small—religious stories and stories about “glocal” history. Materials used and styles adopted reflect the communities’ primary cultural and economic connections, and the often-eventful history has left its visible mark in many ways: demographic developments, economic growth and crises, religious change, wars, floods, epidemics, revolutions, emancipation, modernization, and secularization. Old churches also bear the traces of many remarkable individuals, including

noblemen, reverends, scholars, and visitors. This is in addition to the traces—albeit silent—of numerous other, now anonymous churchgoers who, over many centuries, celebrated their life events, such as baptism, marriage, funerals, and who frequented, maintained, embellished, and cleaned the church, because they felt it was *theirs*. If we wish to preserve old churches beyond our secular age, we have to make their fascinating stories heard, so that communities will find themselves, their history, and identity, reflected in them. Once people start saying “this is my place” again, then there is no doubt that embracing churches and caring for their future will follow suit.

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## Notes

- 1 Thanks to Simon Jenkins for endorsing all quotes from his lecture given in this article.
- 2 Jenkins is the former chair of the National Trust and a member of The Churches Conservation Trust. The conference *Religious Heritage—Europe’s Legacy for the Future* was held in Paris (France) from 11–13 October 2018.
- 3 Quote from Jenkins’ address at the mentioned Paris conference.
- 4 Quote from Aiers’ address at the mentioned Paris conference in 2018.
- 5 The role and legal position of State and Church regarding church buildings varied significantly between Western European countries.
- 6 These observations are based on research carried out by the author of this article into many churches in several European countries, in particular the Netherlands, Germany, Norway and Spain.
- 7 For an influential contemporary view of such developments, see (Taylor 2007).
- 8 A recent overview of new secular uses of former churches in the Netherlands is provided by (Reinstra and Strolenberg 2020).
- 9 Churches are not explicitly mentioned by Foucault. He understands space as more encompassing than physical space only, as it can also include cultural and discursive space.
- 10 Quote from Jenkins’ address at the mentioned Paris conference.
- 11 In most European countries, baptismal records *de facto* served as civil registration before this task fell to the secular authorities.
- 12 This ‘slow’, multi-generational way of doing things has recently been called “cathedral thinking”.
- 13 “Nur unsere Dorfkirchen stellen sich uns vielfach als die Träger unserer *ganzen* Geschichte dar, und die Berührung der Jahrhunderte untereinander zur Erscheinung bringend, besitzen und äußern sie den Zauber historischer Kontinuität”.
- 14 Regarding these, John Harvey observed a traditional double oversight: “If religious scholars are less able to deal with the art aspect than with the religious aspect of religious artifacts, then art historians and artists have the opposite limitation”, cf. (Harvey 2011, p. 513).
- 15 Betjeman also made numerous appearances on television, including *A Passion for Churches*, broadcast in 1974.
- 16 A ‘conventional’ history where church buildings play a central role is (Duffy 1992).
- 17 The website explains: “In five essays, Diarmaid MacCulloch takes us on journeys around some of Britain’s ancient and atmospheric churches to help us get lost in the history, art and personality of these churches as well as digging deeper to reflect on his own experiences of ‘a historian’s life, measured out in churches’”, which clearly resonates how church heritage is not about *having*, but about *being*. I myself created several short videos about churches as storytelling devices in 2014–2015, entitled *Protestantse cultuurschatten* (‘Protestant cultural treasures’), accessible through [cultuurschatten.wordpress.com](http://cultuurschatten.wordpress.com) (project funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO, produced by ValueMedia), and developed a website on the religious heritage of Bergen (Norway) before the Reformation [bergen1517.wordpress.com](http://bergen1517.wordpress.com) (both mentioned websites accessed on 24 August 2021).
- 18 I thank Anique de Kruijff (Utrecht) for this information.
- 19 A requirement for churches to be included is that they should be officially registered state monuments.
- 20 Although similar foundations started later in other Dutch provinces, the organizations in Groningen and Frisia have remained by far the largest and most professional.
- 21 The Groningen foundation currently has about 6000 supporters and the Frisian about 4500.
- 22 The journal *Groninger kerken* is published four times a year and *Alde Fryske tsjerken* (before 2010 entitled *Keppelstok*) appears twice a year. Both are full-colour and have a print run of between 4000 and 5000.
- 23 Before taking up my current professorship at the University of Bergen (Norway) in 2016, I lectured at the University of Groningen and was closely involved in the work of both organizations.
- 24 Many of the buyers turned out to be residing outside the province, a category described by the foundation’s director as “heimwee-Groningers” (“homesickness-Groningers”).

- <sup>25</sup> The above-mentioned book *Kerkinterieurs in Nederland* (price: 50 euros) saw three editions within three years.
- <sup>26</sup> I had conducted a similar project before in 2014–2015, in the manner of a pilot, on the earlier mentioned website [cultuurschatten.wordpress.com](https://cultuurschatten.wordpress.com) (accessed on 24 August 2021).
- <sup>27</sup> In 2015, I developed a thematic educational project entitled “The church as 3D history book” aimed at highschools in the northern Netherlands.
- <sup>28</sup> Of course, only the more affluent social layers are represented, others had graves of less durable materials, such as wood, that have left no traces.

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