A coordinated approach for the future use of parish churches in rural areas in Flandern (Belgium)
CRKC: Centre for Religious Art and Culture

• Expertise Centre for movable, intangible (1998) and immovable (2012) religious heritage
• Focus on Flanders (North part of Belgium)
• Founded by Flemish Catholic Dioceses, Association of religious orders, KULeuven
• Funded by Flemish Government and Catholic Church
• Based in the Abbey of Parc in Heverlee-Louvain
Coordinated approach: legal context

- 1801: Concordate Napoleon – Pope Pius VII
  - Nationalized churches at disposal of Catholic Church for worship; ownership transferred to municipalities
  - Maintenance of the buildings paid by the municipalities
- 1830: independency of Belgium: new state confirmed this regulation
- 2001: Flemish parliament becomes competent for religious affairs and confirms this regulation in decree of 2004
Coordinated approach: legal context

• Dramatic changes in catholic church:
  – Decreasing participation: actualy 5% of population
  – Less priests for public worship

• Dramatic changes for municipalities:
  – Increasing costs of maintenace and restoration of churches
  – Budgets under pressure because of crisis
Coordinated approach: legal context

• Flemish Government, responsible for local policy and religious affairs, asks catholic church to debate with municipalities about future use of churches: do they still need all the churches?

• Establishment of a Parish Church Plan:
  – a common policy on communal level about future use of churches
  – Involving “stakeholders”: cultural, social, tourism
Some figures about catholic churches in Flanders

- 1786 parishes, 1786 main parish churches
- Some parishes have annex churches
  - > about 129 annex churches
  - > in total 1915 churches for public worship, for a population of 6,4 mio
- 486 main churches in rural areas
Parish churches related with the types of areas in Flanders

grootsteden (117 parochiekerken)
centrumsteden (178 parochiekerken)
kleinere steden (429 parochiekerken)
stedelijke rand (201 parochiekerken)
overgangsgebied (393 parochiekerken)
platteland (468 parochiekerken)
Province of West-Flanders
Westhoek – Flanders Fields

- Procession of Penance
- War cemetery of Vladslo
- Menenpoort Ieper
- World’s most famous beer
Why Westhoek?
Common problems

• 18 municipalities with small rural centers
• Population:
  – Total: 216,000
  – From Ieper (34,000) to Mesen (951)
• A lot of small and large churches: 113
• Many small villages in each of the municipalities
• In a rural area:
  – 1/3 of the churches in villages of less than 700 inhabitants
• Icon and sole important building of a village
Ieper

Mesen
Common problems

• Less budget in municipalities to finance maintenance or new uses of churches
• Most of the churches destroyed during WW I and rebuilt in 20ies
  – sometimes structural problems
  – less architectural value
  – difficult to change the use
• Important number of protected churches:
  – 46 out of 113 or 41%
  – higher than Flemish average of 38%
Aims of the project

- To establish a Parish Church Plan for each of the 18 municipalities
- To coordinate choices and possible scenarios about future use of churches over the borders of the municipalities
- To formulate scenarios and practices that can be used by other actors
Partners of the project

• 18 municipalities, represented by their mayor
• An intercommunal organization: WVI
  – From which all the municipalities are member
• The Diocese of Bruges
• CRKC
Timing

• Start: September 2012
• End: December 2013
Phase 1

Inventory of the buildings

• Basis: survey of the CRKC, filled in by the church committees
• City administrations assisted when necessary
Phase 2

Inventory per municipality

• Bundling of the results of the survey of CRKC for each of the municipalities

• Adding information about:
  – Condition of the buildings
  – Actual and future use for worship, as decided by the parish teams and the diocese
  – Public buildings owned the municipalities and future policies or needs concerning public infrastructure for culture, welfare, offices, burying, ...
Phase 3

Process in each municipality

• Discussion sessions between representatives of the local church committees, pastoral teams and municipalities about:
  – Future use of the churches
  – Ideas or proposals for “other use” of churches

• Discussions lead by an independent moderator
  – Trained and prepared for this task by the project management
  – Between 1 and 3 meetings
  – Leading to a conclusion supported by all participants
Phase 4
Preparation of a municipal resolution

• Aim: to elaborate a plan for each of the 18 municipalities
  – Supported by all parties involved
  – Confirmed by the town council and the diocese

• Original timing: October – December 2013
  – Goal will be reached by November 2014
Extra: additional information

• During the process > need for extra information due to effect of local elections and change of local representatives
  – April 2013: information about the relevant Flemish decrees
  – June 2013: information about the specific financial planning and reporting related to parish churches

• Target group: financial officers and aldermen of the 18 municipalities
Conclusions of the project

• By the end of 2014, every municipality will have its Parish Church Plan, approved by the Diocese and the town council
• No dramatic changes in use of churches on short terms, but openness to other uses of the churches, combined with the use for worship
• A few projects of multifunctional use or reuse of churches will be examined
• In most of the municipalities a permanent dialog is installed between the city administration and the church committees
• A set of 9 recommendations is formulated. They are communicated by CRKC.
• The scenario designed for this project, is a model for other projects
• A structure is set up by the Province of West-Flanders to share knowledge about the use of parish churches