

A coordinated approach for the future use of parish churches in rural areas in Flanders (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: actually 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
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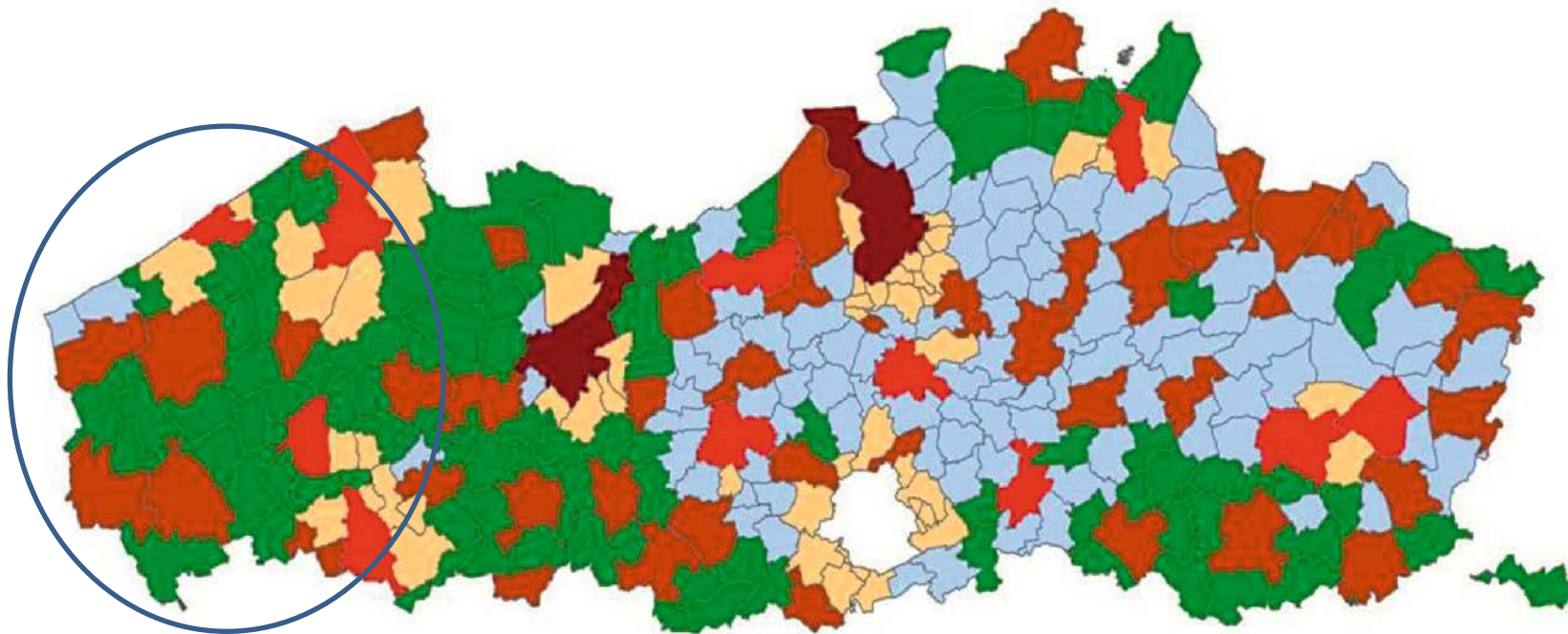
Coordinated approach: legal context

- 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



Province of West-Flanders



Westhoek – Flanders Fields



Procession of Penance



War cemetery of Vladslo



World's most famous beer



Menenpoort Ieper



Why Westhoek?

Common problems

- 18 municipalities with small rural centers
- Population:
 - Total: 216.000
 - From Ieper (34.000) to Meseu (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

leper



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
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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
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Timing

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



Inventory of the buildings

- Basis: survey of the CRKC, filled in by the church committees
 - City administrations assisted when necessary
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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, ...
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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
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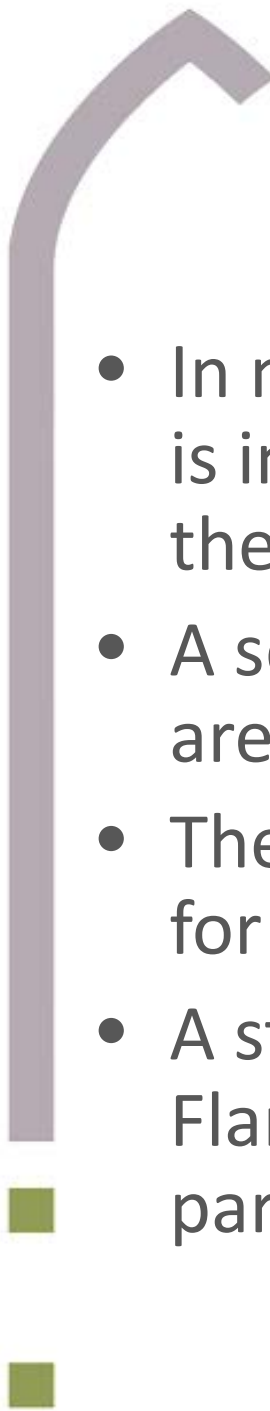
Extra: additional information

- 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
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- In most of the municipalities a permanent dialog is installed between the city administration and the church committees
 - A set of 9 recommandations 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