

SEMINAR ON MOVEABLE RELIGIOUS HERITAGE.
Utrecht, November 2013

For many members of the general public it is the exterior of a church building that will seem most significant. To them such buildings may be important as an episode in the townscape or landscape; their graveyards may provide a moving link to former generations and their very antiquity, as frequently the oldest buildings in their locality, can be greatly valued as can the external evidence they may offer of loving craftsmanship in stone and mortar.

Those who venture in as regular worshippers, visitors and tourists or as occasional attenders at rites of birth, death and marriage will, however, enter a new dimension. The historic and artistic quality of the fixed furnishings alone can often be astonishing, easily bearing out the description of many a local church as a cultural time capsule. And that is to forget the moveable treasure to be revealed in the form of musical instruments, bells, garments and hangings, precious craftwork in metal and other materials and the existence of valuable books and historic records.

Throughout Europe there is therefore growing anxiety for the future of the many religious buildings faced with redundancy due to the widespread and steep decline in regular use for worship. Imaginative and worthy examples of conversions for other functions are already quite common and in England some of the best churches have been kept intact as a form of uplifting visitor attraction. Many have broadened their original function to host cultural events and to encourage wider community use. But when there is complete redundancy what will be the fate of the medley of objects within and which are vital in giving religious buildings their special purpose and character? This enigma has received mixed and often minimal attention.

Hence the great potential importance of this international seminar organised jointly by the new and growing organisation 'Future for Religious Heritage' and the official national Cultural Heritage Agency for the Netherlands, where these problems are among the most pressing.

Based in the former Catharijne Convent in Utrecht, now the National Museum of Religious Heritage, speakers spelled out the dire situation in other parts of Europe. In the Netherlands alone it was stated that half the total of former places of worship have closed during the past ten years. In Denmark, 200 such closures are imminent.

Topics covered by contributors and in workshop discussion therefore concerned, for example, the problems of theft and security, the raising of public awareness of the moveable heritage at risk, its evaluation and conservation, the maintenance of thorough descriptive inventories and the criteria for disposal of objects for continued use in other places of religion or to museums. So we heard, for example, that in Sweden most churches fail to maintain up to date inventories and that thefts are frequent and given a low priority by the police. Another contributor advised that objects accepted by museums should be offered on loan by the local community rather than handed over as gifts, thus maintaining a sense of local pride in ownership.

Perhaps the most memorable part of the seminar was an outing to visit relevant sites in Amsterdam, a city that has an impressive history of making good use of former places of worship. Particularly interesting was a practical exercise in evaluating numerous items within a soon-to-be redundant 19th century Roman Catholic parish church, ranging from pulpit and reredos to communion silverware. Expert advice provided at the end then confirmed or refuted our amateur assessment of their value as of national, regional, local or minimal importance.

It was encouraging to hear that the building itself would be freely offered to the local community and that some of the best features could probably be kept in place without jeopardising its secular use.

Among the former church buildings visited in the centre of Amsterdam were notably De Duif, in a full blown Baroque style and now an events space but which retains all the main chancel fittings in situ and the Portuguese Synagogue, restored for regular worship without installing any electricity or heating. It also houses a fine museum display including precious fabrics and other historic items. Some are nevertheless required for frequent use in services, so raising potential concerns for their proper care and conservation.

For more information on this meeting and its outcomes and for details of events to come visit the website of Future for Religious Heritage. <www.frh-europe.org>

JG. March 2014.