

NETHERLANDS-BELGIUM PROVINCE

Official Languages: The Netherlands – **Dutch**, Belgium – **Flemish and French**

Vision Statement

To live and announce God's Word, to bring the Kingdom of God.

Mission Statement

We, members of the Society of the Divine Word in the Netherlands and Belgium, come from several countries, each with our own culture and tradition. We are called to make it visible through our presence, contemplation, announcing and activities. Aware that God is present in people and in the world, we consider our mission as a sharing in God's mission; this, our mission, is supported by a lived knowledge of Scripture, by a missionary spirituality, by insight into the present way of thinking, by living in a modern secularized and multicultural society, and by being at home with the modern means of communication.

1. Societal Setting

The Netherlands is progressively recovering from the worldwide economic crisis. The recovery process has been accompanied with austerity programs which have affected the most vulnerable people in society: the elderly, the handicapped,



the low income families, and the unemployed. Faith in government, and especially in the European Union, has been declining. The crisis had not only negative effects. There has been a marked increase in neighborhood and family solidarity, while church-related and civil charitable organizations are blooming. Throughout the country there are food distribution centers which get their supplies from food stores and voluntary contributions of the citizens.

The Netherlands has a long tradition of receiving migrants and refugees from different parts of the world. In the 20th century, immigrants from former Dutch colonies (Indonesia, and especially the Moluccas, Suriname and Antilles) began flowing into the country. In recent decades, Muslims from Turkey and Morocco

added to the influx. Since 2015, almost 50% of the asylum seekers come from Syria, another 15% from Iraq and Afghanistan, and about 14% from Ethiopia and Eritrea. As of early 2017, there were about 50,000 asylum seekers in special refugee centers awaiting a decision about their asylum request. During the past few years there has been a growing opposition to the welcoming of refugees. The country's long tradition of multiculturalism is being questioned by a considerable minority of nationalists who are worried about the loss of Dutch identity. We see this attitude reflected in the programs of the political parties.

The secularizing process continues. Church attendance among Catholics and Protestants continues to decline, with the exception of some Pentecostal Churches. The decline is most evident among the youth and young adults. At the same time, we observe the rise of new "religious" movements of people searching for meaning in life and interpersonal solidarity. Belgium is a culturally, socially, politically and religiously complex country.

Belgium is traditionally a mostly Catholic country. This situation has changed drastically. Statistics show that at present 44% of the population considers itself as believers, 30% as non-believers and 18% declares itself atheist. Regular church attendance among Catholics is at an all-time low.

There are in Belgium more than 700,000 Muslims, with about 400,000 of them considered to be practicing Muslims. In spite of the opposition of a few right-wing parties, the majority of the Muslims try to integrate as well as possible.

2. Ecclesial Setting

We observe that in the Netherlands, due to declining church attendance, the decrease in the number of priests, and financial necessity, numbers of independent parishes are being fused into mega-parishes consisting of small faith communities. Some of these communities retain their own church building. However, many churches are being closed and sold. The special roll of lay pastoral workers has been declining due to church imposed limitations in the exercise of their liturgical functions and declining financial resources. While the parishes become bigger and the pastoral teams smaller, the influence of the Church diminishes markedly. Too many of the parish priests have become keepers of the tradition with little eye or inclination for renewal and new initiatives. The dioceses and parishes have few or no alternative pastoral and liturgical programs developed for the faith communities without a church building. Too little room is left for creative lay participation.

The Church in Belgium is certainly no longer an institute with power. Regular church attendance has steadily gone down. It is even claimed that the country counts more regularly practicing Muslims than Catholics. Yet the many vibrant abbeys and monasteries are still prominent on television. While for more and more people the Church has become irrelevant, there is an increasing number of people searching for meaning and a spirituality in life.

At the level of the national conferences of bishops, ecumenical contacts with the Protestants are kept alive but lack momentum. The most fruitful ecumenical contacts and cooperation happen at the parish level. There are ecumenical working groups which prepare ecumenical liturgical celebrations. Protestants and Catholics are giving more attention to what they have in common than to what divides them.

3. Intercultural Mission – *Ad Extra*

Those in Final Vows

IN ACTIVE MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Parish	9	14.1	9.8	10.8
Education	0	0	0	0
Schools	0	-		
Universities	0	-		
Formation/ SVD Vocation	0	0	4.0	0
Administration/ Support	3	4.7	8.4	13.9
Other Apostolates	8	12.5	13.5	16.5
JPIC	3	-		
Bible	0	-		
Communication	1	-		
Mission Animation	1	-		
Others	3	-		

Those in Final Vows

NOT IN MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Studies/ Orientation	3	4.7	1.5	2.1
Retired/Sick	36	56.3	62.8	55.7
Others	5	7.8	0	1.0

The year 2016 marked a major step in the development of the SVD mission in the NEB Province. For the first time a non-citizen, a confrere from abroad, was made the provincial leader. In the wake of this appointment, other confreres from abroad have taken on key positions. This event made two things clear. Firstly, the province itself and the general leadership of the Society realize that the province can no longer continue from its own strength. Secondly, there is the firm will to make a new start under the leadership of our foreign confreres. There is much enthusiasm and there is even talk of a new springtime.

When the province began to have no vocations, many confreres in the province and even the leadership started doubting about the future of the province. Would the SVD still have reason for a presence in the Netherlands and Belgium? Yet, a ministry to migrants began in the 1980s and 90s. Since 1990 the communities have gradually become multinational and multicultural. There are at present 15 confreres of foreign origin, 13 residing in the Netherlands and two belonging to the Missionary Contemplative Community in Montenau. There are six more appointed for

the coming years. In the past few years, two communities were started, in which the confreres endeavor to give expression to our missionary identity within the context of diocesan parishes. The contracts with the dioceses are formulated in such a way that sufficient opportunity is provided for explicit missionary activities. In 2017 a community will be started in the Diocese of Breda. This will be the first time that a parish will be fully under SVD responsibility.

In conclusion, the NEB province is experiencing a new wellspring. The new wellspring had its origin around 30 years ago when the Netherlanders who had been in overseas missions began to return to their home province. As a result, a new awareness arose in the NEB province and new ways were chosen to revitalize and continue the mission by strengthening intercultural communities. Thus we hope that the new spring season and the new beginning can contribute to the proclamation and the growth of "the kingdom of God": a new world order for all people.

The great majority of NEB members are old and retired. The pastoral activities are carried out by our foreign confreres and a few elderly Dutch confreres. This has to be kept in mind when reading the statistics below.

Characteristic Dimensions

The Characteristic Dimensions will be lived out more strongly in our parish work once the Society will be made fully responsible for the

parishes. Each year, the NEB province will evaluate the goals that have been achieved on the basis of parish involvement in the local church, and in SVD community mission projects. Based on the personnel available in the intercultural communities, the members will be involved in the local parish ministry giving special focus to the SVD Characteristic Dimensions.

Priorities among Congregational Directions

Migration, Indigenous and Ethnic Communities and, Reconciliation and Peace Building:

Our missionary activities are aimed at engaging dialogue with the poor and the marginalized, people of other cultures, and people who do not belong to a specific religious community, but are searching for faith and God, as well as the people of other religious traditions and secular ideologies. Therefore we care for migrants, refugees and people at the edge of society. We prioritize the forming of multicultural faith communities where people support one another in living their Christian faith, and at the same time reach out to people outside their own communities through bridge-building. Until now our confreres work in parishes in partnership with the diocesan clergy. This is very fruitful. They become familiar with the way pastoral work in this country is done. At the same time it may limit them a little in forming the faith communities they might wish to set up. Still, even now much is possible, especially in bridge building and reconciliation between different communities.

In the area of migrant care and help for people in difficult circumstances, the province has been rather active. The JPIC commission has been keeping confreres informed about major justice issues all over the world for many years. Confreres also make important contributions to other organizations and their publications, such as the African-European Faith and Justice Network. There is a Christmas action every year which raises funds for special needs at home or abroad. One confrere has recently been appointed as coordinator of all migrant apostolates done by confreres among many different ethnic groups.

Primary and New Evangelization: We want to explore the possibilities of missionary work in the Netherlands and Belgium, and take the church to the people. The underlying goal of our missionary activity is to come in contact with people with core values of the Gospel so as to hand over them the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Our young confreres who are in pastoral work have a way of making informal contacts with Dutch parishioners, visiting them in their homes and inviting them for special occasions in their own houses. Some of them within the parish pastoral teams are responsible for individual pastoral care and care for the sick, where being present and listening is often all one can do.

Collaboration with SSpS and Others

The NEB province works closely together with the SSpS on the provincial level, e.g. through combined meetings and participating in each

other's events, but especially on the level of training and pastoral work for the younger members. Both congregations play an important role in the KNR (Conference of Religious in the Netherlands) and other inter-congregational institutions. Within the country the two are also trendsetters for the involvement of religious and priests from other countries in the pastoral arena. They have also been successful in making Steyl an important pilgrimage place in the Netherlands.

SVD Lay Partners

Besides the "Friends of the SVD", a group of sympathizing ex-students who help and advise us in their respective specialties, a growing number of other lay people have come forward through the contacts of our young foreign confreres. In the renewal of financial and administrative structures, begun under the new provincial leader, they have played a leading role. We have committed ourselves to an ongoing renewal process concerning them. As much as possible, lay volunteers will be sought to engage in the missionary tasks and mission projects. In the near future, a lay volunteers' association will be formed to support the missionary activities. Adequate spiritual formation and training will be offered to the lay volunteers to get acquainted with the SVD vision and mission, specifically in the context of NEB province. Where possible, cooperation and joint collaboration will be sought out with other like-minded organizations and lay volunteers to implement com-

munity projects. Something like an SVD third order does not exist in our province.

4. Intercultural Life – *Ad Intra*

MEMBERSHIP	2018	2012	2005
Clerics	53	62	73
Brothers (final vows)	9	17	24
Scholastics	2	0	0
Total	64	79	97

AGE AND COUNTRY	2018	2012	2005
Average age	68.2	73.3	75.2
Nationalities	11	11	6

Spirituality: Spirituality is fostered along the traditional ways of regular Eucharist, daily prayers, Bible sharing, recollections, and retreats. The province is blessed with the presence of the Missionary Contemplative Community in Montenau, Belgium. While the community is a source of inspiration for so many people of faith and faith seekers, it would be desirable that more confreres within the province would spend some time in this community for renewal and inspiration.

Community Life: Forming community has been a tremendous challenge since the 2012 general chapter. The community in Teteringen is a special place where senior missionaries are living. These seniors are provided with the care

and attention that is needed. The SVD community is part of a greater inter-congregational community with Benedictine monks and Missionaries of the Holy Family. The community in Deurne was closed and its members now belong to the community in Teteringen. Other than this large community, we are in small intercultural missionary communities. The combination of diverse cultural backgrounds, being new in a secularized environment, the hardship of learning the language, the frustration of little pastoral involvement during the first two years for newcomers, and not yet having a clear idea about future missionary involvement cause personal crises and create tensions in the communities. It is for that reason that the province established a "guidance commission" to accompany the incoming confreres during their first three years in the province in matters of language learning, inculturation, and giving insight into the situation of Dutch society and Church.

Leadership: Leadership is now given a more participative character with each member of the provincial council being responsible for a particular aspect of provincial matters. Also, on the local level where young confreres are accepting positions of leadership, initiatives are taken to train them for their tasks. Training sessions about intercultural living, combined meetings with local and provincial leaders, and a greater participation in the district meetings are signs of this new direction.

Finance: Finance has become the subject of major changes under the new leadership. We are

grasping the opportunity for setting up new structures and standardizing the different procedures. With the help of lay professionals, a

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process of renewal is underway. The province has initiated a program through which all community members participate in preparing the annual community budget. In this process, each community member is requested to prepare his personal bud-

get. The practice shows that it is not so easy to monitor the expenditures and assure that these remain within the boundaries of the approved budget.

Formation: Ongoing formation is considered to be of major importance at the personal and communal level. The communities of the Hague, Nieuwegein and Amsterdam meet about five times in the context of the St. Jan District. These are important learning moments, including the exchange of experiences and ideas

with the senior confreres. These communities also meet once a year with the junior sisters of the SSpS. The input and exchange of ideas and experiences center around a common theme. Every year, in the month of September, the province organizes a Theme-Day. The theme is chosen by the confreres themselves, and one or two confreres present an introduction to the theme, then the theme is elaborated in small discussion groups, and these groups present the outcome of their sharing in the plenum.

Our province has become increasingly international and intercultural in its community-life and missionary engagements and is facing a transitional process. At present we are focusing on securing the continuous care and welfare of our senior confreres, developing our intercultural international communities, and capacity building. Our priority is to be present amongst marginalized people, to set up projects to empower them, in collaboration with lay people and through the existing structures of the local parishes.