

General information on the church asylum in church community center Bethel, The Hague

The situation of the family

The Tamrazyan family (father, mother and three children, now 21, 19 and 15 years old) fled from Armenia, where it was unsafe for them and came to the Netherlands 9 years ago. A residence permit was provided initially, but the state appealed twice in court, and finally the permit was denied.

The 'Children's Pardon' regulation

In The Netherlands we have a 'Children's Pardon' regulation for refugee children who have been living in the Netherlands for more than five years during their family's procedure for a residence permit.

The Tamrazyan family applied for this Children's Pardon, referring to the fact that the repeated appeals of the state had lasted longer than five years and their children now were fully integrated into Dutch society. Their request was denied; as a criterion is that one must actively cooperate with being expelled to one's country of origin, that was not safe for them. This paradoxical criterion in the children's pardon results in almost every request being declined (around 96%).

Church asylum

In September 2018 the family, who lived in an asylum center in Katwijk, north of The Hague, heard that they would be sent back to Armenia. They initially fled to the church in Katwijk where they have been members for two years. Generally speaking, there's a gentlemen's agreement in The Netherlands that ensures police does not enter church buildings without permission. But after a month of the family's residing in the church in Katwijk, the police stated that they would not respect this agreement in this particular case.

The only way to still ensure the safety of this family was to make use of an [article in Dutch law](#) that says the police may not enter a church building during a church service. This means that as long as a service is being held the family is safe. For the Katwijk church community it was logistically not possible to hold a continuous service and the Protestant Church The Hague was asked for help.

We decided to offer the family church asylum in church community center Bethel in The Hague. Our intention is to create time and opportunity for a dialogue with the authorities and with political parties about the situation of this family and the fate of some 400 Dutch children in similar circumstances. We started our continuous service on Friday, 26 October 2018 at 13.30.

How it works

This initiative is made possible with the help of pastors from the entire country and from abroad who each fill in an hour or more. The number of churchgoers varies from just a few in the middle of the night to a full chapel with 100 people on Sunday mornings. Many volunteers and staff members support the service.

The Tamrazyan family is staying in a private apartment within the church building and regularly attends the church service. As long as they stay inside the building they are safe. Stepping into the street would put them at risk of being arrested.

The future

At the moment, we do not know how long the church service will continue. We plan to continue as long as it is necessary or useful. We are in contact with the authorities and with members of parliament. Local authorities respect the church service, as long as public order is upheld.

There is a broad sentiment in society that the children's pardon should be applied with more humanity, but politically it is an issue causing a lot of division.

We plea for the secretary of state, Mr. Mark Harbers, to use his 'discretionary authority' in the case of this family and to put a hold on expelling families and children in similar circumstances, until he can guarantee a clear procedure, in which the state does not create lengthy times of uncertainty and stress.

Support

There is a lot of support for the family and for what we are doing, also from non-Christians. The local Protestant Church has the support of the national Protestant Church and the national Council of Churches. Many other denominations support our initiative as well. Hundreds of pastors have already participated in the continuous church service and we are getting help from a large number of volunteers.

Responsibility

We are sometimes critically asked if it is legitimate to use a church service for a political aim. We feel it is our responsibility to take care of people who are in need of help. Our stand is that we consider it our task as a church to point out problems within society and invite politicians to take their responsibility.