
In 1991, Jan G.J. van Booma and J.L. van der Gouw published roughly 700 pages of transcribed sixteenth-century documents from city and church archives of Wesel. Some of these documents had been hastily scrawled, were nearly illegible, and had been gnawed at by hungry mice. The two archivists and church historians thus thankfully preserved these documents and made them more available for researchers. Twenty years later, Jan van Booma continues to publish his transcriptions of Dutch, German, and Latin archival records relating to the Dutch Reformed tradition. His new work, Communio clandestina, offers over 900 pages of transcriptions and commentary (written in German) relating to the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed refugee communities in Goch and Gennep. At the time, both towns were part of the duchy of Cleves, an officially Catholic territory with a sizeable Lutheran minority (today Goch lies in Germany, while Gennep is in the Netherlands). They also became safe havens for Reformed dissenters fleeing the neighboring Netherlands. Van Booma’s primary interest is in making available the sources from these refugees, which constitute some of the earliest records from the Dutch Reformed tradition and ones that few people have read. Most of his transcriptions come from the archives of the evangelical churches of Goch and Gennep, though he also includes evidence from church and government archives in Haarlem, Nijmegen, Wesel, and Düsseldorf as well as sources available in other printed collections. The result is a real service, not only to church historians, but to all early modern historians of both Germany and the Low Countries.

The centerpiece of the collection is the consistory records of the underground refugee church at Goch from 1570 to 1612. Other records include marriage registers, baptismal lists, deacons’ financial records, church account books, letters, attestations, and church orders. Many of the records are incomplete, in part a result of damage or neglect, the secret and transient nature of these churches, and the unsystematic way that their elders and deacons kept their records. Yet they are quite revealing nonetheless. Scholars might use Van Booma’s collection for any number of research topics, including the relationship between the Dutch and German Reformations, varieties within Reformed Protestantism, the experience of exile during the Age of Religious
Wars, social discipline and the Reformation, the “rise of confessional consciousness,” and the function of early modern poor relief.

Most significantly, this collection provides dazzling examples of religious pluralism, idiosyncratic accommodations, and flexible religious practices. Many of the patterns in Goch and Gennep match those noticed by scholars who have focused on this region of Germany. First, though the public churches were officially Catholic, residents developed a curious liturgical compromise. Catholics and Lutherans worshipped together using a liturgy that included separate Catholic and Lutheran moments. During the offertory, the Lutheran minister led his part of the congregation out of the church while the Catholic mass continued. Afterward, the Lutherans returned and their pastor led his part of the congregation in psalm singing, and then offered an evangelical sermon. Subsequently, the priest took over the service again. This constituted a kind of blend between simultaneum, practiced in some churches in the duchy of Berg, and comprehension, practiced in Cleves towns like Duisburg and Wesel. Meanwhile, most Reformed in Goch and Gennep worshipped in private houses. They maintained a distinction between full members and “toehoorders,” who attended sermons but did not celebrate Reformed communion or submit to consistorial discipline. Though this matches a distinction made in the Dutch Reformed Church, it functioned differently in Goch and Gennep; the toehoorders listened to sermons in the secret Reformed house churches, but could celebrate communion and baptism in the mixed Lutheran-Catholic parish churches. This confessional flexibility was not limited to the toehoorders; full members sometimes practiced in the parish churches too (a fact that frustrated Reformed elders). It turned out, then, that the parish churches accommodated three confessions. Further, though Van Booma’s records do not reveal how the town’s Anabaptists worshipped, examples of people moving back and forth between Anabaptism and Reformed Protestantism, as well as numerous mentions of mixed marriages, suggest that there too confessional lines were blurry. Perhaps most surprising is that we find this high degree of accommodation and flexibility among religious exiles. Many scholars have described exile churches as incubators of orthodox Calvinism and models of Calvinist purity; in Goch and Gennep, this was certainly not the case.

Four other patterns are worth noting here. First, these records highlight the leadership role played by Wesel’s elders for all the refugee communities on the Lower Rhine. Second, women in these churches sometimes served as “deaconesses,” just as they did in Wesel. Third, elders in Goch were just as concerned as their counterparts elsewhere with moral matters like drunkenness, dancing, ostentation, and overindulgence, though they left no record of cases