

Chapter 7

Belgium



Belgium has a population of about 11 million, with only two percent being Christian. However, in recent years, the Protestant-Evangelical segment is growing, with a new church starting every week! The country is divided into two communities, Flemish (Dutch) and French. Historically, there has been conflict between the two groups. The official languages are Flemish, French, and German. Hosting the European Union capital, Brussels, and other important international organizations, such as NATO, Belgium is more than just physically at the center of Western Europe. Its position means that, for many centuries, it has seen foreign armies fighting over its soil, and it is itself split between two principal linguistic and cultural regions, as mentioned above.



MARIAN & BENJAMIN VAN DEN AKKER

During the Reformation, the port of Antwerp was a city of great significance, but after the war between Spain and the Dutch in the 16th century, it was held by the Spaniards. As a result, what is now Belgium became Roman Catholic, and the work of the Spanish Inquisition destroyed 600 congregations.



MINISTERING AS A TEAM

Benjamin and Marian Van den Akker lived in the Netherlands, studied at the Belgian Bible Institute in the late 1970s, and came in contact with the British ministry of OAC. After a period of training, they moved to Belgium at the end of 1981 to work with OAC full-time, and the Belgian branch started up in 1982. In their desire to reach Belgium for Christ, they began by reaching out successfully in city marketplaces. During the summer, they conducted ministry in camps and also had an active children's club ministry.

In 1995, a regular ministry of witnessing to crews on ships from all over the world berthed at the Port of Antwerp (one of the world's major ports) also took place.



MINISTRY ON SHIPS CAN BE VERY FRUITFUL

Each week, leaflets containing the gospel, videos of the life of Jesus, and Bibles were handed out. This was combined with the use of gospel magic presentations as a springboard to sharing the Good News of Christ. About 50 ships sail in and out of Antwerp every day.

Here is an example of how God works using this type of outreach at ports, as told by Ben:

I visited a ship under the Saudi flag. The crew appeared to be Filipino and Indian. They showed great openness and many Bibles found new owners. I started a conversation with the cook and asked where he came from. He told me he was from Karnataka, India. I looked in my literature bag, and to my great surprise, there was a Bible in Kannada. His eyes stared at the Bible, and he told me that this was his mother tongue. I told him he could have the Bible. He said that he was a Hindu, but as a child, he went to a mission school where they taught the Bible stories. So, I said that he could now read them from the Bible himself. I noticed that he could hardly control his tears. My prayer is that he will read the Word of God and find salvation through Christ.

The use of object lessons, slight of hand, and illusions were so successful in the Netherlands and Belgium that Ben was invited to perform more than once, on various Christian and secular television programs.

Ben and Marian have one son and two daughters. They live in Mechelen, strategically located between Belgium's two major cities: Brussels and Antwerp. Ben continues to minister in prisons and in the Port of Antwerp and is the chairman of the national commission of Protestant-Evangelical Prison Chaplains.

