



Bible Correspondence School Netherlands "ESDA Instituut"

is currently housed in the Netherlands Union of Churches Conference office.

Photo courtesy of Reinder Bruinsma.

ESDA–Institute (Bible Correspondence School) in the Netherlands

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Overview¹

The Dutch Bible Correspondence School, called the ESDA-Institute for written (and online) courses, was founded in the summer of 1946.² “ESDA” is the Dutch pronunciation of the abbreviation for “Seventh-day Adventist.”

The ESDA-Institute supports the local churches by distributing Bible correspondence courses and by providing the materials to support the program. It serves Dutch speaking persons mainly in The Netherlands, Belgium, Surinam, and Curaçao, but also elsewhere in the world.

The ESDA-Institute in The Netherlands used to be an independent entity led by one director with the aid of various assistants. Currently, the institute operates as a department of the Netherlands Union. A member of the Netherlands Union executive committee is responsible for oversight of the institute and an appointed union department head supervises daily operations. Several volunteers assist in its work.

Since the institute has converted many courses to online ones, the number of people taking the written courses is decreasing, while at the same time online students have increased. The conversion to online versions of courses will soon be completed. All new courses are online only and can be downloaded to print if the student desires a hardcopy course.

Background

In the summer of 1946, the Canadian Army held vespers in the city of Leeuwarden. Participants met in a large tent. The programs were short and had song services accompanied with string instruments. At that time, G. L. A. Faber was pastor of the Leeuwarden SDA community and visited one of the vespers services. Touched by the message and the song service, he afterward spoke to one of the pastors involved and discovered that he was a fellow Seventh-day Adventist.

Because of the war, it had been hard to stay in touch with church members overseas. The two pastors spoke at length to catch up with church events. Faber received a number of magazines the Canadians had brought with them when they came to The Netherlands. One magazine contained an article about the Voice of Prophecy and its free Bible correspondence course. The article stated that the course could also be received overseas.

Ordering the course, Faber became enthusiastic about what he saw as its potential. After obtaining permission, he had the Bible course translated into Dutch and offered it to the Dutch public. Faber conducted the project from his home with the assistance of some others.

History

At its start in 1946 the institute went by the name “de Stem der Profetie” (the Voice of Prophecy). In the days just after the war, many Dutch people wanted to learn English, so the institute advertised the course as being in both English and Dutch. The translation of lessons into Dutch was possible thanks to many gifts from both Dutch church members and from abroad. From the beginning the courses were offered free. Several other denominations in the Netherlands soon followed the example of offering a Bible course, but not all did so without charge. In principle the union conference subsidizes the courses, but they are actually paid for by gifts from the students who take them.

Two pastors who rented a small office in the city of Arnhem did the translation, while the administration and correspondence with students took place in Faber’s home. Within a year he had three assistants. One of them, Miss A. Wallinga, remained involved from the beginning until she was in her nineties, long after her official retirement.

At first, advertising was hard. It was expensive and not everyone was pleased to receive a flyer, some of which people returned torn up. The response rate was around 0.5% of the number distributed.³ Some who received the flyers were critical and reacted negatively. However, the chairman of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at that time said, “Every warning against the driving force of the Voice of Prophecy, roared around, is an advertisement in favor of our work.” After a while, other denominations began providing Bible courses, and by the 1960s many accepted Bible correspondence courses as a good way to share the gospel.

Church members went door to door with flyers, and some continue to distribute them that way. Other congregations mailed their flyers or gave them to magazines and newspapers to be printed in their publications. As time went by this method of advertising became more and more expensive.

Faber had suggested, in November 1947⁴ that every church should have a pile of leaflets at their door to hand out. The layout of the courses was updated to so called “folding letters,” a much more attractive format. Later, in the 1990s and early 2000s, newspapers accepted so-called “fillers” and offered free advertisement spots in the paper that they couldn’t fill up in other ways. Occasionally such a free advertisement showed up on a front page.

In 1951 “de Stem der Profetie” (Voice of Prophecy) merged with “de Stem der Hoop” (Voice of Hope), the organization broadcasting radio programs, to form the ESDA-Institute. For some time “de Stem der Hoop” had advertised the written courses on their programs. That same year it started a quarterly magazine, *Contact*,⁵ to keep in touch with listeners, students, and former students. Every quarter it had a theme linked to one of the courses or topical issues. The ESDA-Institute still produces *Contact* to publicize courses and connect with students.

The original “American” Bible course consisted of 36 lessons. Every student received one lesson a week by mail, which soon became very costly. By 1949 the institute sent two lessons every two weeks, which cost less and

gave the student more time to complete them. Current practice is to send the next two lessons every time students return their completed ones. Online courses are free to download whenever the student is ready for the next lesson.

During the 1950s ESDA-Institute prepared a new course of 15 lessons, based on *Steps to Christ* and written in Dutch and called "Bijbelcursus" (BibleCourse). In 1961 Pastor A. C. A. C. Schmutzler authored a 45-lesson course based on Adventist fundamental beliefs, called *It Is Written*. It was also available as a book.

On June 30, 1976, de Stem der Hoop made its last radio broadcast, bringing to an end a 27-years program that had begun December 16, 1949. Unfortunately, the cost of radio time had now become prohibitive.

Miss A. Wallinga who assisted with reviewing (marking) lessons, took the initiative of writing a health course based on the health principles of Ellen G. White. It has been revised and updated for an online version. A course on archaeology in the Bible lands began in 1974. Pastor N. Heijkoop, who succeeded Schmutzler as director, developed the courses "The Bible has the Word" and "The Bible speaks" in the Dutch language.

In 1980 the board of the ESDA-Institute recognized the need for courses more relevant to the interests of society.⁶ One of them, launched in 1992, was "God, who was He again?" a six-lesson series without any homework, for people without a church connection. A team of church members concerned about those who had grown up in the Adventist church but had left it, had prepared it. In 2020 it will be relaunched as an online version, with the largest radio advertising campaign planned in the history of the Dutch Adventist Church.

Originally started in private homes, the ESDA-Institute has through the years moved to different locations. In 1979 the house in which the ESDA-Institute operated from was remodeled as an office.⁷ In 1996 the office moved from the Prins Alexanderweg in Huis ter Heide to the present location in the headquarters of the Netherlands Union of Churches Conference at Oud Zandbergen.

From its early days, the institute has also served Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. That practice continued until the early 1970s when a sub-office, ESDA-Belgium, opened to handle lessons for students with addresses in that country. Postage paid in Belgium cost less than sending courses by mail from the Netherlands. The materials for Belgium come from the Netherlands. The Dutch-speaking students in Belgium also receive the *Contact* magazine every quarter.

In January 27, 1977, the ESDA-Institute NL became an independent foundation, having its own board and Chamber of Commerce registration.⁸ In 1998 a restructuring of the independent foundation became necessary for financial reasons, and ESDA-Institute became a part of the Netherlands Union as a department in November 1998 while remaining a registered foundation. The Adventist Church in the Netherlands supports the ESDA-Institute by providing a subsidy for its activities and employees. However, the ESDA-Institute is almost self-supporting through the many donations given by students to support its work.

As a means of evangelism, the ESDA-Institute focusses on people outside the church. If students show more interest, they receive a Sabbath School quarterly and an invitation to attend the Sabbath School in their neighborhood. ESDA-Institute sends invitations to students about special local services or other occasions that might interest them.

ESDA-Institute NL has contact persons in the local congregations. Some of them start small groups to invite ESDA-Institute students. The institute maintains close contacts with all pastors in the country who, when requested by students, help to prepare them for baptism. The union supplies the local churches with materials and supports them as much it can. The local church becomes the home of the ESDA-Institute students.

Every quarter the institute distributes a free magazine to all current and former students and interested members of the SDA church. Volunteers mainly produce the magazine, and every quarter many of its recipients donate money, often more than needed to produce and distribute the magazine. The income helps the ESDA-Institute to develop new courses.

Every newly baptized member receives an information folder that contains, among other things, the newest *Contact* magazine and a flyer with all the available courses outlined and information on how to receive them. Small groups also use ESDA both within and outside the church as a lead to study the Bible with each other. Teachers also employ the courses in schools outside the church, as well as for youth Sabbath School classes within the church.

Impact and Legacy

As soon as a student completes a course, he or she receives a diploma. Wherever local congregations have ESDA-Institute contact persons (usually such individuals are officially elected in the local churches), they deliver the diploma to the student. Sometimes the pastor of the local church will do it. Occasionally the local congregation may organize a graduation ceremony on a Sabbath morning to invite family and friends of the graduating ESDA-student. In line with privacy laws in the Netherlands, visits to students only take place if they have granted permission.⁹

With online-courses the situation is very different and quite anonymous. Once a student finishes an online-course, they can read it back, since the answers to their online homework are provided digitally. Students who take the correspondence courses can redo them as many times as they want to. And a lot of them do. One student in the Netherlands repeated the same courses again and again. After 20 years, he decided he wanted to belong to the Adventist church and was baptized.

In 2020 a new online course will be launched. Replacing the old "*It is written*" course, it is based on Adventist fundamental beliefs, using the book *The Reign of God* by Richard Rice and written in a modern style by R. H. Dingjan.

The introductory letter of each correspondence course informs students about the homework system and the *Contact* magazine. Though the institute provides the courses free of charge, it does ask students to enclose stamps when returning their lessons as a small contribution to cover costs. Many students donate extra stamps, so that others unable to afford postage can follow the courses too. Others send money. As a result, ESDA-Institute has had low postage expenses. It has also generated income by collecting used stamps that it then sells to stamp collectors.

Presidents/Directors

ESDA-Institute NL founder/director: G.L.A. Faber (1946-1948).

ESDA-Institute NL directors: P. Voorthuis (1948-1959); A. C. Schmutzler (1959-1968); N. Heijkoop (1968-1984); A. F. Steens (1984-1992); R. H. Dingjan (1993-1998).

ESDA-Institute NL supervisors: R. H. Dingjan (1998-2018); E. M. F. Karg (2018 -present).

SOURCES

Advent, June 1946, May 1951, September 1987, and January 1997.

van Rijn, H. G., "Advent Exposé, 100 jaar Adventkerk in Nederland."

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, this article is written from the personal knowledge of the author, Joanne Balk-Geerlings, who has worked for the ESDA-Institute since 1990.
2. G. L. A. Faber, "De Stem der Profetie," *Advent*, June 1946, 3, 4; H. G. van Rijn, "Advent Exposé, 100 jaar Adventkerk in Nederland," *Advent* September 1987, 97.
3. H. G. van Rijn, "Advent Exposé, 100 jaar Adventkerk in Nederland," *Advent*, September 1987, 98.
4. Ibid. 99.
5. P. Voorthuis, "De Stem der Profetie. Een zielenwinnend werk," *Advent*, May 1951, 3.
6. H.G. van Rijn, "Advent Exposé, 100 jaar Adventkerk in Nederland," *Advent*, September 1987, 100.
7. Ibid.

8. R. H. Dingjan, "Geef ESDA de ruimte!" *Advent*, January 1997, 21, 32.

9. In the past a representative would visit new students and show them a booklet containing examples of the several courses available, then they would receive the first lesson of the course of their choice. The contact person would invite students for special services, such as a gospel concert or a Christmas service, and would also check in with the student from time to time to make sure that the course met their needs. Today, when a student starts a written course, the ESDA-Institute requests permission to enable them to visit in accordance with Data Protection regulations.

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