The decline of reformed church polity in South Africa

Church polity in South Africa is one of the smaller theological disciplines. Different reasons for this position of the discipline maybe indicated as inter alia bad experiences with church polity with regard to church schisms, the influence of the Zeitgeist, and the lack of development in church polity in comparison to other theological disciplines. This article suggests that the impetus for the decline of reformed church polity should be found within the dominant collegialistic concept of church since the acceptance thereof in South Africa. The effect is a secularised view of the church with regard to its government, the office, the church and the church’s relationship with the state. It is suggested that a new discourse about the church and its polity should be initiated in South Africa to the benefit of the church and its polity, but also to that of the different fields which are involved with ecclesiology in various ways.

Context

Church polity in South Africa is one of the ‘smaller’ theological disciplines at the various theological faculties and seminaries; yet, it is probably one of the oldest theological disciplines. The matter at hand is not to indicate exactly where in history reformed church polity originated. It is beyond dispute that the New Testament church had a form of order, a form of government associated with the apostles and after them with the office-bearers, especially the elders (cf. Bouwman 1970:53ff.; Sillevis Smitt 1910; Van ‘t Spijker 1990a: section 4). Church polity, in fact, indicating the way in which the church is governed, is a matter of importance for every generation after the New Testament church came into being. Believers confess that Christ governs his church. The Christ government lays a claim on the believer and it calls to the embodiment of every aspect of the believers’ life (cf. Van ‘t Spijker 1990b:155–158).

In accordance with the definition of the church polity of reformed church politicians¹ the subject may be indicated as follows: Church polity is the theological discipline responsible for the scientific research of the phenomena: the ‘church’ and the ‘government’ of the church as it is revealed in God’s Word, formulated in the confessions of the catholic church and specified in the reformed confessions of unity. Also, it finds expression in the history and traditions of the church, in order to conceptualise, formulate and utilise the principles and norms of the church’s order for its existence under the kingship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

However, this does not help to make church polity a popular field of research. What could be the reason for that be? Reasons, which are indicated as a motivation for this situation are, for example as follows:

(1) In previous centuries, especially during the 18th and the 19th centuries, reformed church polity existed not only in the Netherlands, but also in countries where the reformed theology and reformed churches were established, and was closely associated with internal church struggles and schisms. In these schisms, church polity became the scapegoat for many of the problems without good adjudication of the persons and different personalities involved.

(2) Since the development of postmodernism, a school of thought was established which tried to indicate that church polity and especially a church order are obsolete (cf. Smit 2008:227). Church polity, according to that point of view, only serves to keep church members captured in the out-dated dogma and polities of the church through the centuries. From that perspective church polity is a useful tool for the church leadership to establish and maintain authority over church members and to keep them at bay with a church order in hand (cf. Dreyer 2016:143; Smit 2008:227). However, these accusations are made from an external point of reference, but do not engage the problematic points from an immanent perspective.

¹In view of the fact that the South African or Potchefstroom concept of ‘kerkreg’ [church law] is understood somewhat differently from that in the European or American tradition, please take note that the term Church Polity is used throughout and its corresponding ‘politic’ (adjective) and ‘politist’ (agent) – one who practices Church Polity, to be distinguished from ‘polities’, et cetera.
The reasons for the decline of church polity and church government as mentioned above, may give some valuable perspectives, but it is questionable whether it indicates the main problem with which the discipline and its practitioners are confronted. Yet, what should then be indicated as the main contributor to the decline of reformed church polity in South Africa? This article suggests that the impetus for the problem should be found within the dominant collegialistic concept of church in South Africa which has existed ever since the acceptance thereof in the Church Order of De Mist in 1804 (Pont 1991:170ff.).

It is beyond dispute that the collegialistic view is the dominant view of the church in South Africa whether in the academic context or in the everyday practice of believers, irrespective of their specific affiliation to a denomination in the tradition of the 16th century Reformation. The permanent synodal structures, executive committees and permanent structures are a witness thereof. Yet, it is in stark contras with the foundation and ideals of reformed church polity.

The main points to be considered here are the uncontested acceptance of the kingship of Christ over his church, the place and function of called office-bearers in the church, the local church and the community of churches, and the relationship between church and state. These points are indicative of the main principles of reformed church polity (Van der Linde 1965). By indicating the latter, the difference between reformed church polity and Collegialism, as it appears in the further explanation, is indicated. It, however, also serves the purpose to indicate that Collegialism opposes reformed church polity and fundamentally contributes to the decline of the discipline.

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The collegialist concept of church and church government comes from a vastly different context. It is the context where
man came-of-age. The dominant influences on the concept of church were not in the first place a specific view of Scripture as it was expressed in the 16th century Reformation, but the rationalism and humanism which developed since the Reformation (De Wet 1921). German Collegialism was a church-state theory with the aim to bring order into the German church-state relationship. A directive of this theory is its concept of church. In Collegialism the church is a mere human society (societas), a society equal (societas aequalis) to all other societies within the state borders (Spoelstra 1989:13ff.). The church is viewed as a result of the free will of man – an expression of man’s desire to give expression to his religious feelings. In this view of the church, the creation of the church fundamentally subsists with man. The classic form of Collegialism has no distinct opinion of the uniqueness of the church as a creation of the proclaimed Word through the work of the Holy Spirit. It constitutes a fundamental difference from the reformed concept of church and government of the church. The focus is especially on the institutional aspect of the church and not, as is in the reformed perspective, on the proclamation of the Word to the expansion and edification of the church.

Authority

For the reformed mind, the office-bearers’ authority is not vested in themselves. They are instruments in the hand of God and responsible for the true proclamation of the Word. The important point is that the proclamation is and should be authoritative. No other claim to authority besides the proclamation is valid in this form of church polity. The person is therefore not in focus, but he is a mere servant of the Lord. If office-bearers should misuse this responsibility and pretend to be the sole interpreter of God’s Word, then it is not the issue of our discussion. It does not, in principle, change the nature of reformed church polity and church government. Christ fulfils his government of the church through Word and Spirit, and in the centre is the proclamation of the Word. From the reformed fathers of the 16th century Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546), Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and John Calvin (1509–1564), the reformed tradition took over the essential idea of the centrality of Scripture. Similarly it gives expression to the unwavering belief in the power of the Word. Christ acts and governs the church through the Word and its proclamation. The reformed church order concept can therefore be expressed as an order with the aim to propagate and protect the proclamation of the Word in every instance (cf. Van ‘t Spijker 1980:10).

A hallmark of Collegialism is that church government finds its point of orientation not in Scripture, but in state government. Church government finds its embodiment from the example of state government. In fact, it is possible that the church may even function as a department of the state. In this sense Collegialism may be viewed as the direct opposite of reformed church polity. As mentioned above, reformed church polity emphasises that the church is creatura verbi, the result of the proclaimed Word. Accordingly the church is, by its nature, a religious community and a community which is unique (sui generis) in this world. According to its nature the church also has a unique form of government. It has been in the reformed tradition ever since Calvin indicated it as a government of the Word, a form of government which claims the heart of the believers and directs life from thereon further. Friedrich Julius Stahl, already in the 19th century, indicated the nature of Collegialism over and against true church polity. Stahl (De Wet 1921) says:

Es ist die Verfassungslehre des Rationalismus, die Verfassungslehre des Unglaubens. Es hat deshalb, gleich diesem, seinen Sitz im Bereich des ganzen Protestantismus aufgeschlagen. (p. 29)

Execution

For the reformed mind, as indicated above, the government of Christ is executed by the proclamation of the Word. It is fundamentally anti-hierarchical. The method, which collegialistic church polity ascribes to, differs vastly from the former. Collegialism is in its essence democratic (vox populi vox dei). In the time of Collegialism’s high conjuncture in the 19th century, the form of government mostly found expression in what may be indicated as a form of oligarchy executed by permanently elected functionaries of the church (synod). In this construction of the church, the synod becomes known as the church, or as it is sometimes expressed, the synod as the sum total of the different congregations. Church and congregation cannot be imagined without each other (cf. Von Campenhausen 1994:384). Even today the structure of collegialistic church polity remains the same (Von Campenhausen 1994:392). There was, however, a clear change of heart about the view of the kingship of Christ over the church and his government of the church. The latter developed especially after the Kirchenkampf in Germany. The inclusion of the kingship of Christ-perspective in Collegialism can be attributed to the input of Karl Barth in theology and Rudolf Smend in German Staatskirchenrecht. In contemporary German Staatskirchenrecht the kingship of Christ may even be indicated as one of the most important reasons for the acceptance of the separation of church and state as regulated by the Bömer Grundgesetz in relationship with the relevant articles of the Weimarer Reichsverfassung (section 140, Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949). This development should, however, be adjudicated within the context of the Evangelische Kirche [Evangelical churches] in Germany’s outspoken choice in favour of Collegialism as church polity system. It also goes with the acceptance that the formation of hierarchy in the church is not ideal, but that the necessary organisation of the church compels the church to introduce limited forms of hierarchy. The approach is therefore rather to limit the formation of hierarchy in the church than to try and phase out all forms thereof in necessary structures created by the church. It might have given rise to the expression that the doctrinal point of church government has not been sufficiently fathomed (Smit 1985:269–308). The doctrina [doctrine] and the disciplina [discipline] of the church should not be separated. Doctrine and life belong together essentially. Belief does not divide life in separate compartments, but claims every aspect of the believer’s life before God (coram Deo).
South Africa

Before De Mist’s intervention to create order in the church-state relationship at that time in South Africa, the relationship could be described as a form of Erastianism. As a child of the Aufklärung, De Mist’s ideas about church and state were influenced *inter alia* by rationalism, humanism and supranaturalism. A collegialistic approach to the relationship of church and state was prevalent in Germany, but also in his country of birth, the Netherlands. It was the confirmed approach to church and state. Since the introduction of the Church Order of De Mist (Kerkorde van De Mist 1804; Pont 1991), the same approach to church became dominant in the South African context. It was also echoed in the General Reglement of 1824, Ordinance 7 of 1843 (*Algemene Reglement, Ordinansie 7* – Pont 1991), and in many court decisions since then. One example is *Theron v Ring van Wellington* (1976). Ordinance 7 was revoked by parliament in 1962, but in 1976 in the Theron-case the court of appeal used Ordinance 7 to motivate that the church should in law be adjudicated as a society. The court did, however, not consider Ordinance 7 to be revoked (cf. Pienaar 1986:16). A contributing aspect to this view (which until now has not been sufficiently researched – at least not from a reformed church politic perspective), is the influence of English club-law on the church-state relationship in South Africa. Pienaar (1986:9–12) made some important observations in this respect albeit from a juridical perspective. However, the premise of English club-law and Collegialism about the origin and government of the church is, in principle, the same. The study of the English contribution may help us to get a better understanding of some of the aspects of church and state from the early days of the 20th century in South Africa. The English were after all responsible for the state government and made the laws in those formative years in South Africa.

In the constitutional dispensation since 1994, it is still accepted by influential church leaders and even scholars in church polity, in a typical collegialistic framework, that the judiciary is the last and authoritative interpreter of the church’s internal order. It is an idea which is directly in opposition with the reformed view of spiritual and civil government, but also in direct opposition to the implied separation of church and state in the South African Constitution since 1996.

### Implications

There are indications that the collegialistic concept of church was the single most influential reason for the secularisation of the church in Germany. The reasons therefore should be clear. If the church finds its origin in man, especially when the church is viewed as an expression of the will of man, man, in conclusion, also has the authority to decide if a church is at all useful and needed.

The same is applicable to church polity. If the church is viewed as a human organisation, the authority and responsibility for the government of the church is vested in man and his choice to provide the church with the most beneficial form of government applicable in a specific situation. There is no difference if the church is viewed from that perspective as a society or even a company which functions within the framework of the applicable corporate laws of the state. The church from that perspective, does not need a specialist field of church polity. In fact, any lawyer should then be competent to regulate and administer the internal order of the church.

The latter is in opposition with the reformed perspective on church polity, namely that God provided the principles for the order of the church in Scripture. It is an order provided by the Holy Spirit; an order which protects and promotes the proclamation of the Word in every aspect of the life of the church. However, to my knowledge, a study about the impact of a collegialistic concept of church on South African churches and society has not yet been conducted. It is, however, doubtful if the results would differ from research conducted in Europe, as mentioned above in this article.

### Identity

The paragraph above boils down to the question of church identity. What is the identity of the church according to Collegialism and reformed church polity, respectively? What are the consequences of Collegialism for the church? Collegialism’s answer to the question of the government of the church, as indicated above, is fundamentally different from the perspective of reformed church polity. In essence a collegialistic concept of church dismantled the church of its identity as the body of Christ, the building of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the flock of Christ with Christ as the true Shepherd, et cetera, to a mere human society equal to all other human societies in the community. The church is, in fact, not seen any more as an assembly of believers. The synod and its structures rather become the church and the representatives of the church.

A consequence is that the believers do not see themselves as the church of Christ and do not experience the impact of the fundamental change as a result of the rebirth. In this system, believers do not come into their own right as the church, but they find a place alongside the church which is mainly indicated as the synod with its own prevailing structure. The church has lost its vitality in favour of an ahistorical and abstract view of the church, typical of the high conjuncture of Collegialism in the 19th century. For the church government, the implications are equally distorting. Christ’s government, through the Word, becomes church government by the synod as the sole interpreter of the Word and legislative authority of the church.

### Office-bearers

A fundamental presupposition of reformed church polity is that the proclamation of the Word precedes the church. This point can also be illuminated from a different perspective: the proclamation of the kingdom of God constitutes the church.
The proclamation is also the key to the edification of the believers. How it finds expression in the church, is the focus of this paragraph.

**Charisma and diakonia**

To fulfil the ministry of the proclamation of the Word, Christ gives charisminata in the church. These gifts become visible from the reformed perspective in the church as diakonien (cf. Floor 1976:31; Ridderbos 1966:495). From the reformed perspective, charismata and diakonien are the flipsides of the same coin. To activate the gifts in the church, Christ calls these people to the service. The important point is that the gifts are activated in the church through the calling by the Lord. It is indicative of the way Christ runs his government over the church. No one except Christ has the authority to govern over his church, because the one who bought the church with his blood also has the authority to determine the way in which the church should be governed. The government of the church, by the preaching of the word, is first of all declared to be no human contrivance, but a most sacred Ordinance of Christ’ (Pringle 1854:278). From the reformed perspective Christ revealed in his gift of the officers in the congregation a permanent structure through the centuries towards the edification of the church.

**Competence and capability**

In this context it is useful to make a clear distinction between the terms competence and capability, irrespective of the fact that they are sometimes used as interchangeable. Competence here refers to the authority someone has to execute a specific task. Capability on the other hand is not indicative of the authority someone has, but rather to the ability that a person has to execute a specific task. (Smit 2001:28). In this paragraph the focus is on the specific offices that Christ gives in his church for its edification and ongoing existence in this life. There are of course more and different gifts. Every believer and every congregation may profess to the latter, but the focus is here on the former. In the tradition of Dordrecht 1618/1619, these gifts are those of the ministers, elders, deacons, and doctors or professors in theology (CO 2).

This distinction between competence (authority) and capability (ability) finds expression in the gift, the activation of the gift and the exercise of the gift in the church. The gifts Christ infers upon a person provides for the ability to execute a specific task. Christ enables a person through the calling to execute the gifts. If someone, for example at face value has the capability to minister the Word, it does not mean that he or she at the same time has the authority to fulfil the formal ministry of the Word (Smit 2001:28). The authority to exercise the ministry is obtained through the calling from Christ. The calling therefore grants the competence to ministers to exercise their gifts as full-time ministers in the service of Christ. When the person is ordained in the ministry the internal calling is confirmed by the external calling. Competence and capability meet in the calling and ordination of a minister. After ordination ministers have the competence to exercise their different capabilities (Smit 2001:28).

**Edification**

Since the Reformation, the reformed view is that office-bearers are responsible for the edification of the believers through the proclamation of the Word. The reformed emphasis was always on the office and its meaning for church government. But that does not mean that the general priesthood of all believers is disregarded by reformed church polity. A perspective on the Church Order of Dordrecht (1619; Pont 1981) illustrates this point. The church order protects the rights of church members on the basis of the general priesthood of all believers. Yet, it also guards and protects the offices to fulfil their separate mandates (Smit 2017:116–118). The emphasis is, with regard to the offices, upon the proclamation of the Word in all circumstances to the edification of the believers. The government of the church, according to the New Testament, finds its execution and fulfilment in the proclamation (see Inst. 4.1.5, 4.1.6; 4.14.17).

The fact that the church has an institutionalised aspect is indicative of organisation in the church, that is a specific order of the church. Good administration is important for the well-being of the church. It may also be indicated as an aspect of the church for which the officers are responsible; yet, the latter is peripheral to the main task of the New Testament offices (cf. Van der Borgh 2000:484–485). The essence of the office remains the same throughout the centuries. The governance by the church offices cannot be separated from the proclamation of the Word. The latter is not determined by man. Scripture prescribes the content and mandate of the offices. It finds expression in the confessions, church order and applicable formularies. It may and should also be tested in the light of the revelation of Scripture. It may also be altered (CO 86). These documents do not constitute a canon beside Scripture. Yet, then one should attempt to rectify and better an insufficient or incorrect formulation of the scriptural revelation in these documents and not to favour the Zeitgeist’s promotion of the latest craze or every new hermeneutical or exegetical endeavour.

**From proclamation to management**

The contemporary idea of office-bearers seems not to reflect much of the New Testament perspective of a domestic service within the household. It rather relates to the collegialistic view of the church. Collegialism, in fact, sees the offices and applicable formularies. It may and should also be tested in the light of the revelation of Scripture. Yet, then one should attempt to rectify and better an insufficient or incorrect formulation of the scriptural revelation in these documents and not to favour the Zeitgeist’s promotion of the latest craze or every new hermeneutical or exegetical endeavour.

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so-called congregational, or even professional leaders (see Van de Beek 2012:222–224). Much emphasis is also put on the importance of the church leadership or the congregational leadership. The latter is, however, indicative of the problem. The church leaders’ mandate rather gives the impression of an independent contractor, an employee of the congregation, or even a self-equipped leader of the congregation. These leaders are responsible for guiding the congregation to achieve its goals (cf. Van de Beek 2012:222–224). In this construct of the office, the government of the church through the proclamation of the Word, is separated from the office-bearers; this implies that they are stripped of their main duty to proclaim the Word in every possible situation as called servants of the Lord.

From ministerium to magisterium

Readers of literature in this field of research are by recrudescence reminded that the leadership as referred to above, should in fact be a service to the congregation. It is a form of leadership which tries to define itself in comparison with service. It is described as leadership which is like service.

It seems that the essence of the reformed perspective on the office is lost or is only of peripheral value in this context. The office is ministerium. The reason for this change in perspective is evident. It seems that the nature of the secular view of leadership, entailing inherent aspects of hierarchy irrespective of efforts to democratise the working-place, is not sufficiently considered in the church’s incorporation of these views within its internal practice (cf. Van de Beek 2012:223). The reformed perspective, however, rejected the Roman Catholic Church’s idea of a magisterium in the church and replaced it with the fundamentally different, in fact, opposite concept of ministerium. This also applies to the collegialistic view of church government where the synod acts as the church, the highest authority not functioning as a major meeting of local churches, but as an independent structure next to the local churches (congregations) with the authority to exercise a governance of the church through the proclamation of the Word, is separated from the office-bearers; this implies that they are stripped of their main duty to proclaim the Word in every possible situation as called servants of the Lord.

The local church and the community of churches

The Dutch church politist H. Bouwman (1970:432), describes the authority of the sending of office-bearers by the local church as a primordial principle of reformed church polity.

The primordial principle

For the reformed mind the local church is ecclesia completa. This emphasis is based on the New Testament revelation of the universal and local church. The one universal church of Christ finds expression in this dispensation in the local church. The local church is the universal church in a specific place. Christ gives all the necessary gifts in a local church to function within the right context. Yet, in any formalised church polity system, terms and concepts have an exegetically-dogmatical content which is also historically accepted and determined. It also applies to the concept of office in use by reformed church polity since the 16th century Reformation. The reformed concept of office is not likely to be seen as interchangeable with the contemporary concept of leadership as it was developed by corporate business and the management sciences to fulfil a specific role in that context.
The Word and not synod

A closer look at the section of the Church Order of Dordrecht (1619; Pont 1981) which regulates the different church meetings, gives the perspective that the emphasis of the church order is on the place and function of the Word of God throughout the meeting. The devotions at the beginning of the meeting also have the character of penitence: an opportunity for humiliation before God with the outspoken request that he should guide the meeting through his Word and Spirit; a request that all the points on the agenda should be decided upon in the light of the Word (CO 32; Jansen 1952:152–155). It is a confession that God governs his church, but also an acceptance of the sinful reality we are subjected to. After the meeting adjourns, only the decisions (notes) of the meeting are left. These decisions have a binding effect. However, the binding effect of the decisions, taken by a church meeting, is not vested in an assumed independent ‘authority’ of the meeting. For the reformed mind, the question is not whether the synod or the local church has the most authority. All church meetings have the same or equal authority, because different church meetings, in principle, have the same responsibility. Church meetings should decide the points on the agenda in the light of the Word of God. The binding effect of church decisions therefore lies in the Word and not in a person, a church structure or a moderamen of the church. And because humans (synods) are fallible, reformed church polity provides the possibility to re-evaluate and to correct these decisions in the light of the Word if necessary. It is not the synod that should have the last say on a matter, but the Word of God (CO 31; 46).

Structural secularisation

The church-congregation construction can be described as so-called ‘structural secularisation’ (Van ’t Spijker 1990a: 311–312). It is an indication that the so-called ‘church’ and ‘congregation’ are, in fact, now in a position of mutual opposition in the sense that either the church or the congregation should have the decisive authority. But the emphasis is now on the congregation and not on the church as in previous centuries.

The congregation has been rediscovered over past decades as the so-called ‘true’ body of Christ. The background of this development can be found in the collegialistic concept of church where the church is viewed as the synod; the church is the aggregate of the different congregations. Collegialism expresses an a-historical and abstract approach to the church, typical of the 18th and 19th centuries’ rationalism. It therefore does not come as a surprise that churches in the reformed tradition throughout the Western world, which have a more collegialistic approach to church government, have for past decades experienced a reaction against it or this and the related form of church government. A problem, however, is that the reaction against Collegialism did not bring a new evaluation of the New Testament’s concept of church. Instead, the focus shifted from the synod to the congregation, from the one entity to the other. The congregation is an island in society, a nest for the believers over and against the community in which they live (Van de Beek 2012:132ff.). There is not much of a rediscovery of the New Testament’s concept of church represented in this approach. The focus shifts rather from the bigger structure (the synod) to the now more independent and smaller structure – the congregation. The indication of a congregationalist approach is undeniable in this development (cf. Biesterveld & Kuyper 1905:XII-XV).

This development creates a contradiction in the reformed concept of church. For the reformed tradition, a congregational concept of church has, since its presuppositions, been associated with revolutionist and individualistic ideas, originally promoted by the likes of Jean Baptist de Morély and his followers in the late 16th century in France. The reformed synods in France were aware from the outset of the imminent danger which a Congregationalist concept of church might bring about for the reformed churches. The individualistic and democratic tendencies in Congregationalist church government were rejected. However, the real impact of the democratic thinking grew in influence with the development of the New World during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially because of the democratisation of eschatology. (Holstun 1987; Van ’t Spijker 2001:270). The influence from the USA on theology in South Africa may, in our context, not be underestimated. It also provides a reason for the tendency in South Africa towards a more congregationalist approach to church and church government (See e.g. the approach to church in different studies in “Gemeentebou” at the different theological faculties and the influence of Richard R. Osmer’s book, Practical Theology, in South Africa). Most of the time it is not the result of good exegesis and new insights from the confessions which underscore these developments; it seems rather to be a submission to the immeasurable amounts of Practical Theology, and of indifferent and theological pragmatic literature from the United States which seems to overwhelm the ecclesiological discussion in South Africa.

Like Collegialism, congregationalism finds its origins in a later era with the influence of rationalism, humanism, democracy and other developments since the 16th century Reformation. A point of correlation between these systems is the emphasis on a human contribution to the establishment of church and the democratic nature of church government which is, however, differently motivated within the different systems. In both instances church government finds its embodiment in a point of orientation alongside Scripture. It seems that we have, in our context, two secularised concepts of church, competing for the central spot in ecclesiology.

Companies and societies

According to the above-mentioned view of the church, it is not only comparable to a company or society, but it is a society. With regard to the internal order of the church, the same trend is visible. The church order is viewed as the equivalent of the constitution of a society or the articles of association of corporate business, and like the internal order
of corporate business, the order of the church now fluctuates between tendencies in favour of centralisation or the opposite – the decentralisation of the workplace. Nowadays, the centralised approach of Collegialism has become unpopular and there are initiatives to replace it with a decentralised view of the church. The focus is not so much on the church as the overall structure and managing body of the congregations, but on the congregation as the body of Christ – the so-called true ecclesia (see Dreyer 2016).

### Practice

The origin, nature and method of the above-mentioned church government are fundamentally different from that of the spiritual government. The congregation should formulate a vision and a mission to make the aims of the congregation tangible and measurable. One of these aims, if not the all-embracing purpose of the congregation, is to be a missional community in its context. The congregation can therefore not escape the impact which the application of key-corporate management-principles has on its identity. It seems as if these main features of the congregation have become its total concern and an aim of self-actualisation which may rather relate to a realised eschatology than the reformed perspective thereof. The aim of corporate business is its self-realisation in this context; even possibly allowing the congregation to become an aim unto itself. Therefore, the church stays captured in an institutionalised view without a new perspective on the vitality which the preaching of the Word brings to the church. The fundamental shift, which should be made, is away from the church as institution towards the kingdom of God. That entails a shift in our thinking: from the church as premises of our thinking and speaking towards the formal proclamation of the Word in our different contexts.

An example of this development may, to an extent, be the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA), the denomination of which I am a member. The RCSA is neither in its church polity nor congregationalistically-inclined nor congregationalistically-inclined. But it seems that the position is not static. Through history the pendulum swings between a more centralised approach of church and church government to an accentuation of the local churches which may be indicated as a more congregationalist approach to church. (The latter is indicative of church polity which emphasises the congregation as autonomous.) For the first time in the history of the RCSA it seems that there is simultaneously a strong demand towards a centralisation of church and church government as well as an insistence on a more congregationalist approach to church and church government. It reflects the paradoxical nature of church in our times: there is an appeal on the church to loosen the bond between the so-called church and the congregations, to enable the congregations to be the true body of Christ in its context without leaving the church as institution (Dreyer 2016). The latter is an anomaly within the RCSA, because the church order does not provide for either of these forms of church government; yet, the reformed concept of church with the focus on the local church and the expression of the spiritual bond between the churches in minor and major church meetings remains (Du Plooy 1982).

### Rediscovering the mystery of church

These developments in the reformed concept of church and church polity do not bring us any further in our understanding of the secret of the congregation: life with Christ under the authority of the Word but through the Spirit, always in his presence, while being edified with the eye on the eschatological return of the Lord (Van ’t Spijker 1990b:511–514). However, it seems that the emphasis in our time has shifted. The focus is rather on an understanding of what we, as church, should do and an explanation thereof with some (even important) reference to Christ as Lord.

Reformed churches in the broader spectrum in South Africa may benefit from a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between the widely accepted collegialistic concept of church and the relationship between Scripture, church and church government. The church is prominent in different theological disciplines, for example New Testament, Dogmatics, Church History, Church Polity and Practical Theology. All these fields should be engaged to evaluate and discuss a repositioning of church and church government in our context. This should lead to a theological discussion which supersedes the boundaries of church communities to the benefit of the church and church polity.

### Church and state

John Calvin indicated in the fourth book of his Institutes (4.20.1) of the Christian Religion that there is a vast difference between religious and civil government. These two forms of government should, according to Calvin, not be confused or mingled. The aim of the religious government is the honour of God, the redemption of the sinner and the edification of the congregation.

### A community and government: sui generis

This unique form of government is indicated by the church and by some jurisdictions as a ius sui generis [in its own class]. (Smit 2006; Van Coller 2013b:210). An important point, however, is that the church does not function as an opposing entity over and against the state government. In fact, the church finds its way within the boundaries of the state, and the church is bound by the legislation of the state. It does, however, not mean that every law applies to the church as a religious institution as would be the case with other institutions. Some churches, for example do not define a minister in terms of labour legislation as an employee of the church and the church council as a non-employer. These churches see the relationship not even as contractual by nature, but determined by exegetic-

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3. See on the one hand the decision of the Synod (Acta 2015:21.1) about the creation of a so-called ‘special’ Synod (Acta 2016) and the stream of post-graduate studies that emphasise the importance of the local church on the other hand (cf. Schalekamp 2005:1–54).
The legal instruments, as mentioned above, however also provide a definition, based on a secular view of church, it should not, in this context be considered as an evaluation of the church’s perception of its self-definition – at least within the church-state context and the way it is communicated to the state legislature, but also in the judiciary.

The collegalist view of the church in South Africa described in this article as in Europe, may in my opinion have been the single most important contributor to the decline of the reformed ecclesiology of our time.

Concluding remarks

From the reasons for the decline of church polity in South Africa, as indicated above, I want to conclude with three important remarks:

- It may be valuable to initiate the project with the specific aim to establish what influence of Collegialism in South Africa was or has been with regard to the established concept of church and its consequences at the beginning of the 21st century in different areas of society.
- It is imperative for reformed churches and reformed church polity, within the broader framework of reformed theology, to initiate a discussion at the beginning of the 21st century between the different theological disciplines to evaluate and reconsider the phenomenon ‘church’ and its meaning in our context.
- A discussion, which may even precede the above-mentioned, is to determine what is still considered to be a reformed concept of church and its validity at the beginning of the 21st century.

From this proposed critical re-evaluation of the church and its polity, as indicated in this article, a new impetus for the understanding of the church and its mission in our time may be found. Yet, without the latter, the contemporary diligence for the mission of the church may become, as it was the case throughout the previous century, (which, at the beginning of the 1900s, was indicated as the century of the church’s mission throughout the world), one of dissolution for many believers – even for those at the forefront of these initiatives. All of these initiatives are founded upon the concept of church and church polity – it calls for a re-evaluation of premises about the church and church polity to benefit the expansion and the edification of church.

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