

# The decline of reformed church polity in South Africa



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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.; Sillevs 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 politists<sup>1</sup> 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 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 imminent perspective

1. In 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 'politics', et cetera.

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(cf. Smit 2008:227ff.). It is regrettable, because it then appears to be more ideologically inspired than argued on the basis of good rational church politic arguments.

(3) Within the field of reformed theology the accusation is made that church polity makes use of an 'encrusted' use of Scripture (Celliers & Strauss 2004). The accusation is that reformed church polity still makes use of a 16th-century view and application of Scripture without consideration of developments in some of the other theological disciplines, especially with regard to the Old and New Testament, and the development of Practical Theology since about the middle of the previous century (Celliers & Strauss 2004). Church polity did not, according to the accusation, keep up with these developments and therefore, as theological science, lacks actuality and relevance within the intradisciplinary theological discussion. However, the authors do not account for the question whether these developments are part and parcel of the framework of the classical reformed thought-structure of the 16th-century Reformation, or whether it finds its origin, like many contemporary views of Practical Theology rather in the legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). It may even be a question of opposing paradigms within contemporary theology: Are the developments within the theological sciences, which the authors refer to, indicative of reformed theology or compatible with the latter, or does church polity indeed adhere to an encrusted use of Scripture which is related to the 16th century?

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 synodical structures, executive committees and permanent structures are a witness thereof. Yet, it is in stark contrast 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.

## Christ government

Churches with a collegialistic structure today have adopted the view of the kingship of Christ over his church more prominently than before. Christ is viewed as the only King of the church and the sole governor of the church as the position in reformed church polity has been since its development in Geneva and France.<sup>2</sup> This development does, however, not indicate a fundamental breakthrough in Collegialism's practice of church government. The doctrine of the kingship of Christ over his church and the expression thereof in the life of the church, however, remains problematic within Collegialism.

## Church and church government

Underlying the concept of *church government*, there is a specific concept of *church*. The nature of the church determines, in this sense, the essential aspects needed for the government of the specific community. It takes nothing away from the reformed perspective that the concept of *church* and *church government* are determined by Scripture. A scriptural concept of *church* does not bring church government in conflict with the nature of the church, but aligns it with the scriptural view of church government. In essence, it indicates a form of government via the proclamation of the Word. For the reformed mind the church is a creation of the proclaimed Word (*creatura verbi*) (cf. Smit 2017:101–121). The latter is also the key to the understanding of Christ's kingship over his church. The Christ government finds expression through Word and Spirit, and the extraordinary offices. The more the Spirit fulfils us and acts within ourselves (*in nobis*), the more we become focused on the exalted Lord outside ourselves (*extra nos*) on the right hand of God (see Van 't Spijker 1991:114–132). The latter is decisive.

Christ fulfils his government in us through the Holy Spirit. The latter links up with a second decisive aspect of reformed church polity, namely that the Spirit does not become detached from the Word. The Spirit works through the Word. Word and Spirit cannot be separated. The remarkable point is the high esteem in which God holds us so as to include people through Christ in his service (*Inst.* 4.3.1). Yet, Christ simultaneously never transfers his authority to an individual (a monarch), a small group of elite (oligarchy), a structure (synod) or to a congregation (democracy). The form of government is, in its invisible form, strictly monarchic and in its visible form aristocratic-presbyterial. (Bavinck 1930:371). The authority of the ministry is vested in the proclamation of the Word by called office-bearers (see Van der Borgh 2000:484–485).

The collegialist concept of *church* and *church government* comes from a vastly different context. It is the context where

2. To define *reformed* or *reformed church polity* are sometimes controversial. Zurich, under the guidance of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) should, for example, also be indicated as a centre of reformed theology and church polity during the 16th century. However, I refer in this article to the development of reformed church polity in Geneva under the leadership of John Calvin (1509–1564), its development in France (especially during the time of the different reformed French Synods), where Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and Antoine de la Roche Chandieu (1534–1591) played an important part in the establishment of reformed church polity. It then developed and continued in the Netherlands, with inter alia the contributions of Gijbertus Voetius (1589–1676) in his *Politica ecclesiastica* (1663–1676).

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 *Bönnener 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 supernaturalism. 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 Regiment 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 a-historical 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 *charismata* in the church. These gifts become visible from the reformed perspective in the church as *diakoniae* (cf. Floor 1976:31; Ridderbos 1966:495). From the reformed perspective, *charismata* and *diakoniae* are the flip sides 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 exegetic 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 in accordance with the collegialistic view of church as a creation of man and they are ultimately held responsible to the church. Office-bearers are elected on the basis of a free and democratic election in the church and function in principle as mandatories of the church. The point of orientation for church and church government is a mere human endeavour. As mentioned above a favourite point of orientation for church government from the collegialistic point of view in contemporary church is corporate business and the management sciences. The impact of this approach to the church becomes clear in the concept of the office promoted in churches. Nowadays, congregations are at the mercy of the

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 power in the name of and over the local churches. It is incompatible with reformed church polity. Christ is the sole governor of his church and he does not transfer any authority to the offices to exercise a *magisterium* in his church. The *magisterium* in the church is exercised by the Lord. The introduction of a contemporary concept of *leadership* in the church cannot be softened by the creation of an adjusted view of the office where *ministerium* is used to soften the reality of a new-found human *magisterium* which implies an insertion of the execution of human authority by the specific offices in the church.

## Hierarchy

The question is posed as to whether there still is a comprehension of and a conviction to adhere to the reformed presupposition that any form of hierarchy in the church is irreconcilable with the anti-hierarchical principle of reformed church polity. The latter entails that Christ is the only King and the sole governor of his church through the Word and

the Spirit. Ministers are servants of the Word and not leaders of an organisation which should, in the first place, help the organisation to fulfil its vision according to a specific mission statement. Being church in the light of the Sermon on the Mount, to take one example from Scripture, is not about the so-called 'ticking' off of boxes to fulfil the purpose of the church. Being church is an expression of a comprehensive change of the believers' hearts which is indicative of a new form of existence as citizens of the kingdom of God. To be church, Christ gives the offices to edify his church so that the task within church and society may be fulfilled. It differs in its very nature from the leadership concept of *corporate business*. 'Leadership' has a hierarchical aspect in its very essence. The church office, however, has much more in common with the care of a father towards his children which is dominated by the father's love towards his children (cf. Van de Beek 2012:224).

This observation does not have the demonising of the terms *leadership* or *leader(s)* at aim. The latter has its place and function within the right context. Yet, in any formalised church polity system, terms and concepts have an exegetic-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 local church and the community of churches

The Dutch church politician 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 be church. In the contemporary idiom the reformed focus is on the congregations. It does, however, not mean that one local church is the only expression of the body of Christ. There are many local churches which are a true expression of the church. These local churches recognise one another on the basis of the same confession as true churches and live in a specific relationship with one another. This relationship does not find expression in a formalised structure of churches, but in minor and major meetings. These different meetings gather around a specific agenda. When the agenda has run its course, the meeting disperses without creating or leaving a formalised structure behind. Church community is not a matter of formalised church structures, but the expression and experience of the spiritual bond which exists between local churches.



## 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 and church government collegialistically-orientated 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 judiciaries 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-

<sup>3</sup>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).



dogmatical presuppositions. It is a position *sui generis*. The labour law of the state should therefore not be applied to the position of a minister in these churches.

Furthermore, there may, for example be a valid expectation that the state and state institutions would provide a context of religious neutrality or impartiality for citizens. The same cannot be expected from the church. The church cannot, according to its nature, be religiously neutral or impartial and it should not be expected from the church. In South Africa, it also is not the *de facto* or *de jure* position of the church. The South African Constitution (1996), in principle, provides the space for the church to advance itself according to its self-understanding and the fulfilment of its mandate in responsibility. In that context the church may expect to be adjudicated with objectivity according to its nature. 'Where neutrality assumes the disengagement of feeling, objectivity switches on the desire to be even-handed, despite one's predilections' (Venter 2015:238ff.).

## Church and state

It is a fundamental aspect of religious freedom and even so of the separation of church and state, the latter being presumed in the South African Constitution (1996), that the church has the right to define itself and its institutions (Smit 2006). The related and even more important point is that neither the state nor the independent judiciary may act as the last and absolute authority to administer justice in the church. (Gildenhuis 2001; cf. Venter 2015:172). The legislator may create certain boundaries for the church and other religious organisations, but may not interfere in the internal administration of order and justice of the churches. (Gildenhuis 2001; cf. van Coller 2013a:71–106). The judiciary may, however, revise church decisions mainly on the basis of an evaluation, if the church's actions should contravene the internal order. The application of the rules of natural justice, in this order, may also be taken into account (cf. Van Coller 2013a:71–106). For the church (at least in South Africa), the law of the state should, in this context, be considered as positive towards the church. This, though, inherently contains a danger for the church as will be explained in the next paragraph.

## Protected as presented

The constitutional state protects the church in the self-definition that it provides. Neither the state nor the independent judiciary has any authority to question or alter the self-definition that the church provides. If the church provides a definition, based on a secular view of church, it remains the responsibility of the church to live with the consequences – in the church's life, but also for the relationship between the church and the state. The church may therefore be protected in a self-definition which resembles the principles and norms of the New Testament church. Yet, it is also possible that state law may protect the church within a self-defined state of secularisation. Both options are possible. The legal instruments, as mentioned above, however

important they are and may be in a democratic and plural society, provide protection for the church against state interference in internal church matters; yet, they should not, and in fact, cannot provide any security for the church against secularisation. If the church in the situation defines itself according to the perspective of collegialism, the assumption should be made that there will be no directive from state to reverse the position. This may call for a fundamental re-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 legislator, but also when necessary, to the judiciary.

The collegialistic 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 short remarks:

- It may be valuable to initiate the project with the specific aim to establish what the 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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