



# Reformed missionary work at Richmond (KZN): A historical analysis of its Dutch roots

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## Abstract

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*In this article the Dutch roots of Reformed missionary work, based at Richmond (KZN) since 1960 are analysed. The following three aspects were investigated: the church-historical background of Dutch missionary work in KwaZulu-Natal; the political context within which the work was undertaken, the relationship between the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika (GKSA) and the Dutch churches that sent missionaries to KwaZulu-Natal, the Netherlands Reformed Churches (Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken). The investigation undertaken in this article attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sometimes uneasy relationship between the GKSA and one of her missionary partners from abroad.*

## Opsomming

Gereformeerde sendingwerk te Richmond (KZN): 'n Historiese analise van die Nederlandse wortels daarvan

*In hierdie bydrae word die Nederlandse wortels van die Gereformeerde sendingwerk wat sedert 1960 te Richmond (KZN) gedoen word, ontleed. Die volgende aspekte sal ondersoek word: die kerkhistoriese agtergrond van hierdie sendingwerk wat vanuit Nederland geïnisieer is; die politieke konteks waarbinne die werk gedoen is; die verhouding tussen die Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Afrika (GKSA) en die Nederlandse sendende kerke, die Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken. Die ontleding van die verloop van die sendinggeskiedenis poog om 'n bydrae te lewer tot 'n beter begrip van die somtyds problematiese verhouding tussen die GKSA en een van haar oorsese sendinggenote*

## 1. Introduction

In 1959 missionary work in the Natal Midlands started with the arrival of the pioneer missionary, J. Vonkeman<sup>1</sup> in Richmond, a small country town situated between Pietermaritzburg and Ixopo. Till late in the 1980s Richmond was a thriving centre of agricultural activities, surrounded by black townships. Characteristic of Richmond is also the presence of a considerable Indian population, partly Muslim partly Hindu. Till the late 1980s the town council was dominated by different white constituencies of farmers, business people and civil servants. Since the early 1990s Richmond and its surrounding townships have suffered terribly under ongoing political violence between adherents of the Inkatha Freedom Party, the United Democratic Movement and the African National Congress. The violence was an obstacle to missionary work for more than a decade.

With Richmond as basis Vonkeman initially began the work at the mission post Enkumane, located in rural KwaZulu, the previous homeland. (Enkumane is at least one hour's drive from town.) The churches that have grown as a result of this work over the years, have been integrated into the church structures of the GKSA and form the classis Durban of the Midlands Synod.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning the Dutch sending churches and their missionaries have cooperated with the GKSA's General Deputies for Missionary Work. During this process especially the debate on the theological training of ministers for the emerging churches has consumed much energy from all parties involved (see Vonkeman, 1983; Breman, 1985; Wielenga, 2002). In this article it is contended that the cooperation between the GKSA and the work done by Dutch missionaries at Richmond have been complicated by a mutual lack of understanding of the church-historical background of the partners involved. A sound knowledge of the different backgrounds could have prevented the misunderstanding and even mistrust, that occasionally formed an obstacle in the missionary cooperation.

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1 Vonkeman was sent by the Reformed Church (Liberated – Vrijgemaakte Gereformeerde Kerken) of Kampen (Neth.). Since 1967 this church formed part of the federation of the Netherlands Reformed Churches as a result of conflict in the Reformed Churches (Liberated). For details of this conflict, see Kuiper & Bouwman (1969); Harinck & Te Velde (1994); Van den Brink & Van der Kwast (1992); Deddens & Te Velde (1994).

2 The classis consists of the congregations of KwaMashu, planted by the GKSA mission, Isandlwana, Munywana, Dindini and Kwandeni, planted by Dutch missionary work near Vryheid, Ndaleneni, Mid-Illovo, Elandskop, and Umlazi-Umbumbulu, planted by Dutch missionary work at Richmond.

## 2. The church-historical background of the Dutch missionary work

Two aspects of the church-historical background of the Dutch missionary work at Richmond (KZN) are discussed in this article. The interpretation of the Church Order of Dordt 1618-1619, as generally accepted by the VGK, has had a decisive influence on the history of Reformed missionary work at Richmond (KZN). The General Synod of these churches, held in Kampen (1951) has also played an influential role in the missionary history in KwaZulu Natal.

### 2.1 Principles of church polity

In 1951 the General Synod of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) assembled in Kampen (Bremner, 1985:43 ff). During the time the Synod was held the missionary work of the recently Liberated Churches (1944) was discussed. After long and heated debates, the decision was taken to repeal Article 52 of the Church Order of Dordt 1618-1619 (see Jansen, 1923:234 ff.). This Article determined the nature of the missionary work of the Reformed Churches<sup>3</sup> in foreign countries as had been reformulated at the GKN General Synod held at Utrecht in 1905. Based upon this Article in its previous version, the GKN General Synod held at Arnhem in 1902 had formulated general guidelines for missionary work (the *Zendingsorde*). These guidelines boiled down to a centralisation of all missionary work done within the federation of the GKN: General deputies for missionary work were responsible for the development and implementation of missionary policy, while local churches had no say, whatsoever, in the decision-making process leading to the sending out of a missionary. This practice created a distance between local churches and missionary work undertaken in foreign countries – a situation that proved to be detrimental to the development of a missionary consciousness in the local churches. This was against the intentions of the missionary policy decided upon at the Middelburg General Synod (1896) of the recently (1892) united GKN (see Griffioen, 1996; Vonkeman, 1997). At Middelburg, Synod decided the following:

- Local churches should be responsible for all missionary work done within the federation.

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3 The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) were formed in 1892 uniting the churches of the Secession (1834) and those of the *Doleantie* (1886).

- Local churches should be assisted in the implementation of missionary work by general deputies for missionary work with the aid of their specific missionary expertise and knowledge.

The autonomy of the local church was accepted as a basic polity principle by the churches of the Secession (1834) and the *Doleantie* (1886), a principle accepted during the struggle for the reformation of the established church of the Netherlands, the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* (see Deddens & Kamphuis, 1984; Rutgers, 1887). This principle did not, however, survive the ecclesiastical practice, as it developed during the 20th century. The centre of authority within the church federation gradually moved away from local churches towards broader ecclesiastical meetings.<sup>4</sup> For missionary work this practice implied that missionary work was done by deputies (*Deputatenzending*) with less and less local involvement.

The VGK were characterised by a strong anti-hierarchical sentiment (Van den Brink & Van der Kwast, 1992; Kuiper & Bouwman, 1969; Harinck & Te Velde, 1994; Deddens & Te Velde, 1994). The autonomy of the local church again became the cornerstone of church polity. This situation caused a change in the direction of missionary policy at the General Synod held at Kampen during 1951. It was decided to return to what was perceived as the pure, biblical ideal of the local church as a sending church with all its implications for policy development and implementation. The decision was taken to repeal Article 52 of the Church Order and to cancel the guidelines of the *Zendingsorde*. General deputies for missionary work were not regarded as necessary any more. Local churches received the freedom to start and organise their own foreign missionary work without taking into account the federal structures of the church. Missionary work was no longer a mandate to the church assembled in broader ecclesiastical meetings; it did no longer belong to the common task of the churches in the world. From 1951 onwards missionary matters were not debated anymore at the meetings of the church federation.<sup>5</sup> This anti-hierarchical sentiment was strengthened in the churches that originated from the

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4 The deposition of Dr. J.G. Geelkerken of Amsterdam by the General Synod of Assen (1926) against the explicit wishes of the church council of the local church is a case in point. (See Kuiper, 1972:273-306; also Harinck, 2001; Van Keulen, 2003:247-278 about the theological issues involved.)

5 From 1967 onwards the VGK have reorganised their missionary work completely. They have since tried to balance, on the one hand, the local church's responsibility towards missionary work, and on the other hand the responsibility of the church federation.

VGK in 1967 as a consequence of internal conflicts. In the newly formed NGK the rights of the local churches outbalanced their federal obligations.<sup>6</sup> The (later) NGK Kampen fully used the opportunity created by the 1951 VGK Synod decision to start her own foreign missionary work. After the 1967 split in the VGK it was beyond discussion: the NGK Kampen was regarded as the sending church with all the rights and obligations it entailed.

## 2.2 Implementation of the decisions of the Kampen General Synod of 1951

The sending out of a missionary and the beginning and implementation of missionary work in foreign countries required funds that were not available in the big local church of Kampen. From the beginning she was supported on a voluntarily basis by other local churches across the country – from the far north to the deep south, 40 congregations in total supported Kampen's missionary work – financially and spiritually. These supporting churches were informed and consulted about every detail of the missionary work in progress but they had no decision-making power. The church council of the NGK Kampen had the final say in all aspects of the work. The extent and nature of the missionary work was supervised on a daily basis by an advisory committee of volunteers, appointed by the church council (see Breman, 1985:12-16; Lagendijk, 1971:7-15). Till 2002 volunteers were chosen from the Kampen church; since then two committee members have been chosen from the supporting churches.<sup>7</sup>

The organisation of the missionary work undertaken in Natal reflects the church polity decisions taken in 1951 in the Netherlands. A result of these decisions was that each sending church, supported by assisting churches, has since run her own missionary work without much consultation with other sending churches in the same area (KwaZulu-Natal). The growth and development of the work in the missionary field necessitated, in stage after stage, a closer cooperation of the sending churches in the Netherlands. They (these churches) had to deal with analogous situations in a comparable context. The missionary praxis limited the possibilities of the

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6 An early exponent of this position was the former Richmond missionary M.R. van den Berg (1967). A redress of this balance seems likely, given the fact that general deputies for diaconal matters have been appointed.

7 In the Netherlands the Dutch missionary work undertaken in Nqutu was organised differently (see Breman, 1985:22-47).

ecclesiastical theory as developed in the Netherlands in a very particular church-historical situation (see Vonkeman, 1997:99-100).

One of the setbacks of the 1951 decision was that local churches had to develop and implement their policy on missionary work without the expertise and knowledge that had previously been made available by the General Deputies for Missionary Work. No help could be expected from the church federation, if the need should arise. Missionary work did no longer form part of their agendas. Existing knowledge and expertise within the federation were not collected and made available at a location accessible to all in search for help. At a much later stage of the missionary work one began to understand the loss the sending churches had suffered as a consequence of the 1951 decision. The expertise, needed for doing missionary work in Third-World contexts, did not exist within the NGK federation anymore. Sending churches were dependent on their missionaries' advice and input for the development and implementation of missionary policy. In the early stages of missionary history this was not perceived as a problem; it, however, proved to be a real problem during the later stages. Then the NGK Kampen asked and received expert advice from the VGK missionary institute in Zwolle – the Intercultural Reformed Theological Training (IRTT) – in order to find a way out of the impasse in which her missionary work had found itself.<sup>8</sup> The absence of ecclesiastical fellowship between the two denominations did not prevent the IRTT to help with the missionary work of the NGK Kampen in a crucial moment of its history.

### 3. The political context of South Africa in the 1960s

During this period of time the following was a crucial question: Why try to do missionary work in South Africa, where apartheid was already established in the 1960s (Wielenga, 1990; Giliomee, 2003) when Vonkeman began his work? From a later perspective critical questions could be raised in this regard. During the 1950s, when the VGK Kampen in the Netherlands started to think about missionary work, these critical questions had not yet been formulated.<sup>9</sup> There was not yet a political awareness of what was going on in South

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8 Developing a strategy for missionary work, the Kampen mission was internally divided about the future relationship between the NGK Kampen and the newly established local churches in southern KwaZulu-Natal.

9 See Schutte (1986) for a useful discussion of the relationship between the Dutch and the Afrikaner.

Africa. One of the first critical publications on apartheid was written by J.J. Buskes (1955).<sup>10</sup> The well-known reformed missiologist, J.H. Bavinck, engaged himself in a sympathetic-critical dialogue with the GKSA in the mid-1950s (see Van den Berg, 1973).<sup>11</sup> The chronicler of the early history of the missionary work conducted at Richmond, Joh. Lagendijk, did not mention the political situation of South Africa at all. South Africa as field to do missionary work became considered because of ecclesiastical ties the Kampen church had with a Dutch immigrant church in Pretoria.<sup>12</sup> No one realised at that time that there could be political and moral problems with the choice of South Africa as a field to do missionary work. Nevertheless, this choice had its impact on the missionary work done at Richmond (KZN). The political context of the missionary work can thus not be omitted from the discussions in this article. Attention is therefore paid to the early developments of the praxis of apartheid in relation to the missionary work undertaken at Richmond (KZN).

### 3.1 The apartheid praxis and missionary work<sup>13</sup>

Having won the 1948 national elections the National Party instituted two important commissions to investigate the practicalities of implementing grand apartheid: the Eiselen Commission (Giliomee,

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10 Buskes was not trusted within orthodox-reformed circles as a supporter of the “doorbraak”, the movement of Christians after 1945 to join the socialist party (SDAP), and theologically justified with the help of K. Barth. He also supported J.G. Geelkerken in the 1926 conflict in the GKN in his interpretation of Genesis 1-3. (About Buskes, see De Jongh, 1998.)

11 Also J.H. Bavinck was not trusted theologically and confessionally within the VGK because of his strong anti-Liberated stance in the church struggle from 1936 onwards – a church struggle that led to the Liberation (*Vrijmaking*) in 1944. See Visser (1997:274-282) on Bavinck and apartheid, and on the *Vrijmaking* (Visser, 1997:65-70).

Bavinck's denomination, the GKN, sharply criticizing the GKSA's stance on apartheid (see Verkuy, 1969), was at the same time in doctrinal and confessional decline according to the view of the VGK and NGK, with as consequence that the majority of these two denominations distanced itself from the GKN social-ethical teachings as well. A more politically conservative trend could be detected in the VGK and NGK of that period. In 1976 the GKSA ceased the ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN because of its perceived doctrinal and confessional decline; but in other respects the GKN would have done the same because of the GKSA's perceived condoning of the heresy of apartheid (see GKSA, 1976:242 ff.; 304; 313; 320; 586; 597).

12 The so-called Vrye Gereformeerde Kerke, in Pretoria with Dr. C. van der Waal as her minister.

13 See Wielenga (1990) for an assessment of this relationship.

2003:507-508) and the Tomlinson Commission (Giliomee, 2003: 515-519). Especially the Tomlinson Report of 1954 is of importance for understanding the missionary work undertaken at Richmond.<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson paid attention to the role that church and missionary work could play in establishing black national states within the boundaries of South Africa. He highlighted their role in civilising and christianising the black peoples of the new nation states. According to Tomlinson these mentioned processes would help these peoples to adapt to the new political dispensation. The creation of homelands and independent states produced a wealth of new fields for missionary work, especially in the rural areas where these new homelands and states were to be established. The National Party expected the Afrikaner churches to contribute to the success of the new dispensation by involving themselves in intensive missionary work. There was hope for a bright future for the greater South Africa, when and if the churches could succeed with their missionary work, i.e. to bring the black peoples into the Protestant-Christian camp. This "Christian" idealism in some government circles disappeared very quickly to make place for hard-nosed Realpolitik, aimed at the survival of the Afrikaner nation (Giliomee, 2003).

Against this background it is not surprising that the government controlled the movements of church and missionary work in homelands such as KwaZulu. Permission to start missionary work in homelands was given by the government to those churches that were officially registered in Pretoria with the ministry of Home Affairs. She expected from these churches a positive attitude towards her policy of grand apartheid. The Dutch immigrant church in Pretoria was not registered with Home Affairs and was not in the position to offer the Kampen church a field to conduct missionary work. At long last the GKSA offered the Dutch church one of her fields for missionary work in the rural areas of KwaZulu near Richmond.<sup>15</sup> Requested by government, the three mainline Afrikaner denominations formed a commission to proportionally divide the fields for missionary work made available to them by the Ministry for Bantu Affairs. A distribution of fields for missionary work between different denominations was an old missiological principle (Goheen, 2000:201-202): the so called comity-principle. The GKSA themselves worked in KwaMashu north of Durban. An agreement

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14 See Saayman (2001) on the relationship between this report and the DRC mission.

15 For the GKSA (Prof.) D.C.S. van der Merwe and (Prof.) V.E. d'Assonville conferred with J. Vonkeman as representative of the Kamper mission.

between the GKSA of Pietermaritzburg, representing the GKSA Deputies for General Missionary Work, and the church of Kampen was signed (see Breman, 1983:19-20). This agreement entailed that Dutch missionaries would honour the arrangements made by the GKSA with the government with regard to missionary work in homelands. The Dutch policy on missionary work had to be in accord with the GKSA's one. The ecclesiastical activities of the GKSA had not to be harmed as a result of the missionary work done in Richmond (KZN). In Kampen no one thought about the possible political concerns of the GKSA in this respect. In good faith the only awareness was that of theological-confessional concerns pertaining the planting and building up of young churches.

### 3.2 Reformed missionary work at Richmond and apartheid

In this section the attention is focused on three areas in which apartheid impacted on missionary work: charity or mission by deed; mission in poor, rural areas; demography and missionary work.

*Charity* formed an important part of missionary work in Richmond (KZN). Missionary work started and managed schools not only on farms – but also in forestries in the Richmond and Mid-Illovo areas. In the early 1970s a medical clinic was established at the mission station with a weekly mobile clinic offering services on farms and in remote rural areas. The missionaries realised, however willingly or not, the government set goals for the development of the homeland of KwaZulu. In line with an age-old tradition of Christian missionary work,<sup>16</sup> educational and medical work was started in and around Richmond. There is no doubt that many black children received quality education in mission-managed schools, which otherwise they would have missed out on. The clinic has done sterling work throughout the years in sometimes trying circumstances.<sup>17</sup> It remains, however, a fact that it was the white man's missionary work in a black homeland, created by a whites-only government to secure the survival of especially the Afrikaner people.<sup>18</sup> The danger that in

16 See Van Halsema (1995) for the pre-World War II GKN tradition. Contributions by G.J. Onvlee on medical mission (p. 125-154) and E. van Dijk on missionary work and education (pp. 155-226) are also included in Van Halsema (1995).

17 In 2003, the tribal authority of the area around the mission station Enkumane requested the clinic to intensify its mobile clinic work for the benefit of its remote areas.

18 In the Elandskop area, north of Pietermaritzburg, the Reformed Church was known as the *ibandla lamaBhunu*, the church of the Boers (*die kerk van die Boere*).

the end, from the 1980s onward, good work in itself could be identified with the apartheid ideals, could not entirely be avoided. It was understandable that in that same period normal tensions between missionaries and local leadership were understood in terms of apartheid.<sup>19</sup>

The missionary work initiated by the church of Kampen started and developed in a poor, backward and rural area of KwaZulu. In such areas the homelands were situated and fields to do missionary work were made available by the government to the Afrikaner churches. In these home lands white industry obtained its labour force (*trekarbeid*), while the economic prospects of these homelands themselves were indeed bleak (Giliomee, 2003:597-607). The Dutch-initiated missionary work, in search of a so-called virginal field to do missionary work, accepted what she was offered in the Richmond area without contemplating the consequences. In an economically disadvantaged area, churches were planted. Economically poor churches emerged which could not financially support themselves (Merle Davis, 1939; Verkuyl, 1978). During a later stage of the missionary history, these consequences of the decision to work in such an area would seriously trouble the relationship between the missionary work itself and the newly instituted churches.

Lastly, the areas, where the Reformed missionaries of Richmond (KZN) worked, have never been densely populated. As a result of the government's homeland policy the population, however, grew in the 1960s and 1970s. The homelands actually became the dumping grounds for the surplus black population of white South Africa. The apartheid legislation prohibited these people to move towards economically more prosperous areas (United Nations, 1973). This prohibition, however, ironically resulted in demographic stability. This position changed as soon as the apartheid legislation was dismantled towards the end of the 1980s and during the beginning of the 1990s. After 1994 the rural areas were rapidly losing people in search of work and better living conditions. The missionary work and effort had also to be focused on this trend of people moving away

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19 In 2001 an agreement was concluded between the NGK Kampen and the local churches in southern KwaZulu-Natal to organise and regulate the mutual relationship. In a preamble the participating churches confessed "that in the history of our relationship, because of our brokenness and sinfulness, we have not always lived up to the biblical norms of mutual respect and love. We apologize for that". This statement refers to, among other things, what has gone wrong from the side of the mission and its missionaries in their dealings with the local churches and their leadership in the pre-1994 dispensation.

from the country (*platteland*) towards urban centres. Demographically the mission station increasingly became marginalised; the centres of missionary work were more and more found at places where the population was concentrated – in cities and townships of the urban centres like Umlazi or Hammersdale. In general, the political violence of the 1990s, also in and around Richmond, has contributed much to a demographical change in the country, and the concentration of population in cities.

An indirect result of the apartheid policy was the emergence of a shift in focus in the the approach to missionary work: on the one hand missionaries and the local churches intensified their efforts among people forming the urban population in townships, informal settlements and cities; on the other hand, much work remained to be done among people forming the rural population found in the valleys of the Umkomaas river in the vicinity of the mission station. And often these people were forgotten and neglected by the reigning powers in those areas. The people involved in the Reformed missionary work did not timely perceive what the demise of apartheid would bring about in terms of the planting and building up of viable local churches in poor rural areas.

#### 4. Cooperation with the GKSA

From the very beginning the people involved in the Reformed missionary work at Richmond cooperated with the GKSA. This cooperation created quite a stir in the VGK during the 1950s (Lagendijk, 1971:31-34; Breman, 1985:20, 24-30). In this section of the article Dutch church history as background to the cooperation between the Dutch sending church of Kampen and the GKSA will thus be analysed.

##### 4.1 Dutch church history (1944)

In 1959 the congregation of Kampen sent out her first missionary in the expectation that the Vrye Gereformeerde Kerk of Pretoria would supply her with a field to do missionary work. As already indicated, this immigrant church was, however, not in a position to do so. As a consequence the young missionary, J. Vonkeman, was forced to search for a field to do missionary work all by himself. At the end of a long journey he met with GKSA representatives – D.C.S. van der Merwe and V.E. d'Assonville. They were instrumental in offering the congregation of Kampen the area near Richmond. Intensive consultations on the conditions of the cooperation resulted between the Kampen church council and the GKSA deputies for missionary

work. These conditions were stipulated in an official agreement. The GKSA did not offer the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in general an official agreement of cooperation in missionary work, as no ecclesiastical fellowship of any nature existed between the two dominations. Only the local church of Kampen received permission from the GKSA to work near Richmond under the authority of the GKSA. One condition in the agreement was very important for the churches in the Netherlands: it was not stipulated that the newly to-be-planted churches would eventually be incorporated into the church structures of the GKSA. The missionary work initiated by the congregation of Kampen was not forced to integrate the new churches into the existing classis Durban (iTheku) of the Midlands Synod of the GKSA. Later, in 1962, when the sending churches of Haarlem (Den Haag) and Leerdam concluded an agreement of cooperation with the GKSA, this condition was explicitly stipulated: new churches were to be integrated into the GKSA ecclesiastical structures. The question at this stage implied the following: What was at stake for the Dutch churches?

In 1944 the so-called Liberation (*Vrijmaking*) took place within the ranks of the GKN (1892). A long drawn-out and hotly debated doctrinal conflict (see Wentsel, 1995:320-329; 330-335; Veenhof, 1974:75-80), aggravated by deep-seated differences of opinion with regard to church polity and the interpretation of the Church Order of Dordt 1618-1619 (Veenhof, 1949), ended with the deposition of theological professors of the Kampen Theological Seminary, of elders and of deacons of local churches by decree of the Utrecht General Synod. As a consequence, a wide spectrum of Liberated people considered the so-called *synodocratic* GKN as false in terms of *Confessio Belgica* Articles 27-29. An ethical conflict erupted between the two church groups, which previously were united in one church federation. This conflict boiled down to a policy of non-cooperation with members of the so-called false church in the public domain of politics, trade unionism, education etc. Within the newly formed VGK all kinds of separate organisations were founded to accommodate the Christian calling in the public domain.<sup>20</sup> Churches overseas could only be recognised as sister churches, when and if

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20 See Smit (1994). Especially Smit's article "Kerk en organisatie. Motieven en achtergronden, een peiling" (Smit, 1994:35-104) with special attention to the ecclesiology of K. Schilder; and J. Huygen's *Gereformeerde organisaties in een veranderende cultuur* (pp. 105-170), more or less from the perspective of Reformational philosophy, is of importance in this regard.

they accepted the Liberated position in the 1944 conflict and rejected the *synodocratic* GKN as false churches.<sup>21</sup>

Before 1944 ecclesiastical fellowship existed between the GKN and the GKSA. The GKSA, however, refused to take sides in the 1944 conflict. The GKSA considered this conflict as an internal one (Bremen, 1985:51-78) in which they were not competent to make a decision. The GKSA continued to have ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN – with the result that the VGK rejected the GKSA as false churches – false by association, one could say. Cooperation with false churches, also on the level of missionary work, was regarded as impossible in the opinion of the majority of the VGK. This opinion of the majority had to be taken into account by the congregation of Kampen and the missionary work undertaken by them. The VGK and the congregation of Kampen could not accept that the new, emerging churches formed by the efforts of missionaries had to be integrated into the GKSA federal structures upon penalty of losing the financial and spiritual support of the majority of the assisting churches. It does not need much evidence to state that the GKSA was confused about the internal VGK discussions and arguments. They felt uneasy about this rigid and uncompromising approach to missionary matters at hand.<sup>22</sup>

## 4.2 Dutch church history and missionary work

It was a crucial point for the missionary work undertaken by the congregation of Kampen that she was not obliged to integrate the new missionary churches into the GKSA federal structures. This freedom was experienced as received as a gift from God and as a sign of His blessing. The new missionary churches themselves were allowed to make their own decision as to which church denomination to join; they could even form their own federation. Much later it was admitted in the Netherlands that this whole discussion had been rather theoretical as seen from a missiological and missionary perspective. The choice to join or even to form one's own federation

21 The 1976<sup>th</sup> decision of the National Synod of the GKSA to cancel the ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN opened the way for the VGK to make overtures to the GKSA in the 1980s. See also note 11.

22 Schilder's ecclesiology formed the background of the VGK approach. See the characterisation of K. Schilder's theology by S.A. Strauss (1982): "Alles of niks" (Everything or nothing). See also the assessment of Schilder's ecclesiology by J. van Genderen (1992:627 f.) Cf also Berkouwer (1970:61-93) on church and pluriformity. A GKSA theologian with an affinity for Schilder's ecclesiology is d'Assonville (1991:92-103). See his view of the true and the false church according to Articles 28-29 of the *Confessio Belgica*.

is a contextual one: The church affiliation of missionaries in the field determined the choice to a great extent. In fact, the whole discussion did not concern the missionary churches and their future, but rather the sending churches and their past. This was, however, only realised long after 1967 – after the splitting of the VGK in two parts: the major Liberated Reformed Churches (VGK) and the minor Netherlands Reformed Churches (NGK).

Knowledge of this recent period in church history helps to understand the mutual mistrust that existed between the GKSA and the NGK missionary activities in KwaZulu-Natal (Richmond and Nqutu).<sup>23</sup> This mistrust has hindered the discussions about theological training in the missionary churches (Wielenga, 2002). Between the GKSA and the newly formed NGK no official ecclesiastical fellowship existed. The 1982 National Synod of the GKSA could not make a final decision to accept the NGK's offer of such fellowship. This Synod had also to consider such an offer from the VGK. The VGK, however, demanded that the GKSA choose between them and the NGK: simultaneous fellowship with both of them was deemed impossible. The GKSA had not yet taken sides in the 1944 conflict; but they had ceased their ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKN because of the unchecked doctrinal liberalism in those churches. That was enough for the VGK to seek fellowship with the GKSA. A later Synod accepted ecclesiastical fellowship with the NGK. The relationship with these churches through their missionary work improved; new mission churches were integrated into the GKSA federal structures; the old agreement on missionary work between the sending churches and the GKSA was rewritten in 1982 (see Breman, 1985:40-42). The equality between the GKSA and the NGK with regard to missionary policy and praxis was now emphasized, as was the case between the GKSA and the CGKN. In the end it also resulted in growing cooperation in the field of

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23 The National Synod of 1976 declined a request from the NGK to establish ecclesiastical fellowship (*korrespondensie in engere sin*, see GKSA, 1976:396, 313 ff.), because *this Synod* was of the opinion that the GKSA did not know the NGK well enough to establish such a close relationship as that of a sister church. The fact that the same Synod allowed the local churches of Pietermaritzburg and Vryheid to autonomously treat the issue whether or not NGK missionaries could lead Sunday worship services, seems inconsistent. The conclusion that enough trust existed in the NGK sending churches with regard to doctrine, discipline and life to receive the NGK missionaries as worship leaders, was premature (GKSA, 1976:332-342). To isolate sending churches from their national church federation in this respect seems not to be based upon sound church polity principles.

theological education (Wielenga, 2002). The mutual mistrust gradually faded away.<sup>24</sup>

It must be noted that in the discussions between the GKSA and the NGK the (black) Synod Midlands did not play any role at all, even though she was very much involved. The incorporation of the Zulu Reformed Churches into classis Durban (iTheku), for instance, had to be accepted by this Synod; also the debates on theological training in these Zulu churches affected this Synod. But the churches, united in this Synod, were not involved in the discussions between the GKSA and the NGK. The only explanation for this omission is the paternalistic attitude both these churches displayed in their dealings with churches incorporated in Synod Midlands during this period of history – even if it can be said that these churches were not yet competent enough to handle the complicated matters of establishing ecclesiastical fellowship with churches from overseas at that stage of their development.

## 5. Epilogue

It would be worthwhile to discuss the progress the Reformed missionary work conducted at Richmond (KZN) has made over the years. Attention should then especially be given to the growth of mission churches into independent local churches. Also the *indaba* about theological training and missionary work, that consumed so much time and energy from all parties involved during the period 1963-1991, should be revisited in the light of the discussion in this present article. In conclusion, however, the aim of this article was to emphasize the importance of understanding the Dutch roots of the missionary activities at Richmond. Partners in missionary work should know one another before they embark on the enterprise of doing missionary work.

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24 The calling of the Rev. J.J.F. Kruger of the GKSA (Pinetown) by the NGK Leerdam to fill the vacancy of the Rev. R. Keesenberg in Nqutu, is proof of the much improved relationship between GKSA and NGK. Rev. Kruger was ordained in the NGK Leerdam in 2003.

## Abbreviations used for Dutch church denominations

CGKN	Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland
GKN	Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland
NGK	Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken
NHK	Nederlands Hervormde Kerk
VGKN	Vrijgemaakte Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland

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**Key concepts:**

Dutch church history, church polity and church order

Reformed missionary history in S.A.

South African history of apartheid and Reformed missionary work

**Kernbegrippe:**

Nederlandse kerkgeskiedenis, kerkreg en kerkorde

Nederlandse sendinggeskiedenis in S.A.

Suid-Afrikaanse apartheidsgeskiedenis en Gereformeerde sending-werk