



Rethinking church polity structure in pluralism for the 21st century: A case study of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA)

Rev. Dr. Humphreys Frackson Zgambo,
Unit for Reformational Theology and Development of the South African Society
Internal Box 147 NWU, Potchefstroom,
North West University, South Africa
Email: hzzgambo@gmail.com
Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10318>

Abstract

The rise of neo-radical nationalism, racism and ethnicity in many churches in the 21st century is an unexplainable reality. It is becoming difficult for churches to maintain their denominational identity to a high degree without adjusting its liturgy, traditions and church polity according to new context (Koffeman, 2014:164). In the process of reformation and restructuring to integrate pluralism and ethnic diversity, the church could begin with an understanding of the basic Scriptural doctrines, the implications of the doctrine, definitions and images of the church in the New Testament and apply them to contemporary life (Sanou, 2015:101). In the pluralistic approach, it will be a new identity of the church rooted in a shared faith, hope and fellowship with the living God. For the people of God, there must be a new theory of interdisciplinary concept for political, psychological, theological and spiritual reality.

Keywords: Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), racial separation, ethnicity, nationalism, pluralism, ethnic diversity, unification, contemporary church.

Introduction

The effects of globalization have given rise to neo-radical nationalism, racism and ethnicity in many churches in the 21st century. Many churches are confronted with the challenges of the presence of Christians from different countries of the world with a similar confessional background, but with different national roots, cultures and orientations. Spoelstra(1992:316-317) argues that the concepts of church polity and practical theologies must be replaced by a new diaconiology and ecclesiology. According to Haitjema (in Du Plooy, 1982:108ff), in Reformed Church perspective, church polity is the theological science, “sacred science of governing the visible church”, not merely by a chain of rules and regulations, but constitutes a theological science which studies the rules for the architecture of the church, a building for the people’s conduct and existence in the building (Coertzen, 1991:152-166). Heyns and Jonker(1974:16-30) describe church polity as a theological science, a science that studies fundamental principles of the subject as taught in Scripture (*ius constituendum*), history of the subject and order(*ius constitutum*) obtained in a specific church. The term “pluralism” (noun) means the existence of many different groups of people in one society for example people of different races, ethnicities, different political or religious beliefs: cultural pluralism (Hornby, 2015:1144). In this study, “pluralism” refers to the belief that it is possible and good for different ethnic groups to live together



in peace in one society (Hornby, 2015:1144). The study, therefore focuses on how ideas of “pluralism” and “ethnic diversity” could be integrated as an interdisciplinary key concept in the church polity structure of the contemporary church in the 21st century from Reformed Church perspective.

The study will use the case study of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA)’s experience in simple chronology as the primary paradigm for understanding the process of unification to achieve pluralism and ethnic diversity in the contemporary church. This is not to suggest that the ethnicity or segregation suffered by any other ethnic group is any less offensive or burdensome than what South Africans have experienced. There are important lessons for this focus. While the degree of segregation against individual groups in South African society has varied historically, South Africans since time immemorial have been among the most frequently targeted objects of racial segregation and have extremely suffered some of the most negative consequences (Prill, 2013:4ff). To assist in the research, the following structure is used: historical overview for segregation or separation in the churches in South Africa and the formation of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), the local church structures as ground level for church unity in the GKSA. Unification of black and white churches in the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) to achieve “pluralism” and “ethnic diversity”, excerpts from reports and resolutions of the 1994, 2006, 2007 and 2009 GKSA Conferences in South Africa. An analysis and evaluation on how “pluralism” and “ethnic diversity” could be integrated in the church polity structure of the contemporary church in the 21st century and lastly a summary and conclusion.

The case of separation in the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa

The origin of separation in the churches in South Africa

The Dutch Reformed Churches consists of the powerful Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) to which the majority of white South Africans belong and two smaller churches: Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK) and the *Gereformeerde Kerk*. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) was established in the Cape by the Dutch East India Company in 1652 and provided the religious center of the Dutch settler community in South Africa. During this time of Van Riebeeck, the decision was made, to meet labor needs, by importing West African and Malay slaves rather than white immigrants created the fatal identification of manual work with low status non-whites. This together with the visible cultural aliens of the numerically superior Bantu tribes encountered by whites as they fanned out into the interior, reinforced the convergence in the minds of the settlers of whiteness, Christianity, civilization against color, heathenism, inferiority. Up until 1857, people of mixed descent as well as those from African heritage were fully- fledged members of the DRC in South Africa (Modise in van Huffel 2013:119).

From 1824 to 1857, it withstood several attempts by frontier congregations to racially separate their white and non-white members. On 29 April 1829, the DRC Synod dealt with an enquiry of the Somerset West congregation on separate facilities and services for congregants of mixed descent. Starting from the position that this would be a violation of Christian principles, the church finally and decisively succumbed to popular pressure in 1857, when at a stormy NGK Synodic meeting the practice of racial separate ministration of white and non-white was sanctioned. At that infamous NGK DRC Synod in South Africa in 1857, separate services for “colored” members of the church were approved. This decision led to the division of Christians at the table of the Lord, on the basis of color, as a matter of practice and policy:

The Synod considers it desirable and according to the Holy Scripture that heathen members (non-white) be accepted and initiated into the congregations of the DRC



wherever it is possible; but where this measure, as a result of the weakness of some, would stand in the way of promoting the work of Christ among heathen people, then congregations set up among the heathen, or still to be set up, should enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or institution (Modise in van Huffel, 2013:119).

In 1881, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) was formally established as a separate church for people of mixed descent. Between 1881 and up to April 1994, four racially divided churches came into being namely: the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for Indians, Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for black Africans, Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for people of mixed descent such as colored's and the mother Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) for whites, existed independently of each other (Modise in van Huffel, 2013:119).

From the first decades following, the establishment of the racially segregated churches, the DRC kept the veto power over decisions made by the mission churches (Spoelstra, 1989:72f). At the beginning of the 20th century, the DRC established separate churches for black people in the different provinces. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in die Oranje Vrystaat (DRMC) was established in the Orange Free State in 1910, and the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Bantoekekerk in Suid – Afrika was established later. However, the Bantu Church of South Africa was established to cater for the needs of Black Africans in the two regional synods namely: the Cape Bantu Church constituted in 1951 and Natal Bantu Church constituted in 1952 respectively. These churches became part of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) in 1963 and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for people of mixed descent constituted earlier, on the basis of a church order which had been developed by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), while the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for the Indians was formed in 1968 (Modise in van Huffel, 2013:119).

In spite of the DRC Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk's involvement in the rise of the Gereformeerde Kerk, they were reluctant to support the most zealous and militant acts of the Afrikaner struggle (Villa-Vicencio, 1988:23). In 1914 during the time of Afrikaner rebellion, the Afrikaner churches were again thrust into crisis with members and leaders divided in their support for rebel and government causes. The Hervormde Kerk and Gereformeerde Kerk unlike the English-speaking churches such as the Church of England (Anglican Church), Methodists, and Presbyterians favored apartheid (Villa-Vicencio, 1988:23). When the militant Ossewabrandwag, engaged in anti-government activities and sabotage during World War 11, the Afrikaans churches were again divided. In South Africa, segregation was the word coined in early 20th century for the set of government policies and social practices which sought to regulate the relationship between white and black, colonizers and colonized (Beinart & Dubow, 1995:1). Segregation encompassed many different social relationships, more than panoply of restrictive legislation. Segregation refers as well to a composite ideology or state of practices seeking to legitimize social differences and economic inequality in every aspect of life. Many of the spatial and social elements of segregation such as the division of churches on the basis of color, exclusion of blacks from skilled work, exercise of supervisory functions over whites (Beinart & Dubow, 1995:4-5f).

The formation of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA)

In 1836 -1838 the Great Trek took place whereby thousands of burghers left the Cape with their families, belongings and trekked farther north into the unknown, to begin a new life as a free people under God, rejecting the tyrannical government of the British empire (Slabbert, 2004:6f). When the Dutch settlers trekked north, however, they did not get the blessing from their church. The Cape Synod of 1837 accused them of rebellion, therefore no official pastor was sent to minister to the church. Subsequently, an inevitable schism followed with the birth of the



Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk (NHK) known as the *volkskerk* of the people – (the people’s church), the Boer Republic in the Transvaal, for theological rather than political reasons. However, the ultra-Calvinist Gereformeerde Kerk was established several years later (Ritner, 1967:17-18).

In 1838, as a direct result of the Great Trek, two independent republics were founded under Afrikaner rule namely: the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The NG Kerk pastors serving people of the republics feared the Cape Church’s British rule subjection (Slabbert, 2004:6f). Consequently, Rev. Dirk van der Hoff, a proponent of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, was called as pastor, followed by the formation of the Nederduits Hervormde Kerk as the state church of Transvaal, South Africa in 1853. The NGK and the NHK were basically one in doctrine, liturgy, and church order. The churches only disagreed politically rather than doctrinally. Understandably in their context, it was unfortunately more of a politically motivated decision than a church reformation in the biblical sense of the word (Slabbert, 2004:6-7f). Another minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Rev P. Huet, was convinced that the failure to teach true Reformed doctrines from the pulpit caused the general discontent amongst the Doppers (Slabbert, 2004:6f). The following years were of great struggle concerning the confessions and church government. The Doppers wanted a church run according to the principles of the historic Synod of Dordt 1618/19.

In 1858, Meer’s S. J Kruger, P Venter, and J. J Venter, as leaders of the concerned members in the Nederduits Hervormde Kerk (NHK), tried to convince the NHK congregations to call a minister who did not sing the hymns from the Netherlands. The Nederduits Hervormde Kerk (NHK) of Rustenburg gave permission. Meanwhile, without knowing of each other, the Christelike Gereformeerde Kerken van die Nederland had decided to send Rev. Dirk Postma to investigate the situation in South Africa and to offer help to the Transvaal government through pastors and teachers. When the Transvaal government heard about it, they told the concerned members of Rustenburg that if Rev Postma fulfilled their demands, they could call him as their pastor (Spoelstra, 1989:72f). On January 12, 1859, fifteen of the “Gereformeerdes” wrote a letter to the “Algemene Kerkvergadering” (General Assembly) of the NHK to declare that they wanted to exist as a “Free Reformed Church” (Vrije Gereformeerde Kerk, Spoelstra, 1915:197 in Smit, 2013:132ff).

However, the Doppers held that unity could only be restored on the foundation of the doctrine, service and discipline as established by the Synod of Dordt 1618 and 1619. They said that they had done everything to prevent a religious split. They had gone that far and were not prepared to abandon then anymore the Reformed freedom and institution founded (Spoelstra, 1989:74f). Considering the undeniable absence of unity in spirit and faith, an organisational unity could no longer be considered. Spiritual unity was the absolute condition for ecclesiastical unity which was longed to achieve. Therefore, launching of an evangelical campaign for revival within the NGK coincided in 1859 with the secession of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA). However, the Reformed people were still waiting for true biblical reformation in the churches of South Africa. The name 'Dopper' is the unofficial nickname of members of the Gereformeerde Kerken van Suid-Afrika (GKSA). The origin of this name is uncertain, but the following suggestion seems most probable: Dorpeling ('town’s people'—'dorp' is the Afrikaans name for town (Slabbert, 2004:6f). The Doppers wanted to have a self-supporting church subjected to Christ alone. The Doppers worked on a solution for their problems with focus to local worship aimed to achieve a church polity where the authority of Scriptures alone would be upheld (Slabbert, 2004:6f).

Consequently, the main reasons for the schism and formation of the Gereformeerde Kerken van Suid-Afrika (GKSA) included: influence of theological liberalism of the church in the Netherlands,



inadequate preaching of the gospel, secular education, and state control of the church (Giliomee, 2003:178 in Smit, 2013:131ff). The Doppers were common farm and townsfolk who daily worshiped, lived, and worked under the instruction of the Statenvertaling and the Historic Reformed confessions on a daily basis, as established by the historic Synod of Dordt of 1618-19.

On 10th of February 1859, over 310 people enrolled in Rustenburg to be the Reformed congregation or church of the Zuid-Afri- kaansche Republiek. The Gereformeerde Kerken van Suid-Afrika (GKSA) elected first elders and deacons and called upon the Rev Dirk Postma of the CGK of the Netherlands to become their first resident pastor. The church notified the government that this new GKSA congregation fully corresponded in doctrine, service and discipline with the Reformed Church as determined by the early Synod of Dordrecht 1618 and 1619 (Spoelstra, 1989:72f).

The Doppers mostly lived on the outskirts of the Cape Colony, near the Orange River, on the frontiers. They vehemently rejected the 'new light' of theological liberalism and emotional Methodism. These were not revolutionary people, because for many years, even decades, during the first half of the 19th Century, they had prayed and worked for reformation in the churches (Spoelstra, 1989:62f). They were patient, but in the end they had to be obedient to God rather than to man, and were left with no other option than to reestablish in 1859 the Reformed church of 1652. Their whole battle against humanism and liberalism culminated in a battle to decide what should be sung in the churches to the glory of God. The battle for true doctrine and true church government was most clearly revealed in the battle between the Psalms and the evangelical hymns (Spoelstra, 1989:66f). In earlier years of 1814, the hymns were first introduced in the churches of South Africa without any testing or church decision. In 1833 in Cradock voices of protest were heard against the hymns, and the Ring of Graaff Reinet drew first blood when in a so-called 'Pastor's Letter' they accused the pro-Psalms believers of 'heresy,' that they 'pierce the body of Christ,' and that they were guilty of 'church schism,' because they did not want to sing the hymns. The Ring said that the hymns were acceptable, because the pastors had said (Spoelstra, 1989:72f).

In 1869, the Gereformeerde Kerken van Suid-Afrika (GKSA) opened the Theological School of the Reformed Churches in South Africa. The Theological School grew to become the "Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education" (PU for CHE), more or less on the model of the Free University of Amsterdam, which had been established by Abraham Kuyper (Spoelstra, 1989:71f). One of the most influential men in the history, not only of the GKSA, but of the Afrikaner people and the Reformed churches in South Africa, was Prof. Dr. JD Du Toit (1877-1953), better known by his nickname 'Totius.' Totius, who was very much influenced and formed by Kuyper, was the first Afrikaner to receive his doctorate at the Free University, on the topic of Het Methodisme. He was to become the embodiment of the Dopper reformed faith and culture in SA in the twentieth century, together with the Calvinist president, Paul Kruger (1825-1904), who was the best political leader the Afrikaners ever had. Totius would also become the leading theologian and poet, who would help translate the Bible into the Afrikaner language in 1933, together with the rhymed Psalm book in Afrikaans in 1936.

Consequently, the GKSA organized its churches into racially exclusive Synods such as the Synod of Potchefstroom and Bloemfotein were exclusively for the white membership while the Soutpansberg and the Midlands Reformed Churches were for exclusively black membership within its GKSA General Synod in South Africa (Slabbert, 2004:10f).



The study argues that racial or ethnic divisions in the church results in a clear obstacle in the execution of the Scriptural Great Commission and church's missionary call to all nations of the world. Earlier in 16th Century, in April 1552, Calvin wrote a letter to Archbishop Cranmer on church unity saying:

Amongst the greatest evils of our century must be counted the fact that the churches are so divided one from another that there is scarcely even a human relationship between us ... I shall not be afraid to cross ten seas for the purpose of unity if that should be necessary (Calvin 1552 in Baloyi, 2010.www.reformedreflections.ca/faith-and-life/calvin-on-church-unity.html).

However, after 1994 Democratic election in South Africa, this phase of the history of Christian church changed, the emphasis increasingly fell on the principles of reconciliation and unification in Christ rather than principles of division and isolation (Romans 14:16, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

In 1998, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the General Synod jointly made a resolution in which it is stated unequivocally that it rejected apartheid as wrong and sinful, not simply in its effects and operations but also in its fundamental nature (Handelinge Algemene Sinode, 1998, 509). The Scriptural and theological basis of church unity was confirmed and church unity was later achieved because of sound Scriptural and theological reasons and not because of ideological reasons (Coertzen, 2003:332-343).

The oneness in Christ in the GKSA

The local church as ground level for unity

The point of departure for this study is the local church as ground level for unity in the church. Du Plooy (1982:108) argues that the Reformed church government is based on the scriptural fact that each local church is a complete church, known as an assembly of believers. The unity of the church derives from its being grounded in the one God (Ephesians 4:1-6). Scriptures hold that the local church while indissolubly united to the whole people of God is nonetheless a complete church (Milne, 1982:211). It is the responsibility of all believers in Christ to unite in the fellowship of the local church, to observe Christ's ordinances, obey the laws of God, to persevere in prayer, to keep holy the Lord's day, to meet for worship, to wait upon the preaching of the Word of God and to give generously as God prospers them for the support and extension of the Gospel and at all times seek to advance the Kingdom of God (Exodus 20, John 20-21, Matthew 24:14, Mark 16:15). All people who truly belong to the church are one people and hence the true local church will be distinguished by its unity. Merwe in Koffeman & Smit, 2014:50-51) once said: "The essential oneness belongs to the very nature of the church, and is given to the church in Christ."

In every local church, the plural offices are responsible for the governance of the congregation. The governance is a governance of service through the proclamation of the gospel (Smit, 2013:137). Calvin and Kerr (1989:133) hold that members of the local church are those who by confession of faith, by example, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with others. The visible church is seen by the preaching of the pure Word of Word, hearing of the Word, the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not doubted, a church of God exists (Ephesians 2:20). For Christ's promise cannot fail: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Calvin & Kerr, 1989:133, Matthew 18:20).



When local churches meet in an assembly, they do not constitute a regional or national church; it is an opportunity for the churches to meet through their delegates who disperse after the meeting, through the decisions of the meeting hold good. The fundamental premise is that no local church may dominate another, precisely because each is fully and completely church of Christ. The Scriptures teach that the various churches must assist and help each other in governing the church of Jesus Christ, decide jointly on difficult matters and serve each other (Du Plooy, 1982:108). Calvin advocated that the Word and Spirit should rule both the visible and the invisible church. For Calvin, the authority of the Word is the only authority in the church. God Himself decides what is right through His Word and Spirit, and people are called (offices) to proclaim it (Du Plooy, 2003:9). Calvin's view on unity is that the church is strictly one, hence his use of the "mother" metaphor to emphasise the unity of the church. If the church as a whole is understood to be a mother, then any idea of a particular denominational church being a mother is deconstructed by implication (Baloyi, 2010:1-2).

GKSA unity in belief and confession

Again after apartheid was abolished in South Africa in 1994 when the first democratic elections took place in South Africa, the white and dominant GKSA Church from Potchefstroom initiated a unification process that was intended to unite the three former synods into one (Baloyi, 2010:1). Unity in belief in Christ and the confession was absolutely important in the process of unification of the church. The confessional basis of a new denomination was to be confirmed by everybody involved in unification of the church beforehand (Coertzen, 2003:332-f). According to the 2006 report on ecumenicity and government, the GKSA's ecumenical calling was not limited to doctrinal matters only. It was necessary to expand the prophetic calling of the GKSA in South Africa, to contribute and witness accordingly at religious institutes, including the SA Board of Churches and similar organisation. In the local church, ecumenical unity was expressed in sharing of the body of Christ practically during the Holy Communion. The essential aspects at the celebration of the Holy Communion are the bread and the wine, and the communal drinking cup has a symbolic function that symbolises our spiritual unity in faith in Christ. For that reason, the cup had a prominent place and function together with the wine as one sign. Churches based on the same confessional foundation could not stand next to each other in this world like cocoons without any show of recognition of each other. In that it could be taken into account that diversity without unity serves the ecumenical ideal just as little as unity without diversity. Scripture bound ecumenicity creates a framework for unity that maintains diversity and diversity that strives towards unity. Where believers live in unity, it creates a positive attitude (Acts 2:46-47).

GKSA united network of churches in a geographical area

In the GKSA, a denomination in which different black and whited churches came together found its expression in an integrated one local classis, in logically shifting structure, various classes in a geographical area come together to form National Synod and various National Synods together form the General Synod. National Synods and General Synod came together to make a final decision for the whole church. The church orderly road to church unity and the creating of a structure for the new denomination was carefully treated and everybody involved knew clearly beforehand what the new denomination would about before final decisions were taken. The members of the GKSA committed themselves mutually to one another in trust and reconciliation, both at the level of church councils (locally, in presbyteries, synods and on the level of General Synods) as well as on the level of the ordinary members. They knew and told one another to accept each other in their commitments and viewpoints and also in their confession of the sins of the past. Church unity was not being achieved if there were still hidden agendas and distrust towards one another (Coertzen, 2003:332-343).



According to few churches, in spite of differences in the GKSA concerning exposition of Scripture and use of Scripture, churches referred to “different interpretations of Scriptural parts”, “each interpreted the Scripture according to what he/she thought correct” and so called “selective use of the Scripture”. The GKSA had devoted intense attention in Synod decisions in the past concerning exposition of Scripture and the use of Scripture (Acta report 2009:506-512). Although it appeared that there were differences concerning exposition and use of Scripture, intense attention was paid by churches and majority assemblies to study. The churches and majority assemblies had thorough knowledge of existing decisions concerning Scripture interpretation and management and took it into consideration in their decisions and conduct. That entire matter of restructuring belonged to the General Synod.

According to the 2006 GKSA Conference report, the ecumenical unity on the part of the GKSA was to be re-established. That the meaning of ecumenical unity between the two church communities on either side was to be reinforced and deepened and that it was put into effect in practice (Acta, report 2006:213). When churches met in an assembly, they did not constitute a regional or national church; it was an opportunity for the churches to meet through their delegates who dispersed after the meeting, through the decisions of the meeting. The fundamental premise was that no local church might dominate another, precisely because each was fully and completely church of Christ. The Scriptures holds that the various churches assist and help each other in governing the church of Jesus Christ, decide jointly on difficult matters and serve each other (Du Plooy, 1982:108).

In the local church, all the promises of God obtain for it, and in Christ, the Head and Lord of the church, is as fully present there as in any extended entity (Milne, 1982:211f). In the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), churches come together in one classis in a geographical area, regional synod and national synod in general synodical context may conduct correspondence with neighbouring classes, regional synods and national synods when, according to its judgement, this would promote the general welfare of the church (Art 48). The regional synod is an assembly of neighbouring classes, to which each classis delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the regional synod. The regional synod meets annually, unless, in the opinion of at least two classes, it has become essential to call an extraordinary regional synod.

GKSA church unity in theological training

Ramantswana (2015:17) argues that beginning in 1963, the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) were composed of four National Synods: Potchefstroom (white) Suidland/Southland (mixed race) Middellande/Midlands (black), and Soutpansberg (black). The General Synod of the four National Synods was functional only during the apartheid era, meeting six times (1965, 1975, 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1992), and has since been nonfunctional. The racial tag ‘black’ was used in two senses: firstly, to refer to the three National synods (Southland, Midlands and Soutpansberg) and, secondly, to highlight the reality of the history of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) and the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, which was also exhibited in the church.

Theological training in the GKSA was done along racial lines; there was theological training for black people and white people respectively until 1994. Four phases were distinguishable in the history of the black GKSA relating to theological training: the first phase was from 1910 to 1951, the second from 1952 to 1960, the third from 1961 to 1989, and the fourth from 1990. The multifaceted aspects for non-functionality of theological training led to references to the General Synod of GKSA (Ramantswana, 2015:17).



Following the successful unity talks between GKSA and the RCSAMNS, the two synods merged in 2009 and proceeded to regard the new formation as a General Synod of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (*Algemene Sinode van die Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*). The new formation partly brought to realization the 1997 decision of the RCSAMNS for the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) to be unified along geographical lines. In 1997 when the decision was taken the RCSAMNS' intention was to disband on its next Synod meeting. However, the dream of a unified Reformed Churches in South Africa was only realized 12 years later GKSA (Ramantswana, 2015:17). Thus, 2009 was a significant moment in the history of the Reformed Churches in South Africa as the racial divide that had existed since 1963 was again overcome. The initial overcoming of the racial divide was when the RCSASKNS disbanded in 1990 and joined the structures of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA, Ramantswana, 2015:17f).

According to the June 2007, Potchefstroom and Midlands GKSA Conference report following the 2003 Theological Training in Africa on Theological Training: A large number of Curators were present as well as different ministers. It was decided that the church urgently reconsider the integration of training for ministers in the GKSA, especially if taken into account the critical ministry related needs in black, "township" and "rural" congregations. It was also decided that the Curators in co-operation with the training centres launch an investigation into how training could proceed, with the assistance and guidance of majority meetings in the areas where candidates reside, *inter alia*, by means of and extension of the Faculty of Theology's Telematics Learning Systems in Potchefstroom (2009 GKSA Conference report).

The principles of racial and cultural diversity in the GKSA

Unity and cultural diversity in the GKSA

In the light of the reports and resolutions for church unity from several GKSA Synods, the urgent calling to cross over country borders remained the most important strategic plan on the terrain of ecumenicity. The principles of unity and cultural diversity in the GKSA between the white churches and black churches could be rehearsed as a good example on how the process of unity and diversity among people of God was achieved. Spiritual unity could be the absolute condition for ecclesiastical unity which the church must long to achieve. Racial reconciliation and diversity were elementary stages, among the first steps towards the unity which God ultimately has in mind for every local church. Reconciliation and diversity must be core values in our hearts and within any church movement (Broocks, 2002:94ff). Next to the ministry of the reconciliation and the call to repentance, this also indicates the manner in which the duty can be performed by destroying citadels with the powerful weapons of God: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

According to minutes and recommendation of the Regional Synods of 2007 and 2009 General Synod, heated discussions and deliberations were carried out on a genuine church unity where the dignity of blacks were respected (cf 2009 GKSA Minutes). The Synod of Soutpansberg was at first not in favor of church unity because of sticky fundamental issues that needed to be resolved before restructuring and integration of all Synods. Some issues to be resolved were the name of the General Synod, geography, gifts, growth points, how the unity and welfare of the churches could best be served within the new arrangement, how greater participation and involvement of all churches could be attained within the context of diversity.



Restructuring and formation of the new General Synod

After apartheid was abolished in 1994 when the first democratic elections took place in South Africa, the white, and dominant, church from Potchefstroom initiated a unification process that was intended to unite the three former synods into one (Baloyi, 2010:1f). This resulted in the phasing out of the former theological schools that had upheld the apartheid regime Hammanskraal as the theological school for Middellande Synod and Heidelberg as the theological school for Synod Soutpansberg and the introduction of one theological school at Potchefstroom University. In the spirit of reconciliation and unification principles, clear agreements were necessarily made beforehand on theological training, legitimization and ordination.

The Synods of Potchefstroom, Midlands and other regional Synods were of the view of restructuring and forming a new General Synod. The Synod of Soutpansberg was persuaded to attend the next General Synod under the advisory role of Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken Nerderland (CGKN) and the Christian Reformed Churches North America (CRNA) during the planned restructuring negotiations. Communication to all stakeholders was done in good time that by June 2009 a solution was found for the new arrangement (cf 2009 GKSA Minutes). The matters on the agenda for discussion were to look at issues that cloud the relationship between the General Synod and Synod of Soutpansberg: Theological training and the road to reconciliation on congregation level. The essential oneness belongs to the very nature of the church, and is given to the church in Christ (Merwe in Koffeman & Smit, 2014:50-51).

GKSA ecumenical relationship with other churches

According to the 2009 report on ecumenical unity for the GKSA, the ecumenical call is therefore directed at “restoration and re-establishment of the unity of the church.” In practising the ecumenical calling the focus is not on a discourse or conversation of how the church communities can visibly demonstrate unity, but on prophetic witness for the truth and against the lie, as well as on cooperation in as far as there is a mutual task that has to be taken care of. The eventual unity of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) must be viewed “as the most urgent and important ecumenical calling and mission”. The purpose of ecumenical conversation is the conveyance of the universal gospel by means of which all churches are called to obedience to the Word of God, and called as a united church community according to the doctrine (Acta, 1994:195 in the GKSA 2009 report). And article 49 argues that each major assembly shall appoint deputies to implement the resolutions of the meeting according to explicit instructions. A regional synod as a matter of course appoints deputies to assist classes in dealing with problems that may develop and to be present at the examination of candidates for the ministry. For other purposes, as many different groups of deputies as possible must be appointed. These deputies shall keep proper record of all their activities so as report back to the major assembly. Only the major assembly which appointed them can release them from their office. All church communities with which ecumenical unity, as well as ecumenical relations, is maintained received invitations to send deputies/observers.

All deputies/observers were informed that they would be welcome to attend Synod and that they would be granted an opportunity to convey congratulations to the GKSA on its 150-year jubilee. They would also have the opportunity to participate in discussions of Synod and on Committee, as would be determined by Moderamen. The eventual unity of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) was to be viewed “as the most urgent and important ecumenical calling and mission” (Acta, report 1970:69).



GKSA with Presbyterian Church of Korea (Kosin) PCK

Again according to the 2009 report on Ecumenical unity for the GKSA, the church had to live in full ecumenical unity with the churches in Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan. In spite of the name reformed, the RCJ is a Presbyterian church. They also had a threefold concentric approach according to which they had relations with them in their second circle. Their closest relation was known as: Mission co-operation where they had relations with the OPC, PCUSA, Kosin churches, NGKSA and NHKA. The purpose of ecumenical conversation was the conveyance of the universal gospel by means of which all churches were called to obey the Word of God, and called as a united church community according to the doctrine. In practising the ecumenical calling the focus was not on a discourse or conversation of how the church communities could visibly demonstrate unity, but on prophetic witness for the truth and against the lie, as well as on cooperation in as far as there was a mutual task that has to be taken care of. The local congregations all bear witness to their focus on missionary affairs. The unity with the PCK (K) was sustained and reinforced as far as possible by means of visits by representatives. Deputies were commissioned to take up ecumenical contact with the Korean congregation in Johannesburg, South Africa (Acta, 2006:198, 133 in 2009 GKSA report). In South Africa Korean students were working in the vicinity of Verena, Middelburg and Witbank. Such missionaries were amply supported by Korea as well as by visitors and delegates from the Kosin Hospital. Closer contact with the missionaries would serve a good purpose. The churches, especially in Pusan, were in constant contact with the leaders of the underground protestant churches in China, they were being prayed for, equipped and trained. It was obvious that there was a decline in the number of theological students from Kosin who preferred to study at the Theological Seminary of Potchefstroom.

According to information from the PCK, sometimes they acted independently since the GKSA was initially used for assistance with mission work, and later establish their own church. The result was that there were PCK churches in South Africa without any relation to the GKSA. The PCK was to be approached in that regard and the matter be sorted by means of contact with local churches and the churches in Korea. In that manner, the unity of churches would come to its rightful realisation, so that the fruits of the PCK and GKSA mission work in South Africa be integrated. The mission of the Kosin Churches in China and surrounding countries was dedicated to God in prayer and church articles be included in the Die Kerkblad. The churches in Bloemfontein and Midland received attention with the aim of adding them to the GKSA and expansion of activities. The deputies received the assignment to pay attention to the fact that Korean theological students came to study in Potchefstroom less and less. The matter was to be addressed in cooperation with the Theological School. It was further recommended that contact be resumed with alumni, so that intending students would be motivated to study at the Theological School Potchefstroom (Acta 1994:699 in the GKSA 2009 report).

GKSA with the European Reformed Churches

According to the 2009 GKSA General Recommendation, the Reformed Churches existed only in other European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and others. It was observed that the GKSA did not have reliable relationships with the churches in Europe. Therefore, for the sake of the Reformed Churches in those countries as well as for the sake of ministry to Reformed members of church from South Africa who lived in those countries, deputies were commissioned to develop contact with Reformed Churches in those parts of the world. It was further discovered that the Theological Seminary at El Escorial and the Baptist Churches in Spain were under supervision of the Reformed Churches. Both groups joined hands in assuming responsibility for theological education and training. Reformed Churches in Spain



were scarce, and apart from that group and its involvement, another smaller group existed and was represented at the ICRC meeting at Pretoria in October 2005.

According to brothers at El Escorial it was evident that that remarkably small group was in the process of disintegrating. Reformed people with whom contact was possible appreciated the opportunity and expressed a desire to make use of GKSA's theological literature. The question was whether it was practically possible to overcome the language barrier. That cognisance was taken of the existence of the Reformed (and Baptist) Theological Seminary and the few Reformed Churches at El Escorial, and that those were functioning under difficult circumstances. However, the Deputies took upon themselves to expand and intensify contact with the Reformed Churches in Spain and have representation on ICRC (2009 GKSA Conference report).

2GKSA with the Philippines and Myanmar

According to the 2009 GKSA General Recommendation, the GKSA's second circle of ecumenical relationship was known as fraternal relations, where ideas were exchanged, certain mutual matters addressed and mutual meetings arranged. On that level they had ecumenical relations with the CGKN and CRC in the Philippines. The third circle of relationship comprised contact correspondence where contact was, inter alia, upheld with CRC Myanmar. The Theological Seminary in Kobe was manned by two full-time professors only, and the remaining lectures were represented by different ministers of the denomination. The focus of the ecumenical relationship was on the needs of the students. The RCJ's missionary-related activities extended to Indonesia with one missionary working there. It was also observed that Japan itself was a missionary field with a population of 120 million people and of those only one per cent confessed Christians. However, churches in Japan were small and Japan's culture made evangelization difficult because Japanese were reserved who could not disturb peace (2009 GKSA Conference report).

GKSA with the rest of Africa

According to the 2006/9 GKSA Conference report on theological training, the churches and church leaders in Africa outside of the community of churches of the GKSA played a considerable role in Reformed tradition. In Africa, there was currently an enormous mushrooming of Christian churches, but because ministry in these churches was frequently poor and handled by untrained church leaders, spiritual depth in many of these churches was very thin. The Curatorial acknowledged in that situation, a calling to do everything possible in the GKSA about training and the development of materials and to make those available also outside the GKSA for church leaders in Africa. The calling was carried by a strong vision for the expansion of the kingdom of God, and a missionary vision to transmit the wonderful Biblical belief and confession, also by means of the training of church leaders, other prominent personalities and churches. In that way the GKSA could play a considerable role in the African context when it comes to the propagation of the Gereformeerde confession and theology (2006/9 GKSA Conference report).

In that manner came into focus the question as to the role of theological training in the moulding of a missionary vision among reverends and churches and also the need for concrete training for missionary work in and by congregations and individual believers. Practical issues inherent to Africa and South Africa for the sake of context-sensitive ministry training (adapted from the report TSP Synod 2006/9). The missionary calling of our churches in Southern Africa reported that it was important to attach a more missionary focused approach to all aspects of the theological curriculum so that a missionary orientated theology (and therefore also ministers and churches) can be developed (from report TSP Synod 2006/9).



Again on the role of theological training, there should be a reinforcement of the spiritual relationship between students and lecturers (adapted from report TSP Synod 2006/9). With regard to alternative ways of training the Curators have taken cognisance of the problems attached to training of ministers and the need of ministers in Southern Africa and Africa, as well as of the accompanying opportunities. The Curators also took note of discussions on international level with regard to training of ministers, of the different models that could be followed as well as of the specific models that could be suggested to assuage the dilemma of the shortage and make better use of opportunities. The Curators appointed a committee for the purpose of investigating and evaluating the models that have been suggested and the possibility of alternative training for ministers alongside the present training in order to address the problems and use the opportunities. At the same time the committee would consider the influence that such models would have on candidate training and would advise the Curators with a view to further decision making (Smit, 2013:131ff).

The challenges to church unity in the GKSA

The truth is that God as the creator of the church expects the church to be a place where people from different cultures and traditions will enjoy the unity and justice brought about by the death on the cross of Jesus Christ. Du Plooy (2003:5) explains:

The church is a unity in diversity, and diversity amid unity. Unity essentially concerns unity in faith, an invisible unity, yet unity must be visibly manifested in one fellowship of churches across national and linguistic boundaries. This unity must be experienced within one fellowship, those who are as one in doctrine, office and discipline must experience unity, not only in major assemblies, but also among individuals regarding equipment, love, assistance and so forth.

This explanation makes unity one of the important characteristics of the church. One of the challenges that the church faces is to strive for unity, the unity that cannot be hindered even by ethnicity, language or nationality. The fact that the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA) have been wrestling for unity for so many years is indefensible, and there is still no sign that this has been achieved. One of the services most affected by the lack of unity is missionary work (2006/9 GKSA Conference report). The challenges to church unity in the GKSA could be resolved through employment of the theory/belief that it is possible and good for different ethnic groups to live/worship together in mixed service for the sake of peace in one society (Hornby, 2015:1144).

The problem of divisions in local leadership

Practical challenges for church unity could be exposed in divisions in administration within the local leadership. However, unity of the church does not mean similarity of local churches. It is evident from the Scripture that the unity of believers is a very important matter and that differences should be managed in a Biblical way and in the spirit of Christ. Instructions in this regard appear almost in every book of the New Testament (Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:13, 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:22; Philippians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; Colossians 3:15). It stands to reason that outward differences will be present in administration, liturgy and methods of service as in local churches and churches in different parts of the world (Acta, 1997:171 in the GKSA 2009 report). The problem of divisions in local leadership could therefore be resolved through using the theory of pluralistic/interdisciplinary concept for political, psychological, theological and spiritual reality of the church.



The problem of language

The challenge for the use of one dominant language in church service ought to be addressed for the sake of church unity. The solutions to language problem could be translation and introduction of multi-lingua services within the one multi-cultural congregation or mixed church services. However, people feel at home when communication or church services are done in a language, they understand better. Church meetings form part of members' God experience, in addition to the services, sacraments, and the mother tongue should be maintained in the church meetings. The Word of God also points to the importance of language. Romans 10:17 states: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" It is therefore not a crudely assembled, lacking English. It is mother tongue. This is precisely in line with Synod (Acta 1967:188 in GKSA 2009 report). As members of the body of Christ the believers are not detached from their natural relations. To the contrary, it's about their redemption in all their generations and about nations that are saved in their believers and baptised. In the finished kingdom we see the saved from all nations and ethnic groups and languages (Revelation 5:9; Acts 17:26). A variety of nations is presupposed and maintained by the establishment of the Church at Pentecost, where the Gospel is heard by each in his own language. Therefore, the churches in Bloemfontein and Midlands received much attention with the aim of adding them to the GKSA and expansion of activities. The practical issues should not determine unity.

However, the practical problems demand practical theological solutions. The delegation from the above-mentioned local church attended all meetings of major assemblies with only Tshivenda being used, without translation, until they decided to terminate their membership of the synod in 2006. The archives of the synod until 2008 were only recorded and available in Tshivenda, although Xitsonga speaking people were included in decisions that were taken without their participation due to language constraints. The same Xitsonga-speaking church asked the synod in 2002 to look at the language issue, or else use another language that would include all the groups, but their request fell on deaf ears. Xitsonga-speaking people remained members of that synod. Therefore, the solutions to language problem could be translation and introduction of multi-lingua services within one multi-cultural congregation. The first century church in Acts spoke different languages on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). The witness of the gospel of the Kingdom of God become credible after the church establishes relationships regardless of colour, ethnicity, language, gender or culture (John 14:1-6, Romans 14:11).

Analysis and evaluation on how "pluralism" and "ethnic diversity" could be integrated as an interdisciplinary key concept in the church polity structure of the contemporary church in the 21st century.

In light of the discussion above, the process of reformation and restructuring church polity structure, must reflect on basic Scriptural doctrines, the implications of the doctrine, definitions and images of the church in the New Testament and apply them to contemporary life (Sanou 2015:101). Some of the basic principles and concepts to be integrated in the new approach in the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA) and elsewhere are as follows:

The principle for oneness in Christ in the church

The GKSA was characterized by the principle for oneness in Christ. All people who truly belong to the church are one people and hence the true local church will be distinguished by its unity. When people are unified with Christ as members of his body, they join in his priestly work of reconciling God and man. The truth is that God as the creator of the church expects the church



to be a place where people from different cultures and traditions will enjoy the unity and justice brought about by the death on the cross of Jesus Christ. Du Plooy (2003:5) explains:

The church is a unity in diversity, and diversity amid unity. Unity essentially concerns unity in faith, an invisible unity, yet unity must be visibly manifested in one fellowship of churches across national and linguistic boundaries. This unity must be experienced within one fellowship, those who are as one in doctrine, office and discipline must experience unity, not only in major assemblies, but also among individuals regarding equipment, love, assistance and so forth.

In Reformed Church perspective, the unity in diversity of the church derives from its being grounded in the one God (Ephesians 4:1-6). The Scriptural and theological basis of church unity in diversity must be accepted by all members of the church. Church unity must be achieved because of sound Scriptural and theological reasons and not because of ideological reasons. Calvin's view on unity is that the church is strictly one, hence his use of the "mother" metaphor to emphasise the unity of the church. If the church as a whole is understood to be a mother, then any idea of a particular denominational church being a mother is deconstructed by implication (Baloyi, 2010:1-2). The contemporary church must take a queue from its Lord and Master Jesus Christ to overcome ethnicity/nationalism through theory of love of neighbour and its effects in the church and society in the 21st century.

The principle for local church as ground level for diversity

The GKSA was characterized by the principle for fellowship in diversity in local church. Scriptures hold that the local church while indissolubly united to the whole people of God is nonetheless a complete church (Milne, 1982:211). It must be the responsibility of all believers in Christ to unite in the fellowship of the local church, to observe Christ's ordinances, obey the laws of God, to persevere in prayer, to keep holy the Lord's day, to meet for worship, to wait upon the preaching of the Word of God and to give generously as God prospers them for the support and extension of the Gospel and at all times seek to advance the Kingdom of God (Exodus 20, John 20-21, Matthew 24:14, Mark 16:15). Calvin and Kerr (1989:133) hold that members of the local church are those who by confession of faith, by example, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with others. The visible church is seen by the preaching of the pure Word of Word, hearing of the Word, the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not doubted, a church of God exists (Ephesians 2:20). The church, primarily the local church, must be comprised of people from all nations, tribes, races, multi-ethnic diverse cultures and languages (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15-20, Acts 1:8).

When local churches meet in an assembly, they do not constitute a regional or national church; it is an opportunity for the churches to meet through their delegates who disperse after the meeting, through the decisions of the meeting hold good. The fundamental premise is that no local church may dominate another, precisely because each is fully and completely church of Christ. The Scriptures teach that the various churches must assist and help each other in governing the church of Jesus Christ, decide jointly on difficult matters and serve each other (Du Plooy, 1982:108). Calvin advocated that the Word and Spirit should rule both the visible and the invisible church. For Calvin, the authority of the Word is the only authority in the church. God Himself decides what is right through His Word and Spirit, and people are called (offices) to proclaim it (Du Plooy, 2003:9).

The principle for reconciliation

The GKSA was characterized by the principle for reconciliation. Brooks (2002:94) holds that the New Testament Church in Antioch must be another model for church unity and reconciliation,



since it was born out of the great persecution that arose over the preaching and martyrdom of Stephen, an event orchestrated by Saul of Tarsus. Stephen had been a member of the Synagogue, with a gathering of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentile proselytes, those who scattered from Jerusalem were not native Jewish Christians, but people born from all over the Roman Empire (Broocks 2002:94f). Some people from Cyprus and Cyrene ended up settling in Antioch and a large number of Gentiles became Christians there. Consequently, from the very beginning, Antioch was very much a multi-ethnic church. There are a lot of factors that contributed to their success, but a major key was unity in diversity. The Church in Antioch was characterized by the spirit of reconciliation which overcame ethnic and racial divisions.

The principle for ecumenical connection

The GKSA was characterized by the principle for ecumenical connection. The witness of the gospel of the Kingdom of God become credible when the world sees the church establishing relationships regardless of colour, ethnicity, language, gender or culture. In advancing church diversity, it is also very paramount to conceive that the second coming of Christ will be for the final deliverance of people from every nation, tribe and language (John 14:1-6, Romans 14:11). The church of Christ is a unique community of believers, and it is the fruit of grace of God in Christ who created the church through the proclamation of the Word and the Spirit who is still assembling, protecting and maintaining it (Du Plooy in Koffeman & Smit, 2014:14-15). Each one is given at least one spiritual gift and will be held responsible for their faithful use of it for the benefit of others. No one in the church is excluded from having to use their spiritual gifts to serve others (Hunter, 1950:304).

The fundamental premise was that no local church might dominate another when they meet in an assembly, precisely because each was fully and completely church of Christ. The Scriptures holds that the various churches assist and help each other in governing the church of Jesus Christ, decide jointly on difficult matters and serve each other (Du Plooy, 1982:108). In the local church, all the promises of God obtain for it, and in Christ, the Head and Lord of the church, is as fully present there as in any extended entity (Milne, 1982:211f). The GKSA must be a heterogeneous community with a reconciliatory biblically vision. Moral aspects can be implied in the issue of inclusivity. The core of being a Christian church is to believe in “the reconciliatory gospel” not being guided by prejudice, fear and unbelief (Koffeman, 2014:167). The church must be an “inclusive” community. Inclusivity, in terms of equality, which respects diversity/pluralism, must be a quality marker of church life, character, and church polity. It must be first of all the responsibility of those in leadership to keep such issues on the agenda of the church. People must be aware that it is a matter of boundaries rather than borders. Borders are sharp diving lines between different groups. Boundaries are areas where people are able to really meet in spite of existing diversity, and to seek actively for mutual understanding and acceptance (Koffeman, 2014:166).

This new community, the church of God, will include people of diverse racial, ethnic, national and political identities. It is the nature of the church to live in reconciled relationship with God and one another as a new people of God (Gelder, 2000:108-109). Church polity and church order must be fundamentally based on the reign of Christ as Head, and King of the church, the Word of God illuminated by the Holy Spirit, exercised by officers, therefore true ecclesiology understands what the church stands for and what it should do (Koffeman & Smit, 2014:35). Therefore, to become relevant the contemporary church must be characterized by pluralistic system of government.

The principle for practical solutions to problems

The GKSA was characterized by the principle for practical solution to problems. The practical problems demand practical theological solutions. In the process of continued reformation and



restructuring the church, the Reformed Church polity and others must first acknowledge Christ's Headship and His authoritative Word rule through officers of the church in every detail of life even where man as fallen creature need much grace. The Reformed Christian perspective toward ethnic diversity could begin with an understanding of the basic Scriptural doctrines concerning God and man, the implications of the doctrines of the love and salvation, definition and images of the Church in the New Testament and apply them to contemporary life (Sanou, 2015:101). For the people of God, there will be a new political and spiritual reality. The people of God will be formed around a new different identity, one that transcends race, ethnicity and nationalism. It will be a new identity rooted in a shared faith and fellowship with the living God. This new community will include people of diverse racial, ethnic, national and political identities. The church is placed in the world to practically serve its Lord and the world, and not to be exalted and have its own needs and desires satisfied. A true representative of the church will even be willing to sacrifice his or her life, if necessary, for the sake of its ministry (Erickson, 2013:987).

Summary and conclusion

This study focused on how ideas of "pluralism" and "ethnic diversity" could be integrated as an interdisciplinary key concept in the church polity structure of the contemporary church in the 21st century from Reformed Church perspective. The existing concepts of church polity and practical theologies must be replaced by new ideas of diaconology and new ecclesiology (Spoelstra, 1992:316-317). The study used the case study of the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA)'s experience as the primary paradigm for understanding the process of unification to achieve ethnic diversity in the contemporary church.

The study established that in the Reformed church perspective, the point of departure for the conversation on the unity of the church is grounded on the biblical concept of local church. The scriptural principle builds on fact that each local church is a complete church, known as an assembly of believers. In every local church the offices are responsible for the plurality of elders for government of the congregation (Du Plooy, 1982:108). The diverse elders' government is a governance of service through the proclamation of the gospel (Smit, 2013:137). Calvin and Kerr (1989:133) hold that members of the local church are those who by confession of faith, by example, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with others. The visible church is seen by the preaching of the pure Word of Word, hearing of the Word, the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not doubted, a church of God exists (Ephesians 2:20).

In the pluralistic approach, it will be a new identity of the church rooted in a shared faith, hope and fellowship with the living God. For the people of God, there will be a new theory of interdisciplinary concept for political, psychological, theological and spiritual reality. The new generation is looking for this heterogeneous, borderless, and multi-cultural church model, it is critical for the leadership to think in terms of creating a balanced new multi-ethnic, multi-cultural reformed church. With the mandate of Christ, the Head and King of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit the church must reach out to make disciples across ethnicities, cultures, languages and nations (Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8). Because Paul advocates for the message of reconciliation saying: "Christ reconciles all things in heaven and on earth to Himself". Reconciliation with God necessarily must include the reconciliation of those who are estranged. For that reason, one can talk about the heterogeneity which includes a mix of people in a single service from different racial, social-economic, and cultural backgrounds (Berkhof, 1962:59). The heterogeneous nature of the universal church has generally been reflected in the local church where "an absolute universalism is practiced, there are," no boundaries of sex or age, of status or rank, of nationality or language" (Bavinck in Janseen, 2011:100).



The church is unlike any other community, social organization, or human institution that has ever existed. The church must display characteristics of being an integrated new community, organization and institution, at the same time it has a unique divine nature that makes it different. The church as *ecclesia* must live as a people whose existence and identity were shaped by the principles of the Word of God lead by the Holy Spirit. God must be the one calling this mixed assembly of different people together: God is the one who is creating this multi-cultural community through the Spirit. But the church is left with the task of trying to explain its existence as a new type of human community in the world that is holy (Du Plooy, 1982:4). For churches to make progress in race and cultural relations, in many cases, they must learn to reformulate church polity which accepts people of different traditions, cultures and ethnicities, praise and worship God together (Walden, 2015:87).

In the pluralistic approach, the contemporary church in 21st century is called to reveal the “reign of God” and practice Christian principles of love, kindness, self-control, acceptance, unity and peace lead by the Spirit (Romans 8:8, Galatians 5:22). Ethnic identity is always subordinate to spiritual identity (Chong, 2013:3-4). Sin disrupts God’s will for creation and brings enmity, ethnicity, suffering and death. Diversity is God’s original will and plan of sharing His Personal nature with creation for the restoration of order and harmony in Jesus Christ. However, diversity will bring serious challenges which will lead to reform some archaic forms of church polity, liturgy, worship and orders. Therefore, it must be the responsibility of the church to embrace diversity for its growth, health and influence on the community. The Christian church today is in dire need of serious leadership in relation to diversity, both among the clergy and the laity. Transformational church leadership is essential to greater church diversity (Walden, 2015:97).

Ray (2010:108) suggests that moving toward pluralism and ethnic diversity must be part of the process of continuous reformation in Reformed Church polity conversation. However, as the church creates a new multi-ethnic culture, it does not abandon all aspects of original culture at once. Diversity demands respect for all ethnic cultures. In the pluralistic approach, it will be a new identity of the church rooted in a shared faith, hope and fellowship with the living God. The new reformed church polity could maintain and adhere to ethnic group norms, history, cultures and recent experience in a more balanced way.

The contemporary church must take the responsibility to respond to the challenge of ethnicity and ethnic divisions and respect the value of pluralism and ethnic diversity given that the *Imago Dei* is the ground for human dignity, as was the case in the early churches (Alva, 2017; Nicolaidis, 2010). Church discipline must take its rightful course: rules, disciplinary procedures and processes should help to protect the integrity of Christ, His Church and rights of all members. People found guilty of breaking rules must be asked to account for their actions. The integrity and unity of the church must be upheld at all times.

The world is in need of a new church polity structure in pluralism that will do more than shaking hands, singing a hymn, preaching a sermon, collect offerings and then send people away. Therefore, it must be the responsibility of the church to embrace diversity for its growth, health and influence on the community. This new community will consequently include people of diverse racial, ethnic, national political and religious identities. The new generation is desperately in need of the new theological theory which promotes integrated church polity orientations, colours, activities and programs for the building up of the body of Christ. Therefore, in this “church polity pluralistic” understanding, it is possible and good for different ethnic groups to live together in peace in one society (Hornby, 2015:1144). This is how pluralism’ and “ethnic diversity” could be integrated as an interdisciplinary key concept in the church polity structure of the contemporary church in the 21st century from the Reformed Church perspective.



References

- Alva, R. (2017). The Catholic Church's perspective of human dignity as the basis of dialogue with the secular world. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 3(2), 219-241. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n2.a10>
- Baloyi, E. (2010). Church unity and justice in the Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa (GKSA): perspectives from the Soutpansberg Synod between 2003 and 2008. [Available online at [www.reformedreflections.ca/faith and life/calvin-on-church-unity.html](http://www.reformedreflections.ca/faith%20and%20life/calvin-on-church-unity.html), accessed on 07/19/2017].
- Bavinck, H. in Janssen (2011). Gereformeerde dogmatiek. Vol. 4. Translated from the Dutch by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Berkhof, L. (1962/1969). *Systematic Theology*, London: Banner of Truth.
- Beinart, W. & Dubow, S. (1995). *Segregation and Apartheid in the Twentieth-Century South Africa*, London: Routledge.
- Broocks, R. (2002). *Every Nation in our Generation: Recovering the Apostolic Mandate*, Cape Town: Struik Christian Books.
- Calvin, J. & Kerr, H. T. (1989). *Calvin's Institutes: A New Compend. A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Hugh T. Kerr. Louisville: Westminster Press.
- Coertzen, P. (2003). The Road of Unity in the family of the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa since 1994: A Dutch Reformed Church perspective, *Scriptura* 83 (2003), pp 332-343.
- Chong, S. (2013). A Biblical-Theological Perspective on Diversity & Racism: *Christian Educators Journal*, [Available online at www.christianeducators.org].
- Du Plooy, A. R. (1982). *Reformed Church Polity: Essays and Topics*, North West University: Potchefstroom: TPT.
- Du Plooy, A, R. (2003). *Reformed church polity*. Essays and topics. Unpublished notes. Potchefstroom.
- Erickson, M. J. (1998). *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Haitjema, T. L. in Du Plooy, A. le R. (1982). *Reformed Church Polity: Essays and Topics*, North West University: Potchefstroom: TPT.
- Handelinge van die tiende vergadering van die Algemene Sinode Van die Ned Geref Kerk in Pretoria, (1998).
- Hornby, A.S. & Turnbull J. (2015). *Ethnicity*. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford: Oxford University.
- Hornby, A.S. & Turnbull J. (2015). *Pluralism*. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford: Oxford University.
- Hunter, M. A. (1950). *The Teaching of Calvin: A Modern Interpretation*, London: James Clarke & Company.



- Koffeman, L. J. & Smit, J. (2014). The foundation and Relevance of Reformed Church Polity: As a Theological Science. *Protestant Church Polity in Changing Contexts 2. Case Studies. Proceedings of the International Conference*, Utrecht, the Netherlands 7-10 November 2011.
- Milne, B. (1982). *Know the truth. A handbook of Christian belief*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Modise, L. in Van Huffel, M. A. P *et al.* (2013). *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960 – 1990*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press.
- Moltmann, J. (1977). *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, New York: Harper Row.
- Nicolaidis, A. (2010), 'The Laos tou Theou – an orthodox view of the “people of God”', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 66(1),
- Prill, T. (2013). Migrants, Strangers and the Church in Southern Africa: A Biblical Perspective, *NETS Theological Research Papers- Volume two*, Norderstedt: GRIN.
- Rah, S. C. (2010). *Many Colours: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*, Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Ramantswana, H. (2015). Theological Training in the Black Reformed Churches in South Africa: University of South Africa, *In die Skriflig*, 49 (1). Art. #1814. 17. [http:// dx. Doi. Org/10.4102.ids.v49i1. 1814](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1814).
- Ritner, S. R. (1967). The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid. *Journal of Contemporary History*, volume 2. number 4, church and politics October 1967, Sage Publications: Retrieved on 8/08/2016.
- Sanou, B. (2015). Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and its Mission, *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership: Volume 9.1* www.journalofchristianleadership.org. 16/02/2016.
- Smit, J. M. (2013). The Reformed Churches in South Africa- a perspective on church's view of the state. *NGTT. Deel 54. Supplementum 4*, 130-134. [http:// ngtt.journals.ac.za](http://ngtt.journals.ac.za).
- Spoelstra, B. (1989/1992). Secession and the Reformed (Dopper) Churches in South Africa, *In die Skriflig*, 23. (4-61).
- Slabbert, L. C. (2004). Reformed Churches of South Africa: A Reformed perspective on the History and current struggle in the Dopper Churches of South Africa: *The Reformed Churches of South Africa*. Volume 80/2004, issue 13.
- Van der Merwe, J. M. in Van Huffel, M. A. P *et al.* (2013). *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960 – 1990*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press.
- Van Ruler, A. A. (1969). *Ik geloof*, Nijkerk: Callenbach. 7th edition.
- Villa- Vicencio, C. (1988). *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological History of the English-Speaking Churches*, New York: Orbis Books.
- Walden, K. J. (2015). *Practical Theology for Church Diversity: An Experienced Guide for Clergy and Churches*, Eugene: Cascade Books.



Waruta, D. W. (1992). Tribalism as a Moral Problem in Contemporary Africa, (in Mugambi, J. N. K & Nasimiyu-Wasike). *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity*, Nairobi: Initiatives.

Reports documents

Report 2006. Petition of Protest: Gereformeerde Kerk Pretoria (Dissenting) Against Decision of Synod 2006, on “Structures” of Majority Assemblies (Artt 19, 37, 249, 266).

2006 GKSA. Report on Ecumenicity and Government. Deputy Ecumenicity and Government (Artt 57, 58, 162, 163, 271, 324).

2009 GKSA. Report Deputies National Synod- Report about Study- Frequency and Duration of Synod (Artt 11, 161, 211, 321, 325).

2009 GKSA Report Deputies Ecumenicity: International (Artt 121, 224, 227, 228, 271, 323, 335, and 341).

2009 GKSA. Report of the Curators Theological Seminary Potchefstroom on Theological Training (Artt 104, 105, 149, 179, 188, 213, 239).

2015 GKSA. Report on Doctrinal Matters for unity in diversity (Artt 9, 15, 18, 81, 82, 84, 86, 87, 108, 110, 112, 114, 245, 253).