
The church and ethnic diversity: a church polity approach for structural unification in the contemporary church

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Abstract

This study will discuss the question on the church and ethnic diversity in the contemporary church, based on the experience of the Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa (GKSA) in South Africa. An important presupposition of this study is that the GKSA was never divided in different church communities. Synods were divided on a racial or ethnical basis, but they remained one-church community where the different groups came together within one General Synod. The GKSA process did not aim at unification of separate and independent church communities; rather a unification of the structures of the church community that already existed in South Africa. The churches are in fact one church community, but struggle to integrate different synodal structures based on ethnicity.

Keywords:

The Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), ethnicity, church structure, unification, ethnic diversity.

1. Introduction

This study will discuss how ethnic diversity could be accommodated in the contemporary church from a Reformed Church polity perspective. This study will investigate how ethnically-based structures developed in the church decades prior to 2009 and after, how the GKSA managed to overcome ethnicity and restructure itself to accommodate ethnic diversity. The question stated for the article is: how could ethnic diversity be accommodated in the contemporary church from a Reformed Church polity perspective? The aim of this study is to construct an approach that could be applied to eliminate ethnicity and accommodate ethnic diversity in the contemporary church based on the experience of the GKSA in South Africa.

To assist in this study, the following structure is used: historical overview of mission work in the early years of the GKSA, theological training in the GKSA, the formation of different Synods of the GKSA, unification of different Synods, and unitary models for structures of the divided church.

2. Definition of terms

The word “ethnicity” (technical, noun) is defined as the fact of belonging to a particular race or tribe: many important factors may be related for example tribe, race, class, gender, age (Hornby, 2010:500). The word “structure” means the arrangement of and relations between the parts of something complex, the quality of being well organized, or give structure to something (Pearsall, 2002:1423). The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby, 2010:436), defines “diversity” (noun) as a range of many people or things that are very different from each other. Therefore, in this study, ethnic diversity relates to the quality of being diverse, unlike, varied, or ethnically and culturally different from dominant or minority groups in the church or society (Tracey, 2004:193).

3. Historical overview of mission work in the early years of the GKSA

Without fear of contradiction it may be stated that the GKSA from its origins in 1859 was a church community focused on the importance of the meaning of the catholic nature of the church. From the beginning the GKSA had the intention to manage separation, live and seek communion with churches which are of the same reformed faith (cf. Smit, 2009: 452). It may be a question whether the GKSA, against this background of an intense ecumenical calling, did enough with regard to the mission of the church since the institution of the church (Smit, 2009:467, 468). It does not, however, deter the reality that a lot has been done by this church community with regard to the mission of the church. Therefore, from the early years of the GKSA (1859) a missionary responsibility is evident. This is reflected in the attitude of the first minister called in the GKSA, Rev. Dirk Postma. Postma, from the start dedicated some of his time and attention to eliminate ethnicity and carry out mission work (cf. Fick, 2009:522).

3.1 Early synodal decisions about mission work

The first synods made positive decisions for the importance of mission work under the influence of Rev. Postma in 1863 (Fick, 2009:522). Van Wyk (2016:5-7) holds that the earliest decisions approved by Synods of the GKSA supported the ideas of missions in the church (Synods 1869, cf. 1973). It is a long-established principle of reformed church polity that the local churches (congregation) are responsible for the mission of the church. This also reflects in the decisions of the GKSA. Mission work is a calling for every local congregation (Missionary Church 2018/03/28).

Although Rev. Postma desired to spread the Word of God, it met with obstacles along the road of mission in the Transvaal (Fick, 2009:522). J.J. Venter, an influential deacon and his brother S.D. Venter who happened to be a church minister at Bethulie, did not share the same idea of missions. They were critical of missionary work. The two Venter brothers argued from out of the doctrine of predestination and election which provided that God chose individuals for eternal life and others for eternal punishment, that therefore Christians could leave it to Him to save those whom He wished.

For the Venter brothers, cross-cultural mission was unthinkable, unless there was proof of a change in the other culture (Fick, 2009:522). Eventually, the Venter brothers left the GKSA and joined another church, and missionary work continued – uninterrupted in the church. However, the view in the GKSA was rather that the relationship between mission and predestination rests on a decision of salvation as a hidden decree of God. Because no minister of the Word had insight in which the elect was among his audience, it was not possible to preach the gospel to the unidentified elect only. The mission of the gospel ought to go to everyone (Fick, 2009:522). Therefore, the GKSA's first synods made positive decisions about missions and Rev. Postma had a strong desire to overcome ethnicity and spread the Word of God amongst black people (cf. Van Wyk, 2016:5-6).

3.2 The first congregations

From the impact of missionary responsibility, the first congregations were established when Rev. Postma met Venter on June 24, 1859, and decided to buy a piece of land in the district of Vlakfontein, namely the farm of Michael van der Walt, for £1 500 to build a church village. That was the founding of Reddersburg (Fick, 2009:531). Winburg also started in 1859 (Spoelstra, 1989:73). On January 21, 1860, the Burgersdorp congregation was established on the farm Roosterhoek, and soon the following arose: Colesberg in December 1860, and Middelburg in the Cape Colony- in the Mooirivier district, Pretoria, along the Crocodile River, Nylstroom, Lydenburg and many others in the Republic of Transvaal (Spoelstra, 1989:73). On 21 February 1861, the *Volksraad* officially acknowledged the founding site as a town of Reddersburg and on 2 November 1863, it was declared as such (Malan in Fick, 2009:531). The local churches notified the Governor of the Cape Colony of their existence independently without mentioning denominational unity (Spoelstra, 1989:73f). Rev. Postma failed to get permission from the church to minister to black people at Nylstroom and he allegedly challenged the church members for practising racism in church circles (Ndou, 2000:94-96).

3.3 Mission work in the Northern Transvaal

In 1910, South Africa became the Union of SA and the GKSA started mission work among black people with Rev. Pieter Bos focusing on the Northern Transvaal (Ndou, 2000:94, cf Du Plooy, 2003:490). In order for GKSA missionaries to penetrate the mission areas, it was necessary for them to overcome ethnicity and work with the ethnically-separated people whom they wanted to evangelize (Ndou, 2000:94-95).

Eventually, the GKSA planted mixed/coloured churches in the Southlands, and black congregations in Northern Transvaal, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Consequently, from the original five congregations with over 300 members in 1859, the GKSA grew to 1 079 confirmed members by the end of 1862. This number rose to 12 125 in 1904, and the Almanac of 1941 reported of some 33 487 members (GKSA Missionary Church 2018/03/28).

3.4 Unity in the early years of the GKSA

In the early years of 1863, unity found further expression in the GKSA among the first five congregations when they adopted the church order (*Kerkorde*) of the Synod of Dordrecht 1619 as the common basis for a fellowship, cooperation and mutual assistance in ecclesiological matters (Spoelstra, 1989:73).

In view of the Reformed Church polity, order is based on the scriptural fact that local churches are a true expression of the church (Du Plooy, 1982:108, Smit, 2013:137). These local churches recognise one another on the basis of the same confession as true churches and live in a specific relationship with one another. This relationship does not find expression in a formalised structure of churches, but in minor and major meetings. These different meetings gather around a specific agenda (Smit, 2018:9-19). When the agenda has run its course, the meeting disperses without creating or leaving a formalised structure behind. Church community is not a matter of formalised church structures, but the expression and experience of the spiritual bond which exists between local churches (Smit, 2018:9-10).

3.5 Theological training in the GKSA

From the year when the GKSA started in 1859, the need for establishing a Theological School to train ministers grew over the years. In the Reformed view, there was never an office of missionary or evangelist alongside the established office of a minister. Mission is done by a called minister of the Word, sent by a congregation to assemble the body of Christ in an area where no church is yet established. In principle, that is what it was in the origins of the GKSA; any minister can be called by a congregation and sent to all ethnic people as a missionary.

3.5.1 Establishment of the Burgersdorp Theological School

In 1869, the GKSA Synod decided to establish its own theological training school in Burgersdorp, on more or less the model of the Free University of Amsterdam, established by Abraham Kuyper (Van Wyk, 2016:2). The GKSA founded this Theological School for theological

studies as well as teacher training in Burgersdorp in the Eastern Cape. Rev. Postma and Rev. Jan Lion-Cachet took charge of the training of students during the early years in conjunction with their ministry in the Burgersdorp congregation (Van Wyk, 2016:2).

In 1905, the Theological School of the GKSA re-located to Potchefstroom, *inter alia*, to escape the influence of the British-orientated Cape Province (Van der Vyver, 2016:2). As a result of implementation of the ideal of the GKSA to establish an institution for Christian Higher Education, it later became Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU-CHE) developed on the model of the Free University of Amsterdam (Baloyi, 2010:3f).

3.5.2 *Establishment of different Theological Schools*

The GKSA's first phase of theological training in the black churches began in 1910. The GKSA started to contemplate and develop theological training for the mission churches. Theological training in the black congregations was necessitated by the white missionaries' need for assistance from the indigenous people in the transmission of the gospel, as well as church-planting efforts (Ramantswana, 2015:2-4). Jojakim Matlakala was the first black candidate to start receiving training for the ministry of the Word in accordance with the study program approved by the GKSA synod deputies. After a year-and-a-half of studies, he completed his training (Ramantswana, 2015:3-4). In June 1947, the GKSA Synod mission deputies examined him, and he was considered worthy to be called as a minister of the Word. On 8 October 1947, Matlakala was ordained as a minister of Soutpansberg Reformed Church, thus becoming the first black minister of the Word in the GKSA (GKSA 1953:13 in Ramantswana, 2015:3-4).

In 1959, Hammanskraal Theological training school was instituted for black students, who wanted to study and become ministers. Other Theological schools for black students started at Heidelberg Theological School in Venda. In 1961, the GKSA established a policy for the training of black ministers of the Word, which ushered in a new phase in theological training (Ramantswana, 2015:3-4). From the era of 1961 until 1989, the policy of separation was the framework within theological training done in the black communities/synods. This policy of separation was drafted two years prior to the establishment of the three black national synods, which were established in 1963. This policy reflects the apartheid ideology of the time (Ramantswana, 2015:3-5).

However, 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 to 2015 (Ramantswana, 2015:2f).

3.5.3 Unification of Theological training

In 1994, after socio-political changes in South Africa, an effort for managing ethnic separation and structural unification of theological training to accommodate ethnic diversity began. In the period of 1994/95, the GKSA moved towards unity of black and white churches with regard to theological training. The former Theological schools that were poised to be phased out included Hammanskraal Theological School and Heidelberg Theological School, earlier in 1994. This meant that, for the first time in the history of the GKSA, black and white people would come to receive their training in one and the same institution, at the Potchefstroom Theological School (Ramantswana, 2015:6f).

In 1995, the GKSA National Synods met and agreed to deal with ethnic separation and unite three theological schools of Hammanskraal, Heidelberg and Potchefstroom into one Theological School, where students from all sections of the population were to be trained. Consequently, the unification of Theological Schools positively paid off in the sense that for the first time black students started to conduct worship services in white congregations in Potchefstroom and surrounding towns (Ramantswana, 2015:4f).

4. The formation of different synods of the GKSA

4.1 The National Synods

Because of the establishment of the GKSA missionary work in the Northern Transvaal in 1921 as stated earlier, strong congregations developed among the black population that eventually formed two National Synods: Midlands and Soutpansberg for black churches. Van Wyk (2016:5) argues that the GKSA was one of the initiators of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) in 1946 and this Synod was to play a very important role in the ecumenical affairs of the church. Later in 1963, the culturally-based structures in the GKSA culminated in the establishment of four national Synods namely: the

Potchefstroom for the white congregations, Southlands for the coloured/mixed race congregations and Midlands and the Soutpansberg for black congregations (Ramantswana, 2015:2f).

4.2 The political developments in the era 1948

Following socio-historical divisions of the South African society over the decades, the National Party (NP) of Dr D.F. Malan came into power in 1948 and started to provide clear legal distinctions – not just between Black, Coloured, Indian and White, but also within the African society (Beinart & Dubow, 1995:16-17f). The South African Government created homelands and their own chieftaincies in order to implement the policy of apartheid. This apartheid policy influenced some churches including scholars from within the GKSA to provide theological legitimation of a legislation that maintained minority rule of the National Party (cf. Villa-Vicencio 1988:23).

Coertzen (2013:33) argues that one cannot say that there was no tolerance of different faith convictions in the country, but all along, the state government was controlling the churches through its policies. While the original motivation for apartheid came from scholars within the GKSA, the GKSA never accepted apartheid as the policy of the church (cf. Van Wyk, 2016:7-8). From the era of 1948, the South African Government enforced the policy of apartheid on the whole of the country including the churches in South Africa (Coertzen, 2013:33).

4.3 The necessity of different synods

Van Wyk (2016:5-9) holds that the church model that developed in the GKSA, could be described not as a *volkskerk*, but as a *volkerekerk* and was formulated by Prof. W.J. Snyman (Van Wyk, 1985; 1993:45-48) in the 1950s to 1960s in the 20th century. The *volkskerk* is the concept of a “national or people’s” church. It implies that the church of Christ could manifest itself in one’s culture (*volk*) to the point of national synods (Van Wyk, 2016:5-9). The reality of differences in cultural values, language and lifestyle always persist in the church of Christ. The churches in the *volkskerk* concept could be composed of separate cultures and function beside one another, but remain one church.

The model followed in the GKSA may rather be indicated as a “volkerekerke”-model. The different cultural-based National Synods could unite together in one major assembly, a General Synod. The important questions of doctrine, the Confessions, church polity and liturgy could be addressed together at a meeting in a major assembly such as the General Assembly. The General

Synod of the GKSA, consisting of one 'white', one 'brown' and two 'black' national synods, was first established in 1963 (Van Wyk, 2016:5-9ff).

In the context of South Africa's stressful socio-political situation of the 1960s, it was not a minor event for the black and white churches to meet together in one General Synod with whites by far in the minority (Van Wyk, 2016:5-9). This was a significant promising development for church unity in the GKSA. Soon, however, it met with criticism from the "younger black churches" claiming that church unity should not start at the 'top' (synodal) level, but from 'below' in the local congregations, they argued (Van Wyk, 2016:5-9). The *volkerekerk* model does not differ that much from the *volkskerk* model, for it put too much emphasis on the *volk* culture of the people. The black churches argued that "what we need is not a *volkskerk* model, but a *Godskerk* – "God's people" church model. The result of this criticism was that the General Synod of the GKSA existed only until 1992 (Van Wyk, 2016:5-9). Therefore, this major assembly for General Synod of the four National Synods was only functional during the apartheid era, meeting six times (1965, 1975, 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1992); since it was non-functional, it was discontinued in 1992 (Ramantswana, 2015:2f).

5. Unification of different synods of the GKSA

5.1 *Unification based on a paradigm shift*

The unification of different synods began as a new paradigm shift after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa in 1990. The socio-political changes re-kindled a fresh theological paradigm shift to eliminate ethnic separation and redefine the church. In 1991, the GKSA accepted the following important recommendation on race-relations taken by the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES): "the ideology of apartheid is a sin and the theological justification of it is a heresy" (Acta GKSA 1991 in Van Wyk, 2016:5-6).

In 1994, South Africa held the first multi-party General Elections which led to the adoption of the new Constitution in 1996. This paradigm shift, on the one hand, was a restorative process of the already existing structures in the GKSA in which the previously suppressed and separated church-structures were regaining their self-confidence to do things on their own and, on the other hand, felt the need for de-segregation and unification of different Synods (Ramantswana, 2015:12f).

In 1998, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the General Synod jointly made a resolution in which it stated unequivocally that it rejected

apartheid as wrong and sinful, not simply in its effects and operations, but also in its fundamental nature (GKSA 1998:509). Therefore, in the period 1991 to 2000, following socio-political changes in South Africa, the GKSA again gave special attention to issues of ethnicity, language and culture in an effort to achieve ecclesiastical unity in the church (2012 GKSA CO 48 art 19, 37, 91, 249, 261).

5.2 Unification based on common belief in Christ and the Confessions

The unification of different synods was based on a common belief in Christ and the Confessions. The GKSA enjoyed long-standing “spiritual unity” and had no reason to remain divided structurally, unless it was because of differences based on purity of doctrine and the Confessions. Belief in Christ therefore constituted the church. Unity in faith and confession (unity in service, doctrine and discipline) is the only determinant – neither ethnicity nor political convictions nor joint statements (2012 Synod GKSA CO 48). The church order contained the principles for the maintenance of the God-given order and justice, as well as proposed practical applications of those principles (Vorster, 2011:14-15). The only basis for being one church was in many instances re-discovered by virtue of being committed to serve the same Lord in the invisible church of which Christ is the Head, even of those with whom they had no actual contact or interaction (Erickson, 1998:1141).

5.3 Unification based on integration of structures

The unification of different synods was based on the merging and integration of minor and major structures of the GKSA. In 2000, the GKSA Synod (Acta: 498) reported that there was an agreement (1997 Acta: 869) among the Synods of Potchefstroom and the Midlands to establish discussions that would lead the church to structural unity.

From 2003 to 2009, the GKSA Synod continued a discussion on “structural unification” for the three former National Synods of Potchefstroom, Midlands and Southlands to be phased out and to integrate them into one major assembly structure namely the General Synod to accommodate ethnic diversity (2012 GKSA CO 48 page 284, Baloyi, 2010:1). An Ad Hoc Commission (AC) was appointed to provide a preliminary suggestion to the next General Synod regarding the grouping of new minority assembly structures such as Classis and on the manner in which Classis could delegate to the Regional Synod assembly structures, and in turn the Regional Synod structures to the major assembly structure of the General Synod (Acta: 473 & 728, 2006 Acta: 387, 2012 GKSA CO 48 pages 273-274).

As a rule, no less than 15 churches formed a classis. There were more or less 410 churches that had to be grouped into Classes. Classes were made up of more churches, so that there could be adequate spiritual gifts to effectively deal with the agenda as far as ethnic diversity was concerned. Attention was to be paid to practical concerns such as distance and cost, as well as the availability of the necessary gifts (cf. Synod GKSA 1997, Acta 1997:865 & 2000, Acta: 501, 2009, 2012 CO 48 art 48).

5.4 Challenges to the unification of different synods

Van Wyk (2016:5f) holds that some of the challenges to overcome ethnic separation and structural unification came as the result of the unfortunate attitude of the Synod of Soutpansberg who decided not to join, although a few of the Venda congregations did join. The Synod of Soutpansberg expressed controversial demands which indicated disapproval of church unity. Earlier in 1988 (Acta: 53; Acta 1991:508) up to 2006 (Acta: 387) and in 2009 (Acta: 350), there were many reports indicating reluctance of the Synod of Soutpansberg to participate in church unity discussions. The black Classis of Tshwane also did not join (cf GKSA Synod 2006, Acta: 387, 2009, Acta: 350). The aim of this study is to indicate that the process of unification in the church encounters stressful controversy due to differences in participants' understanding of premises and approaches to manage ethnicity and church unity.

5.4.1 Differences in understanding of premises and approaches to church unity

Differences in understanding of the premises of the Bible, the Church Order and approaches in which the process of unification would be done in the GKSA were some of the factors that led to poor progress in church unity (cf. position paper written by the Deputies of the Synod of Soutpansberg 01/03/2011:305, 306). The demands expressed by the Synod of Soutpansberg could be traced back from South Africa's socio-political context when it was established as a result of missionary activities of Rev. Pieter Bos who favoured to work with black people in Northern Transvaal (Limpopo) in 1910 under the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Ndou, 2000:94-95, Baloyi, 2010:6-7).

The controversy could be summed up to include historical, cultural, and socio-political factors and personal ambitions by certain individuals in the church which might probably be the motivation why there was no possibility of reconciliation (cf GKSA, Acta 1997:865, and 2000:501, cf. 2012 GKSA CO 48 art 37, 91, 249, 261, 284 page

285f). The relationship between the Synods of Soutpansberg and Synod of Potchefstroom had become strained over-time in history due to their different stances towards apartheid, both inside and outside the church (position-paper written by the Deputies of the Synod of Soutpansberg 01/03/2011:302).

In the discussions on 3 June 2010, it once again became clear that the Deputies of the Synod of Soutpansberg were on no account prepared to discuss the views/decisions of the General Synods of 2006 and 2009, nor would they retract their set controversial conditions (GKSA 2005; 2006:389). Although the GKSA (Synod 2006) made decisions on the matter of structural unification and had taken note of the Synod of Soutpansberg's view that they wished to solve the matter first before new structural arrangement, the Synod decided (GKSA 2006, Acta: 391) to continue with dialogue with the Synod of Soutpansberg on this matter and other problems experienced by the latter.

The premise and controversial conditions explained in the document by the Deputies of Synod Soutpansberg (01/03/2011:305, 306ff) implied that the Synod of Soutpansberg believed the churches in the GKSA General Synod did not have the marks of the true church and that they were therefore not one with the GKSA in doctrine, the Confessions and church government. The Synod of Soutpansberg did not always consider the real facts, neither did it refer to concrete decisions and therefore had wrong perceptions of the views and decisions of the GKSA. Testimonies of insights, plans and actions of the Synod of Soutpansberg became obvious alongside individual ministers' attempts to establish – alongside the GKSA, their own ethnically-separated countryside structure of churches and major assemblies under the leadership of the Synod of Soutpansberg (2012 GKSA CO 48 art 37, 91, 249, 261, 284 page 288f).

The Synod of Soutpansberg's point of departure was extremely problematical and contrary to biblical reformed church government. The GKSA therefore argued that there is no Reformed church in the world which adopts or has adopted the course in ecclesiastical matters now as proposed by the Synod of Soutpansberg. The approach of unification which the Synod of Soutpansberg wished to adopt was therefore alien to article 30 of the Church Order: ecclesiastical matters in an ecclesiastical manner (2012 GKSA CO 48, art 37, 91, 249, 261, 284 pages 268-273).

However, the Synods of Potchefstroom and Midlands insisted on continuing with discussions and restructuring major assembly structures. The Acta of the National Synods of 2006 (387-399) and 2009 (350-360) clearly testified that all three Synods were aware of the state of affairs and that the above-mentioned period was the target date. The intention and assignment of the Deputies of the GKSA and Midlands were precisely to reach clarity about the problems of the Synod of Soutpansberg and to persuade them to cooperate in the uniting process in terms of the Reformed Creed and Church Order (Addendum 2a and 2b). Nevertheless, it proved to be impossible to convince the Synod of Soutpansberg to agree to a normalisation of relations according to the principles of the Bible, the Confessions and Church Order (2012 GKSA CO 48 art 37, 91, 249, 261, 284 pages).

5.4.2 Unnecessary and boundless unification delays

The 2012 GKSA Synod held that the actions and decisions of the Synod of Soutpansberg had caused unnecessary and boundless delays in the process of reaching constructive and effective unity in terms of the ideal that the three former Synods shall meet as one General Synod, including the restructuring of major assemblies (2012 GKSA CO 48 page 272ff). Since 2004, the Synod of Soutpansberg had been engaged, in the terms of a fixed plan and method, to establish their own ethnically-separated fellowship/structure of churches, alongside that of the GKSA (and the former Synod Midlands), which would function independently of the GKSA (Addendum 2 b. 8, 2012 GKSA CO 48 page 280ff).

The Synod of Soutpansberg was not prepared to cooperate or to give clear reasons why they believed the decisions for structural unity were contrary to their view of the Church Order. The GKSA therefore was forced to conclude by informing the Deputies of the Synod of Soutpansberg on 1 March 2011, that the Synod was constantly delaying the progress of ironing out the problems of restructuring and the constructive restoration of unity, for according to them there could at most be consensus after 2015 (2012 GKSA CO art 37, 91, 249, 261,284, pages 269f).

In light of this discussion, the study has established that differences on premises and approaches to overcome ethnicity and unification were the main reasons for the poor progress of structural unity in the GKSA

in South Africa. Differences in understanding the biblical reformed church principles, the Church Order and the approaches in which the process of structural unification would be carried out in the GKSA, as well as church politics expressed in political statements of the position paper written by the Deputies of the Synod of Soutpansberg, were some of the factors that led to poor progress in church unity in the GKSA (cf. the Deputies of the Synod Soutpansberg 01/03/2011:305, 306).

However, the GKSA decided that the Synod of Soutpansberg is a church community besides the GKSA, due to the fact that all Christian members who truly belong to the church are one people committed to the same Reformed Church doctrine, the Confessions and lifestyle (Milne, 1982:215ff).

5.4.3 The challenge of language in the GKSA

The challenge of language would need a practical solution. The point is that the GKSA decisions never established a language as the norm, but rather that the best possible standard should be obtained at synod. The synod should then provide for the translation services. It is not the point that the culture or the language is the norm, but service in the best possible way in the church. Therefore the norm is the best possible standard. The latter is the core of the Synod 2009's decision. Therefore, each new minor assembly such as a Classis and regional Synod had to take its own measures with regard to language or medium of communication within the framework of the official languages of the region in South Africa. The respective minor assembly could ensure that language differences could not lead to inadequate communication in the church.

5.4.3.1 The use of mother-tongue

The use of mother-tongue could be a realistic approach to resolve the practical problem of language in mission outreach and church polity. Everybody should in a realistic way be able to express him/herself in his/her mother-tongue if he/she is not able to use another language.

5.4.3.2 Bible Translation

Translation could be another approach to ease the problems of communication between languages of different people depending on need. This approach would help eliminate ethnicity in the church. The aim of the Bible translation in the GKSA was to:

Create an understandable source text oriented Afrikaans translation of the Bible, suitable for reading and use in worship services as well as catechism, Bible study and personal use.

According to the 2015 report on Bible Translation (GKSA Art 103 Acta 2015:111, 112, 3.1.5, 3.1.6 pages 268-270), the GKSA Synod nominated individuals for the Advice Committee on Bible Translation at the Bible Society, offer assistance with all matters related to the *Verdere Afrikaanse Vertaling* of the Bible, continue with the instruction of Synod 2000, about the names of God of *JHWH* and *Adonai* in the Old Testament, and the appointed Deputies to start evaluating the translations so that “a well-considered decision may be made about their official use in 2018”. The Deputies were to *inter alia* review the faithfulness of the translation instruction (letter) as well as the specific aspects the GKSA would like to see in such a translation (for example the names of God).

The Deputies in the GKSA were to enable the General Synod 2018 or soon afterwards to judge whether the BDV translation complies with the instruction, namely whether it is as faithful to the source text as possible and rendered in understandable Afrikaans. The relevant source texts are deemed worldwide as the most authentic Bible texts, which is for the Old Testament the fourth edition of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS4) and for the New Testament the fourth edition of the Greek New Testament (UBS4 rev.) of the World of Bible Societies (GKSA Art 103 Acta 2015:112, 3.1.5, 3.1.6 pages 268-270). A possible date was mentioned as DV 2020(GKSA Art 103 Acta 2015:111, 112, 3.1.5, 3.1.6 pages 268-270).

6. Unitary models for structures of the divided church

Following the above discussion, this study indicates that it may be possible to establish two different models or approaches of experiencing church unity on the basis of reformed church polity principles. The aim of the unitary models will be to manage ethnicity and establish that all Christian members who truly belong to the church are one people committed to the same Reformed Church doctrine, the Confessions and lifestyle; hence, the true church will be distinguished by its organisational unity (Milne, 1982: 215).

The unitary models to be applied to manage ethnicity and accommodate ethnic diversity for the divided church are namely: the separation of church structure model and the unification of church structure model.

6.1 *The separation of church structure model*

6.1.1 *The GKSA separation of church structures prior to 2009*

The GKSA adopted the separation of the church structure model based on ethnicity several decades before 2009 in South Africa. This system of a separated church model functioned by identification of every church structure according to South African distinctive society's traditional culture and legal influences. The unity of the church was not primarily of an external dimension, but of an internal and spiritual character. This separation of structure model implies that all the people who belong to the church share in the same faith, and are cemented together by the bond of love of God, and have the same glorious outlook in the future (cf. Berkhof, 1996:572).

The GKSA churches, composed of separated-racial cultures functioned alongside each other in different classes and national Synods, but continued to remain one-church community. The four national Synods namely: the Potchefstroom for white congregations, the Southlands for the coloured/mixed congregations, the Midlands and the Soutpansberg for black congregations, therefore operated separately beside one another, but met together in a one-major assembly (Ramantswana, 2015:2ff, cf. Villa-Vicencio, 1988:23).

The different synods also established separate structures for theological schools to meet the needs of the congregations based on the culture of the people (Ramantswana, 2015:2ff). However, the important questions on doctrine, Confessions, church polity and liturgy were resolved together at meetings in a major-church structure, the General Assembly in 1963, 1965, 1975, 1980, 1984, and 1988, but it was discontinued in 1992 (Ramantswana, 2015:2f).

6.2 *Unification of church structures model*

6.2.1 *Unification of GKSA Church structures after 2009*

This study indicates that the GKSA adopted unification of church structures after theological re-evaluation in 2009. The unification of church structures aims to overcome ethnicity and merge the GKSA's

ethnically-separated church communities into one-church community that already existed in South Africa. The GKSA enjoyed long-standing “spiritual unity” and had no reason to remain divided structurally, unless it was because of differences based on purity of doctrine and the Confessions. Belief in Christ therefore constituted the church. Order ought to be seen as an essential part of the well-being of the church and the basic principles for order were founded in the Bible and the Confessions (Vorster, 2011:14-15).

One of the results of the unification was that the theological training should provide sufficient opportunity for the students to train in practical aspects of the ministry, for example the way in which they could perform sermons. This in general happens in the local churches surrounding the Theological School, where students get the opportunity to exercise their gifts to conduct a sermon. The latter provided the opportunity where those students, irrespective of race, get the opportunity to exercise their gifts. Students are allowed to execute these training exercises, when it is conducted in a traditional white congregation, either in English or Afrikaans. This arrangement was well-accepted in most of the different local churches and continues to this day in South Africa.

7. Conclusion

This study discussed how ethnic diversity could be accommodated in the contemporary church from a Reformed Church polity perspective. The aim of this study was to construct an approach that could be applied to eliminate ethnicity and accommodate ethnic diversity in the contemporary church based on the experience of the GKSA in South Africa; how ethnically-based structures developed in the church decades prior to 2009 and after, and how the GKSA managed to overcome ethnicity and restructure itself to accommodate ethnic diversity.

In the view of the Reformed Church polity, order is based on the scriptural fact that local churches are a true expression of the church (Du Plooy, 1982:108, Smit, 2013:137). These local churches recognise one another on the basis of the same confession as true churches and live in a specific relationship with one another. This relationship does not find expression in a formalised structure of churches, but in minor and major meetings (Smit, 2018:9-19, Monsma, 1967:122).

In order to illustrate how to best overcome ethnicity, the Scripture indicates that Abraham was called to be God's agent for His mission to the rest of the people (Gen 12, 15, 17). Christ longs to overcome ethnicity and redeem all ethnic groups so that He could use them to fulfil His mission of salvation (cf. Sule-Saa, 2000:32-33, Mtt 28:16ff, Mk 16:15-12, Act 1:8). The contemporary church could boldly eliminate ethnicity and restructure itself to accommodate the needs of an ethnic diverse community because it fulfils the global vision of the New Testament Christianity (Sequeira, 2016:38). The churches in a fellowship of a structured assembly could display the marks of the true church in Christ, while at the same time being serious about the characteristics (attributes) of the church such as unity, sanctity, apostolicity and catholicity, and they could be in a better position to seek spiritual unity with one another (cf. 2012 Synod GKSA CO 48).

However, due to the effects of globalization, many churches are confronted with the challenge of the presence of people from different countries with a similar confessional background but with different national roots. It is difficult for churches to maintain their denominational identity to a high degree without adjusting the church polity and liturgy according to relevant context (Koffeman, 2014:164). The contemporary church must be a reconciliatory as well as an accommodative community. Therefore, this unification of church structure model could be the best approach to overcome ethnicity, foster church unity and accommodate ethnic diversity in the contemporary church. This is how ethnic diversity could be accommodated in the contemporary church from the Reformed Church polity perspective.

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