

South Africa's Reformed Churches improved aspects of the Dutch church polity in the 19th century

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Dates:

Received: 31 Mar. 2022

Accepted: 01 June 2022

Published: 14 Sept. 2022

How to cite this article:

Du Toit, P.R., 2022, 'South Africa's Reformed Churches improved aspects of the Dutch church polity in the 19th century', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2544. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2544>

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Systematic theology determined church polity, and that had an influence on church history. Thus, the Church Order of Dordt (1618/19) was for centuries the standard of church polity within the Reformed Church in the Netherlands until it was replaced by the General Regulation (1816). Because this church played a major role in the development of the reformed churches in South Africa, the assumption was that the mainline churches in South Africa closely followed the example of the Netherlands. This article aimed to evaluate the development within the mainline churches in South Africa regarding three aspects: the delegation by a church council to broader (major) assemblies; the naming of the presbytery as a circle; and finally, the composition regarding a synodical commission. A comparison was made between the densely populated Netherlands and the scantily populated South Africa. For a comprehensive view, both demographical and geographical differences, as well as political and historical developments were considered. The outcome clearly showed that church polity cannot be applied in the same manner in different locations. The majority Reformed Churches in South Africa (the Dutch Reformed Church – the whole family of churches); the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) followed the same route. The only exception was the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika).

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This paper contributes to a new appreciation for these three aspects as still being regarded as true church polity, but in a 'decolonised' way from the Dutch situation during the first half of the 19th century.

Keywords: Reformed Church polity; Church Order of Dordt; General Regulation 1816; Church Order of De Mist; staggered representation.

Brief historical background

The *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) – Dutch East India Company – established a halfway trading post at the southern point of Africa in 1652 to resupply and service all the company ships with fresh supplies for their journey between the Netherlands and East Asia. (The distance between Amsterdam and Cape Town is 6191 nautical miles – 11 453 kms – and between Cape Town and Mumbai is 4599 nautical miles – 8508 kms.) This trading post eventually gave way to the establishment of the city of Cape Town, the expansion of the Cape Colony and later to the present-day South Africa. The establishment of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in the Cape Colony (followed by the example of the mother church in the Netherlands) was, however, subject to the control of the Classis (presbytery) of Amsterdam. It is worth emphasising that the Netherlands was a real-world power in the 17th century and thus traded in many parts of the world.

The government of the Netherlands chartered the VOC to rule on their behalf in whichever part of the world they might settle and trade. They were also entrusted with the religious affairs of their subjects, wherever they may be. The VOC thus ruled the Cape Colony for a century and a half (until 1795), followed by British rule for a brief period (until 1803). The Netherlands again ruled between 1803 and 1806 as the Batavian Republic. Although this governing period lasted only three years, it had a major impact on church polity. The commissioner-general at the time, J.A.U. de Mist, drafted and subsequently made his Church Order official. Within the field of church polity, this Church Order of De Mist (CODM) played a significant role for many decades because the British government, which again governed the Cape Colony for several decades since 1806, did not make any new rules concerning the church in the Cape Colony.

Following this brief introduction, one must first take cognisance of the church situation in the Netherlands before comparing certain aspects thereof to those in South Africa.

The church situation in the Netherlands

Regarding representation by the church council

The VOC's head office was in Amsterdam. Therefore, to comply with their religious obligations as prescribed by their charter, the VOC made extensive use of the Classis of Amsterdam to fulfil a key role in the Cape Colony, as this Classis was entrusted with overseeing religious affairs, including all church polity matters. The Classis assisted in many ways – also in finding appropriate religious workers. The polity issues were mainly dealt with by correspondence and occasionally by visiting ministers *en route* between Amsterdam and East Asia.

During the 17th century, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands was well organised. Developing from church meetings of note, like the Convent of Wesel (1568) and Emden (1571), church polity was neatly formulated at the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619) in the Church Order of Dordt (COD) (Koffemans 2009:71–74).

The Netherlands was densely populated, and the Reformed Church functioned efficiently within this well-formulated church polity. Regulations were clearly defined. Although no general synod was held in the Netherlands since 1618–1619, the different provincial synods – 10 in total – met on an annual basis. The many classes – at least 43 – met either bimonthly or at least quarterly (Pont 1981:180–181; Van den Broeke 2005:96; 119) and the church councils met at least monthly.

The boundaries of a classis in the 17th century were determined by two factors: the means of transport (horse or oxen) and the density of the population of the believers. The proximity of any congregation to the central congregation was decisive: no congregation must be more than half a day's travel from this central congregation (Van den Broeke 2005:67; also, note 160 on the same page).

Furthermore, when implementing this definition for the boundaries of a classis (the 43 in total), one must also take note of the multitude of congregations in the Netherlands. It is no surprise that a classis consisted of dozens of congregations – even up to 41, as in the case of Classis Leeuwarden of provincial synod Vriesland, with 41 congregations in 1816; in 1852, the total was 45, and in 1951 it rose to 49 congregations (Van den Broeke 2005:144, 176, 332). Van den Broeke gave details of two more classes that he used as examples in his study: Classis Utrecht (provincial synod Utrecht) had 26 congregations in 1816 and 25 in 1852, while Classis IJzendijke (provincial synod Zeeland) had 23 and 24, respectively (Van den Broeke 2005:145, 176).

It was the duty of every church council to delegate representatives to the meeting of the classis. The classis was responsible for a wide variety of matters – amongst other responsibilities, to also examine candidates for the ministry.

When the church council delegated members to the classis, and the classis on their part chose delegates to represent the classis at the provincial synod, and the provincial synod determined who would represent them at the general synod, this was called 'staggered representation' (Afrikaans, *getrapte afoaardiging*).

According to the COD, every congregation sent representatives to the classis (Article 41), however numerous. This was not the case with the General Regulation of 1816 (GR1816). Now the classis was regarded as a management consisting of a commission of moderators, namely a praeses, assessor, a scribe and two and three or four commissioned ministers, as well as only one elder (GR1816, Article 55).

While the COD stipulated that the provincial synod should convene, consisting of four or five classes, and each classis should be represented by two ministers and two elders, this was also altered by GR1816. Article 31 stipulated that the provincial management should consist of one minister per classis and only one elder for all the different classes. They were to meet three times a year (Article 39).

The general synod was required to be attended by a representative (one minister) of each of the 10 provincial managements (Article 17). Figure 1 shows the impact of these alterations when compared to the previous situation.

Although Bouwman stated that the ideal should certainly be that all church members of all the congregations must be present at a synod (*synodus plenaria*), he realised that it would not even be possible for all council members to be present on the classis or provincial synod level. He was therefore in favour of a system whereby representatives could attend – even if it was by way of 'staggered' representation (Bouwman 1970: II 16). This staggered representation became an important and generally accepted part of church polity in the Netherlands.

Regarding the difference between a circle and a presbytery in the classis in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, most provincial synods adopted the COD formally. Even those provincial synods that did not adopt the COD mostly functioned on this basis until 1816 when the GR1816 was forced upon the Reformed Church by the government of the Netherlands.

The role of the classis is well known and well defined. However, to understand the later development in South Africa, attention must be given to the lesser-known concept of a circle.

Within a well-functioning classis, there was a separate entity with no governing responsibilities called a 'circle'. Although

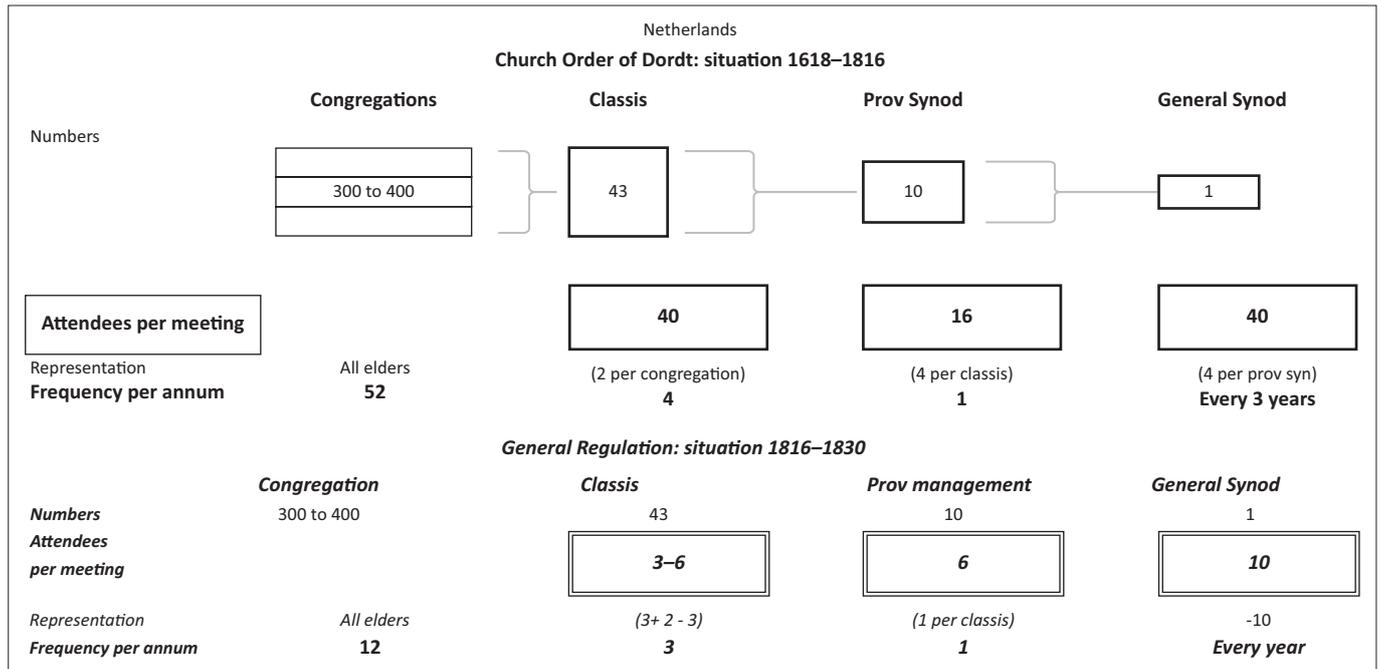


FIGURE 1: Delegation to broader assemblies: The Netherlands.

the COD does not mention the name ‘circle’ at all, the concept had been well known in the Netherlands ever since the 17th century (Van den Broeke 2005:117).

Given that a classis consisted of at least a few dozen congregations, it was standard practice that a classis was subdivided into circles for these nongoverning responsibilities. The Classis of Utrecht, for example, with their 26 congregations, named their four circles as *Vechtring*, *Rhijnring*, *Jansring* and *Lekring* (Van den Broeke 2005:101).

The circle was not characteristic of a church assembly but was merely regarded as an informal meeting of ministers to oversee the required Sunday services (preaching) that were being conducted in the different congregations and particularly in a vacancy. The concept of the circle was moulded on the *colloques* instituted in Switzerland, where the synod decided in 1539 to constitute three colloquies for the Classis Lausanne (Van den Broeke 2005:55).

The circle normally met on a weekly or biweekly basis. Since it had no governing function, it was initially not formally described in any church order. It was eventually neatly defined in the GR1816, where it stated in Article 81 that the circle should meet as often as it deemed necessary [*zoo dikwijls, als zij goedvinden*] (Pont 1991:40).

The GR1816 in the Netherlands (Articles 3, 31, 49, 53 [Pont 1991:30–37]) gives a thorough description of the duties of the circle. The circle was correctly regarded as a subdivision of the classis. Article 49 summarises it well (given here in a free translation of the original Dutch):

[T]he Reformed churches, under the same provincial management, are divided into classes for managerial or judicatory purposes and to oversee the conducting of services in

vacant congregations by means of the circles. This also serves to facilitate meetings of ministers. (Pont 1991:36)

Article 52(d) states that this subdivision into circles is instituted for local conditions and especially to see that the necessary services are conducted in vacant congregations (Pont 1991:36, 37). The Sixth Division of GR1816 describes the responsibilities of the circle even more clearly in Articles 78–83 (Pont 1991:40). It is again clear that the circle was there to support the service (*bediening*), to assist in vacant congregations, to expand Bible knowledge and to help the Christendom blossom (Nel 2019:139–141; Art. 82 – Pont 1991:40).

The main responsibility of the circle was to guarantee that the Sunday service was conducted regularly in every congregation (taking the situation of shortage of pastors and other vacancies into account). An interesting stipulation was that the praeses of the circle where a vacancy had occurred because of the death of the minister had to inform the wife of the deceased of her responsibility towards the minister who was assigned to preach on the Sunday. As she had the use of the parsonage as well as remuneration for a year after the death of her husband, she was therefore responsible for the transport, accommodation and remuneration of the minister (Van den Broeke 2005:97; 2010:40).

In his explanation of the meaning of the circle, Pont points to the lack of management responsibilities and typifies the circle as morally religious (*sedelik-godsdienstig*) in nature. Pont refers to Royaards, who depicted the purpose of the circle as instrumental to mutual whetting of ministers and the expression of brotherly love. Ministers in the vicinity committed them hereto and regarded it as an instrument for

brotherly love, encouragement for more enthusiasm for the office of minister, help in his scientific formation and the improvement of religious sense (Pont 1991:94).

Important deviations in the Netherlands during 1816–1845

It is particularly important to state that GR1816 brought extensive changes to the situation in the Netherlands. Provincial synods no longer functioned as synods – there was only a General Assembly that met on an annual basis. Two permanent members, one representative of the eight different provincial synods and one elder on a rotational basis of the provincial synods were appointed (Royaards 1834:89). The provincial synod was reduced to one permanent member, one representative from each classis in the province and one elder on a rotational basis from one classis (Royaards 1834:105).

Regarding a synodical commission

The COD had no place for a synodical commission. Although the general synod was envisaged, it did not convene for almost two centuries since 1619. The church councils, classes and provincial synods functioned well.

The Dutch government took the initiative to write a new church order. The GR1816 established a general synod that convened once a year. There were no more provincial synods, only provincial church managements (*besture*). The general synod convened once a year, and in 1827, a general synodical commission was established as a permanent body that should act on behalf of the synod and the church. There were nine members, namely the chairman, the vice chairman and the secretary of the synod, as well as three ministers and three elders appointed by the king (on presentation by the general synod) (Pont, 1991:92).

At the end of 1830, the church had a general synod that convened every year. Furthermore, there was a small nine-member general synodical commission representing 10 provincial synods (managements) and a total of 43 classes from all the provinces. They met twice a year. It is important to stress that the general synodical commission was in no way representative of even a quarter of the 43 classes. In reality, they were not even representative of the 10 provincial synods (managements).

To summarise the situation in the Netherlands, since the General Synod of Dordt 1618–1619, the eight provincial synods (eventually 10) met regularly; 43 classes, each with at least two to three dozen congregations not more than half a day's travel from the main congregation, also functioned well. This was altered in 1816 with only a general synod, provincial meetings, classes functioning and circles to attend mainly to the normal Sunday church services.

Having established this, it is now necessary to focus on the situation in South Africa.

The situation in the Cape Colony and later in South Africa in the period 1652–1824

Commander Jan van Riebeeck came to South Africa in 1652 and the first congregation, Cape Town, was established in 1665. In this frontier situation, the first Christian settlers were slowly expanding into a country where roving indigenous inhabitants practised their own religions. Some inhabitants were introduced to Christianity and were converted over time.

Geographically, the whole of the Netherlands would fit at least 10 times into the Cape Colony and about 35 times into the whole of South Africa: according to the CIA World Factbook, the land area of the Netherlands is 41 543 square km compared to the 1 219 090 square km of South Africa.

The circumstances in South Africa, however, were totally different as compared to the Netherlands. In the Cape Colony, the countryside stretched far and wide, with great distances between congregations. It was scantily populated, with small communities and inadequate transport. Moorrees correctly concludes that distances indeed played a significant role in the slow development of the church (Moorrees 1937:577).

It is therefore no surprise that in this situation, the establishment of congregations was a drawn-out process. During the first century and a half, congregations were slowly formed as the population expanded into this vast area: Cape Town (1665); 21 years later, Stellenbosch (1686); then Paarl (1691); after nearly half a century, Tulbagh (1743); Malmesbury (Swartland) (1745); after another half a century, Graaff-Reinet (1792) and Swellendam (1798). In the 19th century (up to 1824), congregations were formed in Caledon (1811), George (1813), Uitenhage (1817), Cradock (1818), Somerset (currently Somerset West) (1819), Beaufort (1820) and Worcester (1821). A total of 14 congregations were established from 1665 to 1824.

Representation by the church council

In the first century and a half, there could not have been any representation of a church council because there were no real means of accomplishing that. The slow development of the church must also be attributed to the fact that the church was also subservient to the state, and the government had to first seek the help of the Classis of Amsterdam regarding church polity matters.

Extraordinary in this situation is the fact that even when there were only five congregations, they felt the need to come together for useful deliberation. This could only have succeeded if both the government and the Dutch mother church approved. When this approval was granted, the Combined Church Assembly (*Gekombineerde Kerkvergadering*) functioned between 1745 and 1759 (Kleynhans 1973:14, 286–293). In all respects, the meeting resembled a classis: each

congregation was represented by at least the minister and an elder (Kleynhans 1973:287). Although the congregations wished to call it a classis, the Classis of Amsterdam advised against it. The main reason was that these few congregations could not be called a classis because they were not able to rule in the same way as the classis in the Netherlands, e.g., to consider the examining of ministers (Vorster 1956:42).

Except for this short experience, it took nearly 160 years before the first synod was held in 1824 – and this could only succeed by way of the 14 congregations sending delegates to synod. As no presbyteries existed at that stage, the 14 congregations sent delegates. Remarkably, this manner of delegating eventually became standard practice in the most Reformed denominations in the country. This way of representing the church council was regarded as being a *synodus plenaria* (not *synodus contracta*).

This first synod could convene because of the provisional Church Order of Commissioner J.A.U. de Mist. This church order (CODM) would, for decades, play a particularly significant role in the DRC. This CODM was called 'provisional' because it was never formally adopted by the Batavian Government before 1806, when the English again took over (Dreyer 1936:9, Footnote). Both the English government and the church itself, at its first synod in 1824, regarded it as the existing (*vigerende*) church order (Dreyer 1936:208 – the letter of Rev. J.C. Berrange mentions this resolution of the 1824 meeting; The Acts 1824, 16 Nov – p. 19; Moorrees 1937:553).

Although the CODM in Article 46 made provision for the possibility that a General Church assembly could meet (Dreyer 1936:20–21, Pont 1991:188, 196, 197), the first meeting of this kind was only realised in November 1824. At this first synod, a General Regulation (GR1824) was adopted for the church (Dreyer 1936:212–240), supplementary to the CODM.

When this GR1824 was adopted by the Synod, a few documents were influential thereto: the Church Order of Dordt of 1619 (COD), the Church Order of De Mist (1804) (CODM) and the General Regulation of 1816 (*Het Algemeen Reglement van 1816*) (GR1816) of the Dutch Reformed (*Hervormde*) Church in the Netherlands.

Except for the aforementioned documents, there were two exceptional documents (each containing several propositions) regarding church polity matters that synod had to apply their mind to – both from Dr G. Thom and the Church Council of Caledon, namely 'Fundamental Regulations' and 'Temporary Propositions and Regulations' (Coertzen 2004:241). The full heading of the Caledon Church Council's document reads: 'Proposed Fundamental Regulations to be considered by the very Reverend the Synod of the Colonial Reformed Church in Convocation [2nd Nov. 1824]'. It consists of 25 recommendations (see Dreyer 1936:188–191 where it is quoted verbatim). The 'Temporary Propositions and Regulations' is also a collection of eight more propositions (Dreyer 1936:191–192).

The Proposed Fundamental Regulations harbours certain definite church polity recommendations. The second recommendation requests the establishment of presbyteries. In the original document it reads: 'That the Colony be divided into presbyteries (Classes) and to which the numbers of the different Churches can appeal from the Consistories, if they consider themselves aggrieved' (Dreyer 1936:188). Recommendation 4 states that a classis is important for disciplinary purposes regarding ministers and church council members. Recommendation 6 asks that every classis must provide a State of Religion to the synod. Such a report must, amongst other matters, address moral issues, education and the instruction of the heathens. Recommendation 7 asks that the synod in future be constituted by representatives of the different classes – 'the distance and expenses attending a general synod render such impracticable' (clearly arguing that this is the case if the representation is by congregational representatives). Recommendation 9 requests, interestingly, that the final decision regarding a minister in a disciplinary matter must be made by the General Synod of the Church of Scotland (Dreyer 1936:189). This last recommendation would lead to intense discussion (although it was not adopted).

It is important to take note of the influence of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in this first synod. Not only did Lord Charles Somerset, the governor for the British government, played a leading role in the settlement of the British settlers in the Eastern Cape (1820), but also he was keenly aware of the shortage of Dutch ministers for the vacant congregations. He therefore requested Rev. George Thom (the minister at Caledon – previously from the London Missionary Society) to recruit ministers of Calvinist background in Scotland to serve in the Cape. Thom succeeded in his mission by recruiting several ministers from the Evangelical party in the church. Thus, of the 13 ministers attending synod, no fewer than five were from Scottish background (amongst them Andrew Murray). A resolution to take up formal relations with the Church of Scotland was even discussed by Synod but not adopted (Moorrees 1937:547, 564–565; Van der Watt 1979:6, 7).

The Synod adopted this General Regulation for the governance of the DRC in South Africa in November 1824 (GR1824) and further stated that the governance of the Reformed Church was being exercised by congregations, presbyteries and synod (Dreyer 1936:215; Pont 1991:216).

The Synod divided the 14 congregations into three presbyteries – called circles – namely, the first, second and third circle (later renamed the circles of Cape Town, Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet) (Dreyer 1936:215). The responsibilities were fully described, especially regarding discipline and appeals, namely in Articles 6, 46, 90, 91, 93, 118–124 (Pont 1991:216–217, 224–234).

Figure 2 illustrates how small the church was and how few the representatives were in this vast area.

It is important to remember that the first synod was convened by delegates from the congregations, as no presbyteries

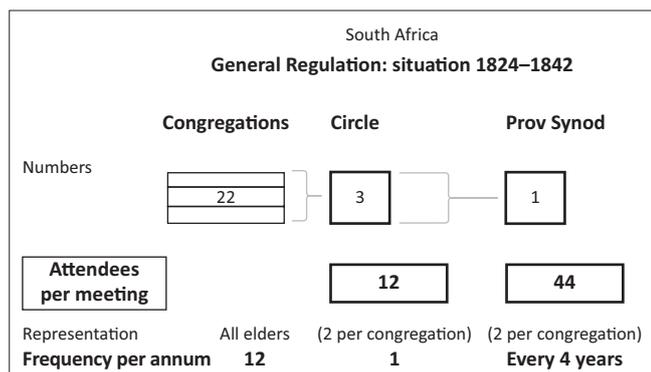


FIGURE 2: Delegation to broader assemblies: South Africa.

existed. The congregations were represented by both a minister (where there was one) and an elder. This became the standard practice and was regarded as being a *synodus plenaria* (Eybers 1934:183).

The presbyteries were intentionally called circles

In South Africa, distances and the vastness of large parts of the country initially gave rise to a reduced rhythm of meetings after 1824: synods normally met every four or five years and circles annually.

It is therefore noteworthy that the name ‘classis’ was never used in the church in the Cape. Even in the Dutch documents of that time, it was always referred to as a circle. It is unclear why this name was chosen, especially if it be kept in mind that the COD in Articles 41 and 47 (Pont 1981:180–181) and GR1816 in Articles 3, 31, 49 and 53 (Pont 1991:30, 34, 36, 37) repeatedly only use the name ‘classis’ or ‘classical management’.

Therefore, although there is a definite distinction between a classis and a circle, the name circle has deliberately been used since 1824 at the Cape for this major assembly. The question thus remains: why was this name chosen? What was the purpose thereof? Why was the name ‘classis’ not used at all?

It seems that one must agree with Eybers that the ‘circle’ in the DRC was regarded as more or less identical to the classis of the Old Reformed Church. Although the description of the circle in South Africa is not at all the same as that definition in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands (Eybers 1934:30, 110), Eybers therefore describes the work of the circles according to the responsibilities of the classis (Eybers 1934:110–120). Even in a recent work by Strauss he refers to classis and circles as sort of synonyms (Strauss 2010:65).

The one consequence of church representation in South Africa whereby the church council delegates representatives to both the circle and the synod clearly underlines the so-called autonomy of the congregation.

Establishing a synodical commission

Although the circle played no role in the appointment of delegates to synod, a certain recognition was given to the circle. This recognition was linked to a rather weird governing commission – the synodical commission.

At the third assembly of the synod in the Cape (in 1829), there was a thorough discussion on a *synodus contracta*. The three circles had different opinions on this. In their report to the government secretary regarding the course of the synod, Rev. P.J. Herold (praeses) and Rev. J. Spyker (scribe) wrote that synod had determined that a *synodus contracta* was impracticable (in the original Dutch: ‘*impracticabel*’) (Dreyer 1936:308). Synod tried to overcome this problem by deciding to meet every five years to give the circle more power (Dreyer 1936:308). The one political commissioner, D.F. Berrange, on his part advised synod that instead of a *synodus contracta*, they should institute a synodical commission and that this commission should be empowered to deal with certain matters (De Handelingen 1929, 3 Nov: bl. 59; Kleynhans 1973:222; Moorrees 1937:578).

Initially, there was never any specific mentioning of the work of the synodical commission. It was only at the synodical meeting of 22 November 1842 that a specific matter was referred to the synodical commission (De Handelingen 1842:238). At the following synod – that of 1847 (already with 31 congregations) – a full report by the synodical commission was tabled (De Handelingen 1847:254 vv) and a report was even presented regarding the assignment given by the previous synod (De Handelingen 1847:261). At this session of synod, there were also several discussion points regarding the functioning of the synodical commission (De Handelingen 1847:296).

The process with the establishment of a synodical commission in South Africa had therefore taken quite a different path than that in the Netherlands (Pont 1991:42). The one point in which there were similarities was the fact that in each, the government played a significant role in the establishment thereof.

The description in 1842 of the responsibilities of the synodical commission in the church in the Cape clearly stated that the synodical commission would be the highest governing body in the church when the General Assembly was not convened. A Presbyterian principle was also ignored by not assigning any elder to this important governing body (Pont 1991:264).

A positive development was that every circle was at least represented in the synodical commission (which was not the case in the Netherlands). While the DRC disregarded the role of the circle in delegating people to the synod, it had a totally different attitude to delegating people to a synodical commission, perhaps understandably so. Here was a relatively small church with a few dozen congregations, a few circles (presbyteries) and as such, a sort of provincial synod that in reality functioned as a general synod.

Historical development in 19th and 20th centuries

Up to the middle of the 19th century, the DRC was the only Reformed Church. Thereafter, the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika) came into existence as well as the Reformed Churches in Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika).

Within the DRC, there developed separate churches for different racial groups. Suffice it to say, they followed the lead of the DRC regarding church governance.

Just to complete the history of South Africa, four provinces (Cape Colony, Natal, Free State and Transvaal) formed the Union of South Africa in 1910. In 1961, the Union of South Africa became a Republic and in 1994, when a full democracy was established, the country was divided into seven provinces.

It is therefore clear that staggered representation did not play any role within the ranks of the DRC. It is, however, commendable that some elements of a staggered representation in the DRC came to light. Since 1994, the Church Order, in Article 33, made provision for an alternative way in which the synod could be constituted. Synod was to decide on the manner of representation as well as the number of delegates per circle (Die Kerkorde 2019, Art. 33.1.3). Up to 2022, however, no synod has made use of this permission.

During the further development of the DRC, major changes took place in the cities, but the tradition of small circles was kept. Indeed, a certain pattern was established: a circle would consist of a maximum of eight congregations.

Situation within the family of the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa

The family of DRCs had strong links with each other, also regarding the implementation of church polity.

Dutch Reformed Church

The situation remains that a church council sends delegates to both the circle and the synod. Although Article 31.1.3 allows for a synod to decide that delegates can also be selected by the circle, it is not known that any synod implements this. The synods delegate persons to the General Synod on a *pro rata* basis (Article 35.6). At present, according to Article 40.3, there is a general synodical commission for the general synod, and it is named a General Synodical Moderamen (Kerkorde van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, 2019). The different (provincial) synods also operate with synodical commissions.

Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa

The Church Order book of URCSA also contains some regulations which are still only worded in Afrikaans, and

therein they always make use of the term 'circle' (Church Order URCSA 2016, p. 195, 197). URCSA also stipulates in its Church Order of 2016 (Article 10) that the representatives of congregations shall meet as a regional synod at times and in a manner decided by the regional synod. While the situation regarding the representation at synod is therefore the same as that of the DRC, it is not the case with the general synod. In Article 11, it is stated that the general synod consists of the four members of the Moderamen of each regional synod as well as one minister of the word and one church council member from every presbytery within the boundaries of each regional synod. They also make room for young people, as well as male and female representatives of each presbytery (URCSA, Procedure of Meetings, Article 3.1.2, and Chapter 6: Procedure of Meetings – *Church Order and Regulations of the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa 2016*).

Dutch Reformed Church in Africa

The presbytery is also referred to as 'circle' (*ring*) in the Afrikaans Church Order. The circle comprises all the ministers in the circle as well as an elder, evangelist or deacon for every minister in the congregation (Article 24). The regional synod is constituted in the same manner as the circle (Article 26).

The General Synod (Article 32) is constituted by four members of each regional synod and one minister plus an elder, evangelist or deacon from every circle. Those delegated by the circle need to be there with a letter of credence of that circle (Article 32.3) (Die Hersiende Kerkorde van die NG Kerk in Afrika, 2007).

Situation with other Reformed Churches in South Africa

There is very much a shared history between the Afrikaans churches in South Africa. This is especially true for their foundation.

In the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika)

When compared, the Church Order of NRCA differs the most from the classical COD. NRCA assemblies are regarded as assemblies of the services (*ampte*). Order Rule 3 describes the assemblies of the services. The NRCA has only 3 traditional assemblies: church council, circle and the general church assembly (not calling this a synod). The presbytery is also referred to as 'circle' (Ordinance 2.2, p. 6).

There is no staggered representation, as the church council delegates representatives to attend the general church assembly (Ordinance 4.4, p. 50).

The NRCA also makes room for formal assemblies of elders and deacons on different levels in their church order (Kerkorde van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, 2019).

In the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika)

Of all the South African churches, the Church Order of the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA) is certainly the closest to that of Dordt. It still has only 86 articles, and these articles contain basically the same wording as that of Dordt (Nel, 2019:180–185).

The RCSA – in line with Dordt – only has four assemblies at present: church council, classis, regional synod, and general synod (Art. 29) (Church Order of the Reformed Churches of South Africa). They adhere to the staggered representation. This, however, was not always the case. The staggered representation was decided on at the National Synod (as it was called then) of 1958, following the recommendations of a study commission which was instituted on practical grounds (Visser: Appendix B: 337). A thorough description regarding the 1958 decision can be found in the report of the Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) of the United Reformed Church of North America (Sikkema:13,14). Since that time there was at times petitions to alter this (Die Kerkblad, Julie 2006:43; Sikkema:14).

Conclusion

This study does not elaborate on the developments that were implemented since 1830 in the many denominations that evolved in the Netherlands. Except for the many denominations, there were also adjustments made in the Reformed (*Hervormde*) Church in the Netherlands (Nel 2019:108–114; Van Wyk 2020:3–4).

The focus is on the formative period during the first half of the 19th century in South Africa. It is evident that historical development in another geographical area with a different demographical composition has led to a necessary deviation from the example set by the church in the Netherlands. It clearly illustrates that South African church councils have taken pride in delegating representatives to both the presbytery and the synod. This fact was surely supported by the fact that congregations were spread out over a vast area. The staggered form of delegating therefore never took off.

The naming of the presbytery as circle was generally accepted, the exception being the RCSA that continues with the name classis up to today.

Regarding the role of a synodical commission, a great deviation had also taken place from the initial Netherlands model where not every classis was represented in the synodical commission. In South Africa, it is important that at least every circle should be represented in a synodical commission.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

P.R.d.T. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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