

# **The Church Order Updated**

**Report from the committee for  
Evaluation of the Church Order**

**Summarized Translation**

## Inhoud

1	Introduction	3
2	Themes	4
3	Trends	5
4	Summary	6
5	Conclusions	7
6	Recommendations	8

# 1 Introduction

The official date of the unification of the church was May 1, 2004. As of that date the new church order became into force. It was agreed at that time that an evaluation of the church order would be executed after five years. Nobody after all could know beforehand whether the carefully balanced compromises in the by-laws and general regulations would be effective or not.

In the past five years the context of the church has changed. After the unification and its mostly inward-looking struggle for compromises and solutions, the church decided on a priority for missionary work. In 2007 the general synod adopted the vision statement "Learning to live out of wonder". The church should work on improving the life of the congregations, their development and their identity and on the classical assembly as inspiring platform for congregations and office-bearers. The question rises: do the organization and the regulations of the church allow sufficient space for this?

At the same time we became aware that the Protestant Church should take into account a major decrease in membership and financial resources. In the Protestant Ministries a reduction in staff and organization was accomplished: the regional offices were closed. Looking for possibilities to save on costs, we also had to consider the institutional designs of the church. Should we not reconsider regulations in order to concentrate resources on the core responsibilities of the church? Could we afford the luxury of this church order and this high degree of organization? What can be established about the future role of ministers and ecclesial workers? This final issue required a number of special study committees and it will be dealt with in a separate report.

The purpose and direction of the research and inquiries were established: how can we improve the practical regulations of the church order without affecting its intentions? This summarized translation leaves out the description of the research and immediately expresses

- The themes and trends resulting from the research;
- The summary;
- The conclusions;
- The recommendations.

## 2 Themes

- The composition of ecclesial assemblies, boards and colleges. Due to an increasing shortage of candidates it becomes continually more difficult to comply with the strict regulations concerning the composition of assemblies, boards and colleges with regard to numbers and representation of the deacons, elders and ministers.
- The classical assemblies experience a shortage of candidates and resources. The sphere of activity and the range of duties in itself are perceived to be meaningful. The quality however and strength in the practical execution of duties are endangered.
- At the moment the composition of the general synod reflects a wide representation of the grassroots level of the church (two delegates per classical assembly). The quality of the deliberations and the decision making process however is endangered by the size of the body.
- The colleges (for supervision, visitation etc.) have to deal with a shortage of qualified human resources. There is a scene of tension between the experience of meaningful duties on the one side and the weakening of quality and power on the other hand.
- At the grassroots level there is an increasing desire for being represented in the ecclesial assemblies in a recognizable way, in order to be able to identify with the policy of the ecclesial assembly.
- The church order distinguishes between the duties and responsibilities of the ecclesial assemblies and those of the diverse colleges. In reality however there is an increasing need for cooperation and mutual gearing of policy.
- At the local level the regulation concerning the registration of church members is perceived to be complicated and taxing. This perception is intensified by an increasing lack of support of the geographical principle of the membership of the congregation.
- The prescribed election procedure for elders and deacons is perceived to be unclear, causing many misunderstandings and sometimes conflicts, complaints and disputes.
- The office of ministers is a strategic core function in the church. By all concerned attention is called to:
  - Simplifying and clarifying the procedure of calling a minister;
  - A less non-committal nature of the cooperative communities of ministers and imbedding these communities in the classical assemblies;
  - A greater involvement from the board of the classical assemblies in the granting of study leave to the ministers;
  - Expansion and clarification of the authorization of retired ministers;
  - Special attention is called to the dealing with conflicts concerning ministers.
- Attention is called to a responsible employment and positioning of the ecclesial worker: involvement of the classical assembly with their appointment, the position related to or next to the deacons, elders and ministers, a clear regulation of the preaching consent.
- The general synod should have a more transparent and powerful performance. Decreasing the size, changing the internal allotment of duties and reconsidering the manner and procedures of the meeting could encourage this.

### 3 Trends

- There are clear indications of receding organizational and governing power and quality, causing tension between the quality requirements in the church order for good ecclesial governance and the actual situation.
- There is a strong demand for more flexible regulation rather than stringent ruling (e.g. the prescribed balance of ministers, deacons and elders in a body).
- People emphasize the position of members of ecclesial bodies to be a representative one rather than to be a delegate without a restricted mandate.
- More attention is called to the quality or expertise of members of ecclesial bodies rather than being an office-bearer and the ratio between deacons, elders and ministers.
- People advocate continuity in the (boards of) ecclesial assemblies and colleges rather than the circulation required.
- Ecclesial assemblies and colleges focus on cooperation and shared responsibility rather than on being independent.
- Ecclesial bodies (at the level of the classical assembly or the synod) need to be granted more authority: binding advice after consultation instead of required agreement.
- Ecclesial workers express solicitude for a qualitative and responsible execution of duties; congregations however ask for more authority and a ministry position for the ecclesial worker.
- Local congregations express emphasis on membership by choice rather than membership determined by geography.
- At the local level there is a preferment for appointing members of the church council by the council rather than for election by the congregation members.
- There is need for a general synod that provides inspired leadership, with sensitivity for what is going on at the local level and for what at this time spiritually is required in order to be church together.

## 4 Summary

The evaluation of the church order from the very beginning was aimed at the actual functioning of the regulation. The exploration had a pragmatic approach. Its purpose was the improvement of the regulation, directly encouraging the quality of being a congregation of a church and making regulations connect with the context of society in which congregations and church have to operate. The contributions from experience experts have been very valuable.

The fundamental principles and the basis of the church order (the articles with Roman numbers) have not been challenged. There is a sympathetic-critical attitude towards the church order. We find church councils to have a relaxed manner. People are not enslaved by the church order but profit from it when applicable. When the regulations are perceived to be complicated or coercive people go their own way. At the level of the classical assembly or the synod people feel a positive involvement with the church order, in particular when the body they are a member of is at stake. The sphere of activity of this body is perceived to be meaningful. People become critical when the regulations are overtaxing, have a contrary effect, or provide too little power or elbowroom. At the local level the church order is no common property.

Most experiences point at a faltering or receding organization. At all levels in the church we see an increasing lack of human resources, knowledge and expertise. At the local level there has been a decline in resources. We now see the effect of that spreading to the classical assemblies and to the synod. The suggestions for change remain within the current main structure of the church order; a fundamental revision of the church order is uncalled for.

The suggestions do not always point in the same direction. Situations and contexts obviously diverge. The question arises as to whether uniform regulations are feasible in the end. The call for flexibility in the church order anyhow is omnipresent. There is an urgent need for a church order that takes the divergence of local and of regional contexts into account seriously.

The divergence has to do with the tensions inherent to a presbyterian-synodical church as well. In this type of church, matters can be dealt with in a centralized manner or in a decentralized manner, depending on whether the presbyterian or the synodical element is emphasized. Some of the scenes of tension are:

- Should in the ecclesial assemblies (classical assembly, general synod) representation of all offices (minister, elder, and deacon) be underlined or should the representation of all congregations and classical assemblies be stressed (representation of the grassroots level)?
- Should in the ecclesial assemblies the presence of all offices be emphasized or should the required expertise and the experience of the delegates be underlined?
- For how long can we bear the tension between the increasing individualism and the geographical structure of the congregations? Up to now the two elements can be combined in the registration of members at the national level. This registration however requires the intensive cooperation of the congregations. The congregations prefer registration on the basis of the individual choice of the members.

## 5 Conclusions

- Considering the decrease of the available potential members it is desirable to:
  - substantially reduce the current size of the ecclesial assemblies;
  - think over the possibility to delegate (and to appoint) former office bearers to (in) ecclesial assemblies (and colleges);
  - give a greater liberty to church councils, classical assemblies and the general synod to determine their composition.
- In order to safeguard the continuity in the ecclesial administration the term of service of the members taking part in the administration should be expanded. It is desirable that ecclesial assemblies can decide to delegate their duties to their boards.
- Specific problems concerning regulations proved to be interfering or damaging to persons or to the image of the church (e.g. conflicts about ministers, the functioning of the general synod) should be dealt with as soon as possible.

## 6 Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: the church councils**

- If the number of office-bearers is less than 10 the church council itself will be able to determine how its composition will be. Minimal requirement is that all offices (elders, deacons, ministers) shall be present.
- The minimum number of office-bearers in the church council shall be 4. The church council shall in that case function as board of deacons or as board of church stewards.
- Make it possible that the congregation members can authorize the church council for a maximum of 6 years to elect elders and deacons itself.
- Maintain the rule that elders and deacons can be directly re-elected once; however the church council can determine in its regulations whether a second direct re-election is possible.
- Look for possibilities to counteract the regulation requiring accumulation of duties.

### **Recommendation 2: the classical assemblies**

- Maintain the current grouping of congregations into classical assemblies and of classical assemblies into regional bodies
- Reduce the number of delegates from each congregation from 2 to 1. The delegate should have a standing substitute.
- The classical assembly itself may determine how its composition of office-bearers will be. All offices are required to be present, with a minimum of 4 per office (elders-church stewards count as a separate group).
- The duties of the classical assembly concerning congregations can be transferred to the board of the classical assembly.
- Safeguard the professional support of the classical assembly by the Protestant Ministries.

### **Recommendation 3**

- Do away with the general classical assemblies.
- Let each region have a required periodic consultation with delegates from the boards of the classical assembly.
- Establish new regional colleges dealing with problems and conflicts concerning ministers and ecclesial workers.

### **Recommendation 4: the general synod**

- Reduce the number of delegates from each classical assembly from 2 to 1. Every delegate should have a standing substitute.
- Reduce the number of board members of synod.
- The term of service for the delegates shall be 4 years, with the possibility of a single extension. A person should not be member of synod more than 8 subsequent years.
- The term of service for the board members shall be 4 years.
- The term of service for the general secretary shall be 4 years; the general secretary can be re-elected twice.

- Review the regulated allotment of duties of the small synod and the general synod.

**Recommendation 5: the Evangelical-Lutheran synod.**

- Reduce the number of delegates from the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod to 3.

**Recommendation 6: the colleges**

- Reduce the actual period of time for dealing with cases concerning administration of justice by increasing the legal support for the colleges.

**Recommendation 7**

- Abandon the number fixation between office-bearers and lay people in the regional college for the visitation.
- Every classical assembly can determine the number of visitors, with a minimum fixed at 4.
- Drop the regulation about substitutes.
- The classical assembly can appoint a new visitor only after consulting the chair of the college.
- Determine in a protocol the requirements for a visitor including the obligatory introductory course.
- In cases of extraordinary visitation the regional college for visitation can give a binding advice.
- A written account of the visitation should really be discussed in the classical assembly.
- Normal visitation will as of now happen within the ecclesial assembly concerned.
- Regional and general colleges for visitation should consult one another about a fixed protocol concerning allotment of duties.

**Recommendation 8**

- Establish a structural consultation of the Regional College for dealing with Finance and Administration and the classical assembly, in order to have a framework for the general care for the financial well being of the congregations.
- Add to the regulations that preceding permission of the RCFA in case of large financial transactions concerning church buildings and real estate of the congregation is required.

**Recommendation 9**

- Draft a stipulation in by-law 3-20 determining how a minister can be discharged from his activities and be released from his congregation with agreement from all parties involved.

**Recommendation 10**

- Simplify the stipulations about the member registration: registration in a congregation takes place on the basis of the preference of the congregation member.

**Recommendation 11**

- Provide space for the founding of (new) congregations.

**Recommendation 12**

- Stipulate explicitly that the participation of ministers in the cooperative communities of ministers is obligatory.
- Enhance the relationship between the cooperative communities and the classical assemblies.
- Let the work communities appoint the minister that takes care of a vacant congregation.
- Specify the duties of such a minister.
- Put the legal position of a temporary minister on the same footing as the legal position of the permanent minister.
- Draft stipulations for interim-ministers.
- Simplify the classification of ministers into two categories: ministers in service and ministers not in service.
- Expand and clarify the authorization of retired ministers.
- Explore the possibility of synod restricting itself to dealing with the outlines of the legal position of ministers; details will be handled in the organized consultation of the church with the ministers. The volume general rules in the church order for the salaries and pensions of ministers could be reduced drastically in that manner.

**Recommendation 13**

- Elaborate concerning the ecclesial worker in what local situations the transition to being a minister could be made; what are the requirements the ecclesial worker should meet for this transition?
- Enlarge the possibilities for non commissioned ecclesial workers and homiletically gifted congregation members to receive consent to preach, in order to prevent that the consent to preach will be the sole ground for appointing an ecclesial worker in a congregation without a minister.

**Recommendation 14**

- Draft a stipulation in the by-laws of the church concerning the maximum term for consideration (of changes in the church order) by the classical assemblies.
- Draft an instruction for the classical assemblies how to proceed in a round of considerations.
- Improve the communication between the (board of the) general synod and the classical assemblies.

**Recommendation 15**

- Explore the possibility how to provide space for members of the board of synod to take part in the public discussion of issues touching the heart of the proclamation of the church without prejudicing the formal verdicts of the synod of the colleges of synod.

**Recommendation 16**

- Merge the General Advisory Council and the General Advisory Council for the Reformed Confession into a Council concerning Church and Theology. The duties of this new Council should be:
  - the current duties of the separate councils
  - the advice for the synod concerning Lutheran confessions
  - the advice concerning current theological issues

**Recommendation 17**

- Draft stipulations concerning the use of e-mail in the internal and external communication of an ecclesial body; in particular the requirements for legality of a decision making process by e-mail outside the official church meetings.