

PRESS RELEASE OF SYNOD BELHAR OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA, APRIL 12-16, 2021

Opening and constitution of meeting

Rev G Mnisi led the Prayer Service held in the Church of the FRC Belville on Sunday 11 April on Col 4:12 with the focus on prayer and its importance during the Synod.

On 12 April Rev P Abrahams, on behalf of the convening church FRC Belhar, delivered an opening address after reading from 1 Thess. 1: 1 – 10. The letters of credence were verified to ensure that the delegates were lawfully delegated by their classes.

Attendance

The following delegates from Classis North were present: Rev PG Boon, Rev HH van Alten, Rev GF Mnisi, Br G Hagg, Br F Hagg and Br GR Bouwmeester. From Classis South: Rev J Bruintjes, Rev P Abrahams, Br J Klaaste, Br M de Wit, Br W Bijker and Br R Snijder.

The following brothers were elected as the officers of Synod 2021: Chair: Rev J Bruintjes; Deputy Chair: Br G Hagg; Scribe: Br R Snijder.

Despite the Covid-19 travel restrictions we were grateful that delegates from our sister-churches could attend online during several sessions and also acted as advisors. Br B Veenendal represented the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA). Br. O Bouwman and Rev H Schouten represented the Canadian and American Reformed Churches (CanRC), while Prof J van Vliet represented the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS). Rev. H Venema and br. A Pedro were delegated on behalf of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands (RCNL, *GKv*). Rev F Bijzet was special advisor on the sister-church relationship with RCNL. The Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) sent Rev Coen Vrey who attended parts of the synod.

Synod Rules

In the past the FRCSA have adopted a process of ratification of synod decisions after synod had concluded in order to involve churches. Synod decided that Deputies in future would send their reports via the Stated Clerk to churches for their comments. Comments should reach the Deputies three months before Synod. Deputies could then submit their final reports with Addenda if necessary. Objections from congregations would still be discussed at Synod. Synod rejected a proposal from Classis North that all churches should be represented at Synod.

Other rules were also amended and changed to better streamline the rules and the functioning of synod. These rules will now be published in order for churches to have insight in how synod functions.

Contacts with Churches in South Africa (DCCSA)

To date Deputies had maintained contact with four South African church federations. With regard to the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCAfr) attempts for contact were made but to no avail. With regard to the Free Church of South Africa (FCSA), deputies attended their General Assembly in King Williamstown, to motivate the FCSA to remain active members of the ICRC. The FCSA admitted that this was due to financial constraints and this will be reported to ICRC for support. Contact was made with the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of SA (REACH). REACH deals with similar issues as we do, such as hermeneutics, women in

office and gender issues. Synod decided to continue contact with FCSA and REACH as they were committed to sound Scriptural obedience.

DCSA expressed concerns about the stalling developments towards unity with the RCSA at a national level. In 2019 the RCSA and FRCSA organised a conference on church federation, at which general agreement was found on most theological, confessional and church order principles. However, in practice the implementation of such principles was sometimes hard to attain in the RCSA.

Synod adopted a proposal by Deputies to encourage local churches to intensify and expand their contacts with local RCSA churches. The Deputies' focus should shift to the provision of more support to these local consistories, particularly the churches in non-Afrikaans speaking communities. Although Deputies have provided guidelines, local circumstances may vary significantly, and more guidance is needed, e.g. through draft agreements.

Contacts with churches abroad (DRCA) and membership of the ICRC

FRCSA have a sister-church relation with the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Liberated (RCNL), the latter with restrictions about Rules 5 and 6 of the Church Order.

Synod expressed its thankfulness for the faithfulness of CanRC and their support to the FRCSA, particularly through prayer, communications on sister-church relationships and funding for our students and the Reformational Study Centre. Mission Deputies SA (MDSA) have approached the CanRC for funding of mission work in South Africa. However, Canadian government regulations make it almost impossible to fund foreign activities unless the Canadian donor remains in control of expenditures. A proposal was made to investigate the possibility of CanRC to fund the FRCSA Deputies Theological Training and then allocating FRCA funding to MDSA. Synod decided that a three-way discussion be arranged between the deputies in the three countries. Synod decided to maintain the sister-church relations, to send a delegate to the CanRC synod Guelph of 2022 and keep FRCSA churches informed about developments in the CanRC.

With regard to the FRCA, Synod expressed gratitude for their commitment to sound doctrine, as well as their support in prayer and funding of theological training in the FRCSA. FRCA delegates were asked about the ICRC, on which a positive response was received in that a proposal in this regard will be tabled at the FRCA Synod in Albany, June 2021. Synod decided to continue this sister-church relationship and send a recorded greetings address to Synod Albany. Synod also decided that DRCA should remain informed about ecclesiastical developments in the RCNZ and Asia Pacific, mainly via the FRCA and the ICRC.

FRCSA Synod 2017 had decided to maintain a restricted sister-church relationship with the RCNL, and take a final decision at a later stage. The final decision would be based on whether the RCNL Synod of Goes 2020 would confirm the decisions of Synod Meppel to allow women in all ecclesiastic offices and on the proposed unification with the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC). Synod discussed the confirmation of the two decisions at Synod Goes. In their original report DRCA had made two alternative proposals, one to end the sister-church relation, the other to maintain it in order to be able to assist concerned RCNL congregations and members. Following a report by Rev F Bijzet Deputies had withdrawn the second alternative in an amendment to their report.

Synod confirmed that the decisions of Synod Goes rendered the sister-church relationship untenable. However, it was argued that no date was fixed when the sister-church relationship would be ended and that we could go an extra mile. It was argued that the churches in the RCNL that had objected to the decisions of Synod Meppel, may get the impression that the FRCSA are leaving them to their own troubles if we terminate a sister-church relationship with the RCNL now. After voting Synod decided as follows:

1. That the RCNL, by the decisions of Synod of Goes 2020 regarding women in office and unification with the Netherlands Reformed Church, have deviated from the Word of God and undermined its authority. These decisions by RCNL synods are sufficient to terminate sister-church relations (in line with synod Soshanguve North 2017, art 44).
2. For the sake of local churches and church members in the RCNL who have objections to the decisions of the Synods of Meppel and Goes, to continue the restricted sister-church relationship as decided at Soshanguve-North 2017, art 44.17.
3. Either FRCSA synod 2024 will make a final decision, or the sister-church relations will end when the RCNL unite with the DRC.
4. Although not included in the rules for sister-church relationships, synod mandates Deputies to engage with concerned churches and members who object against the decisions of RCNL synods with the purpose of discussing the way forward.
5. To communicate with the RCNL deputies about the mandate of the FRCSA's DRCA to engage with concerned congregations and members.
6. To write a letter to all church councils of the FRCSA and to educate congregations on the nature and grounds for this decision.
7. To mandate DRCA to communicate synod's decisions to our Canadian and Australian sister-churches as well as to the ICRC.

With regards to De Gereformeerde Kerken (DGK) and the Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland (GKN) synod noted with gratefulness to the Lord that the two church federations are in an advanced stage of unification. Synod mandates our deputies to continue their engagement with these churches and that after unification a sister-church relation could be considered. In case of members from these federations coming to South Africa, consistories should allow them as members or as guests at the Lord's Supper – should they make such a request – only after a suitable discussion with them.

With regards to the RCNZ synod mandated Deputies to stay informed about developments via our sister-churches (FRCA) and not to enter into a direct ecclesiastical fellowship due to our limited manpower.

The FRCSA are active members of the ICRC and appreciation was expressed for how this conference guarded at the Reformed doctrine. ICRC has requested the FRCSA to assist in strengthening the church in Africa and encourage reformed churches to join the ICRC. The Reformed Study Centre can play an important role here. It was decided that two FRCSA Deputies would focus on the ICRC commitments and promote the ICRC among FRCSA congregations, e.g. through the ICRC's magazine Lux Mundi. Synod decided to send at least two delegates to the next ICRC conference which will be held in Windhoek, Namibia.

Bible translation, liturgical music, forms and prayers

Deputies Bible Translation submitted two reports with opposing views on the Afrikaans Bybel Direkte Vertaling (Bible Direct Translation, BDV) of 2020. The one report proposed that synod first decides on the acceptance of the Critical Text as source text edition for translation of the New Testament, as had been used

for the BDV. If yes, the BDV 2020 could be assessed in terms of the reliability and correctness of the Afrikaans translation. If not, there would be no need to evaluate the BDV. The second report proposed that only the Textus Receptus or Majority Text could be used as the source text edition, and therefore the BDV should be rejected. Synod discussed the differences between the various source text editions and were informed that there is more than 98% of congruity between the two source editions. Our sister-churches abroad and CRTS had accepted the Critical Text as a source text and the basis for theological training. Synod also considered the fact that BDV 2020 highlighted differences in translation in footnotes. Synod decided not to express a preference of any of the source editions. With regard to English translations, synod recommended the English Standard Version (ESV) for official use in our churches and the New International Version (NIV) as allowable, particularly for our Mission churches, as acceptable Bible translations. Synod mandated deputies to continue with the evaluation of the BDV 2020 and also the need for Sotho or other African language translations for use in the churches specifically for mission churches.

With regard to the liturgical forms and form prayers the Deputies report was adopted but new Deputies will be mandated to solicit more input from congregations on the alternative form for celebrating the Lord's Supper ('Viering van die Heilige Nagmaal 2') and report to next synod. Deputies will also investigate which forms have not been translated into Sotho and consider reprinting the forms produced by the DRCSA together with a translation of the forms that do not appear in the DRCSA book used in the mission churches.

Needy churches (art. 11)

After several years in which applications from needy churches remained low, requests for support are expected to increase due to newly instituted churches and more needs in other churches. Deputies requested therefore an increase of funding from the churches. Deputies warned about the danger of the federation developing into a bond of needy churches that would be dependent on foreign funding, which is unsustainable. Mission congregations that want to institute should realise that they are expected to provide their own funding for basic costs.

Mission

With gratitude synod took notice of the mission work being done by the churches, the coordinating and oversight role of the Mission Deputies of SA, and the availability of funds for the coming years from the RCNL (via the channel of ZAM/DVN). Due to God's blessings several mission churches in Tshwane and Cape Town intend to institute within the next three years. Synod discussed a concern about the Missio Dei approach apparently underlying the new ZAM/DVN vision on mission work. The classical vision of mission work is to convert unbelievers, spread the Gospel, and plant churches. The secondary objective is funding of more diaconal type projects and in providing helping hands. The ZAM/DVN mission focuses on declaring God's love in word and deed and help build God's Kingdom on earth, so that people in the world acknowledge God and want to follow Him, in short "Sharing faith worldwide".

Synod also took note of the gradual decrease in ZAM/DVN funding. Deputies were mandated to continue cooperation with ZAM/DVN through the Agreement of Cooperation. The decrease in their funding necessitates an increase in funding by the FRCSA churches and requests for support from sister-churches abroad. Delegates from the CanRC indicated that opportunities for funding mission work outside Canada were restricted.

Theological Training

Deputies Theological Training reported with gratitude to the Lord that currently seven students were enrolled for theological training, two of them at MDiv level at CRTS. Five students were in different stages of BA Languages degree studies at South African institutions. Deputies recommended a single training trajectory consisting of a BA Languages and an MDiv at CRTS. The annual studies at MDiv level would normally consist of eight months academic studies in Hamilton, and three months Practical Pastoral Training in South Africa. Deputies proposed to also use supportive studies to help students reach the desired academic level to enter the theological training. The interest of the churches should be more important than that of prospective students. Therefore, theological training should be firmly grounded in solid theological studies and then contextually applied. Training at South African institutions should occur preferably near the student's congregation to ensure students do not alienate from their congregation. Prof van Vliet as advisor from CRTS indicated that the MDiv training at CRTS should preferably be through classroom attendance in Hamilton, but CRTS is developing alternative hybrid training which would consist of a combination of in-class training, online training, and practical training. Students would be mentored in South Africa by their own pastor and if necessary a contracted mentor, and at CRTS by mentors appointed by the institution. Synod expressed their desire to not look at CRTS as an exclusive training option but also investigate alternatives, such as the newly planned independent 'Gereformeerde Teologiese Akademie' (Reformed Theological Academy).

Liturgical music

Deputies Liturgical Music had requested churches to make presentations on new hymns that could be added in line with the criteria and framework that was adopted by Synod 2011. Churches had proposed additional themes to Deputies. Deputies highlighted the reality that in several congregations the opposition to hymns was so vocal that consistory refrained from singing them. During Synod discussions it was emphasised that the theological foundation for singing hymns has been well explained in the past. Synod decided that the new themes proposed by FRC Pretoria (Christian Life and the Fruit of the Spirit; Perseverance of the saints and the armour of God; Jesus' Return; Prayer; Comfort when Believers Die) and FRC Bellville (Creation and Recreation; The Last Judgement; Eschatology) should be added to the list of themes used for selecting hymns and Skrifberymings. A sub-committee should also be established with members of the Sotho-speaking churches and missionaries which will work on evaluating the Difela tsa Sione hymns and psalms with a view to standardizing the songs. The Deputies will also offer our assistance to the RCSA/Calvyn Jubileum Fund in the form of IT expertise to further develop and improve the GKSA application of Psalms/Skrifberymings, as it is being increasingly used in our federation

Synod decided to approve the following 14 Skrifberymings for use by the churches for testing: 51,52,53,54, 59, 63, 64, 65, 68, 71,73,75,77 & 78, and request consistories to provide feedback to deputies on these proposed Skrifberymings.

Synod Treasurer

Synod Treasurer reported on the financial status of the church federation, which had become critical over the past two years. Not all churches contributed, and those that did, not all did so on time. As a result cash flow problems arose. It was proposed to send a letter to all consistories to keep their synodical finances up to date and to keep each other accountable at classis level. The budget for 2021-24 was extensively debated as a cap had been set on synodical expenditures, and deputies had requested contributions that exceeded this cap..

Government, Stated Clerk, and Internet

Synod decided that synods would send blessing addresses to both the President of the RSA and the Mayor of the city in which synods are held. The Stated Clerk was thanked for his continuous good work over the years. The Stated Clerk would together with the Archivist of the Archival Church investigate and start to implement an updated and digital archival system. Furthermore, the Stated Clerk was mandated to publish the newly adopted Rules of Synod as a new Church Book, together with other church federational documents, as indicated by FRCSA Synods of 2008 up to 2021.

Synod mandated Deputies Internet Communication to redesign the website and make it more attractive and modern; to keep the website updated and current with all publications, and encourage churches to keep their information up to date; and to ensure that all pages are in both Afrikaans and English.

Next synod

The FRC Mamelodi was appointed as convening church for the next synod, scheduled DV for September 2024. The FRC Pretoria-Maranata was appointed as alternate.

The chairman thanked the convening church and sisters and brothers of Belhar and Belville for the excellent way in which they hosted the synod.

After a devotion from Romans 16 : 1-17 and 25 – 27 and prayer the chairman Rev. Johan Bruintjes closed the synod.