

## 21.9 DEPUTIES TRANSLATION OF DOCTRINAL CREEDS, FORMULARIES AND PRAYER (Artt 96, 328)

### THE OPEN DECLARATION

- A. The Report is stated.
- B. **Decision:** The Report is referred to Commission Doctrinal Matters 2.
- C. Rev L du P van der Vyver reports on behalf of Commission Doctrinal Matters 2.

#### D. REPORT

##### 1. Mandate (Acta, 2006:605)

“The Synod accepts the Proposal in the following manner: The Open Declaration is referred to Study Deputies together with the Proposal so that they can investigate it in the light of above-mentioned points 1 and 2 and can reformulate it as is deemed necessary and report back to the next Synod regarding the matter”.

**Decision: Noted.**

##### 2. Interpretation of the mandate

- 2.1 From point 2.1 (Acta, 2006:605) it seems that the Synod was of the opinion that a study and reformulation of the Open Declaration might be necessary.
- 2.2 From point 2.2 (Acta, 2006:605) it follows that the necessity of changes to the Open Declaration should be motivated in light of Reformed church history and church polity.

**Decision: Noted.**

##### 3. Church historical motivation

- 3.1 The Christian Reformed Church compiled an Open Declaration at the Synod of Zwölle in 1854. From then on delegates to ecclesiastical meetings showed their agreement with the Reformed doctrine, service and discipline through the Open Declaration. Two historical events led to this:

A variety of churches and church denominations came into existence in the Netherlands at the time. The Christian Reformed Church, who broke away from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1834, had to define its distinctive identity.

The Christian Reformed Church reacted against the view of the church that originated in the Dutch Reformed Church under the influence of the Enlightenment. According to this the church was seen as a society of persons with common goals who take decisions on a majority basis (see Spoelstra 1989:283, Bos, 1950:189). The Christian Reformers wanted to use an Open Declaration to emphasize that the church is not just an ordinary society of people, but that it functions on the foundation of Scripture, confession and church order.

The Christian Reformed Church desired to be a free Reformed Church according to the doctrine, service and discipline of the Canons of Dordt. The open declaration emphasized this confessional foundation of the Christian Reformed Church, and delegates to ecclesiastical meetings were bound to these confessional foundations (see Spoelstra, 1963:182). Rev Dirk Postma originally belonged to the Christian Reformed Church and proposed at the GKSA Synod of 1862 that an open declaration should be read publicly at the constitution of the meeting (GKSA, 1862: art 12). In this Open Declaration the Synod witnessed to its agreement with the Three Formularies of Unity, the Canons of Dordt (1618, 1619) and the liturgy of the Reformed Church in The Netherlands. The declaration also invited all churches who accept the Canons of Dordt, its service and church

governance to correspondence and ecclesiastical community with the GKSA (GKSA, 1862:art 12). The Synod of 1863 (art 9) decided to reformulate the Open Declaration. The reformulation contains an overt reference to the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession of Faith, The Canons of Dordt and the Three Formularies of Unity. However, no real change in terms of content was made. The Synod of 1894 (art 3) decided that General (Particular Synods) had to decide themselves whether the Open Declaration had to be read at the constitution of their meetings or not. The Open Declaration was translated into Afrikaans on the instruction of the Synod of 1913 (art 87), and has remained unchanged since then.

A revision of the language of the Open Declaration can historically speaking be necessary, because the current declaration has been in use for almost a century and the Afrikaans language has undergone certain changes during that time. The Open Declaration in its current form contains several archaisms and tautological concepts that should be addressed. The sentence constructions are sometimes long and clumsy, and could be stated more simply.

**Decision: Noted.**

#### **4. Considerations with regard to Church Polity**

- 4.1 The aim of the Open Declaration is that the delegates underwrite their Letters of Faith by signaling their agreement with the Open Declaration (Handleiding by die Kerkorde, 1966). The Open Declaration therefore does not contain a mandate that is prescribed by the constituted meeting, but rather a mandate that is constituted with the meeting itself (see Spoelstra, 1989:211).

The function of the Open Declaration is threefold:

Firstly, the Open Declaration describes the code and order according to which ecclesiastical matters should be dealt with in meetings. Such descriptions are necessary for the orderly functioning of the church and the ecclesiastical meetings (1 Cor 14:40, art 86).

Secondly, the Open Declaration serves church unity by describing reformed people's unity in doctrine, service and discipline, and inviting all churches who underwrite the same foundations to correspondence and actual unity.

Thirdly, the Open Declaration has a confessional character. The delegates openly and publicly confess their reformed faith.

**Decision: Noted.**

#### **5. Ecumenical comparisons**

- 5.1 The Open Declaration of the Christian Reformed Faith, in comparison to the Open Declaration of the GKSA, emphasizes to a larger extent the necessity of witness. It therefore contains references to texts such as John 8:31 and Matthew 10:32. However, there are no real differences in content. The Open Declaration of the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands (GKN) contains two accentuations that the declaration of the GKSA does not contain explicitly. It emphasizes the fact that Christ is the Only Head of the church, and that ecclesiastical meetings solely take decisions in the light of Scripture and the confessions. It furthermore declares that the churches will seek unity among them in Word and Spirit and that they will fight together in the struggle against the sinful world.

**Decision: Noted.**

#### **6. Matters for decision**

- 6.1 The current Open Declaration contains archaic and tautological language use that should be addressed. The sentence constructions are sometimes long and clumsy, and can be stated more simply.

6.2 The fact that Christ is the only Head of the Church should be emphasized, since ecclesiastical meetings serve the authority of Christ.

6.3 The inclusion of the principle of ecclesiastical unity aimed inwards and not only outwards can strengthen the unity seeking character of the open declaration.

**Decision: Points 6.1 to 6.3 noted.**

## 7. Reformulations

7.1 The concepts that have been replaced by more current terms, as well as tautological terms that have been deleted, have been underlined. Sentences that have been reformulated have been printed in italics.

<b>TRANSLATED ORIGINAL VERSION</b>	<b>TRANSLATED EDITED VERSION</b>
<p>The synod meeting of the <i>Reformed Churches</i> openly and each member for himself declare as follows:</p> <p>We <u>embrace</u> wholeheartedly and with good conscience the Creeds of Unity that were determined and published by the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, held in Dordrecht in the years 1618-1619, namely the <u>Heidelberg Catechism, the 37 Articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith, The Canons of Dordt or 5 Articles against the Remonstrants</u> as our Confession and we promise to maintain them through the <u>graceful power of the Holy Spirit</u> according to God's Word, <u>each according to the responsibilities of his office</u>.</p> <p><i>Also the Liturgy determined by the above-mentioned Synod we accept as prescript for the practice of the holy service.</i></p> <p><i>With regard to the Church governance we will abide to the church order of the above-mentioned Synod of Dordrecht as it was amended by the synods of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.</i></p> <p>All who have received the same precious faith with us through the grace of the Holy Spirit and who wishes to confess and <u>bethought</u> it with us <u>we invite wholeheartedly</u> to ecclesiastical community.</p> <p><i>We wish to correspond with <u>all churches in this part of the world and other countries</u> who wish to confess and bethought the faith with us in <u>brotherly communion</u>.</i></p>	<p>The Synod meeting of the Reformed Churches of South Africa openly and each member for himself declare as follows:</p> <p>We wholeheartedly believe in the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who reveals himself in Scripture. We believe that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church and that He rules his church through His Word and Spirit. We wholeheartedly and with good conscience accept the Three Creeds of Unity that were accepted at the Synod of Dordt 1618-1619 the doctrine of Dordt, namely the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Canons of Dordt. We promise to uphold this truth through the merciful guidance and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit according to God's Word.</p> <p>We accept the liturgy determined by the Canons of Dordrecht for our services, as they were ammended upon by the National Synods of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.</p> <p>In church governance we maintain the Canons of Dordrecht, accepted in 1618-1619 and amended by the National Synods of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.</p> <p>We as a meeting declare that we strive for true shared unity, and that we as body of Christ confess the true faith to the world. All who have received the same precious faith through the merciful work of the Holy Spirit, and who want to uphold it with us,</p>

<p><i>May it please the Lord in his mercy to <u>sanctify his precious Word to many hearts</u>. It is the wish and prayer of the above-mentioned synod meeting that through this and through the work of the Holy Spirit all the elected should gather and all the true believers should unite in one ecclesiastical community (Acta 1863:8).</i></p>	<p>are wholeheartedly called to ecclesiastical communion. Our wish is to have the closest communion of faith and ecclesiastical correspondence with all those church communities who profess the same as we do.</p> <p>May the Lord in his mercy grant that many will accept his Word through the work of the Holy Spirit. May all the elected be called as true believers and be united in one ecclesiastical community.</p> <p>It is our wish and prayer.</p>
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## 7.2 Motivation

- 7.2.1 The full name of the church denomination was added for the sake of completeness.
- 7.2.2 The reference to the Triune God was added to clearly distinguish between the Christian faith's concept of God and that of other religions.
- 7.2.3 The reference to Christ as Head of the Church was included because ecclesiastical meetings serve the authority of Christ.
- 7.2.4 The following archaic concepts in the Open Declaration were replaced by more contemporary concepts
- 7.2.4.1 *embrace* – accept
- 7.2.4.2 *graceful power of the Holy Spirit* – merciful leadership and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. The concept of graceful power is archaic and difficult to understand. We are of the opinion that the suggested formulation communicates the intention more clearly.
- 7.2.4.3 *invite (nodig)* – called.
- 7.2.4.4 *bethought* – uphold
- 7.2.4.5 *brotherly communion* – community of faith.
- 7.2.4.6 *sanctify to many hearts* – accept.
- 7.2.5 The following tautological concepts were removed
- 7.2.5.1 *37 Articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith*
- 7.2.5.2 *The Canons of Dordt or the five articles against the Remonstrants*
- 7.2.5.3 *each according to their office*
- 7.2.6 The Open Declaration should be clear. The declaration has therefore been shortened and simplified in places, without changing the content of the Open Declaration (compare the parts in italics with the parts in the original declaration).
- 7.2.7 The expression *also the liturgy of the above-mentioned Synod* was expanded to *liturgical principles and guidelines as determined by National Synods*. The reason for this is that the National Synod has taken decisions with regard to liturgy during services that offer expansions on the liturgical principles laid down by the Synod of Dordrecht (see Acta, 1997:731-768).
- 7.2.8 The expression [*We declare as meeting that we aim for mutual unity in the freedom of Christ and that we as body of Christ confess the true faith to the world*] has been added to strengthen the inward confessional and unity-seeking character of the Open Declaration.
- 7.2.9 The concepts *elected* and *true believers* in the last paragraph is susceptible to misunderstanding since it can leave the impression that not all elected are true believers. The sentence has been reformulated to make the original intention clearer.

**Decision: Approved – changes already made – Deputies Acta. The Open Declaration that has to be translated into the other languages used in the GKSA, is referred to the to-be-appointed Deputies for finalisation.**