

Appendix 7

Report on a Visit to the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt (GKV) General Synod, Zwolle Zuid

Foreign Delegates Week, 27-31 May 2008

It was a special privilege and responsibility to be the delegate of the RCNZ at this portion of the GKV's triennial General Synod. While this synod stretches over a period of several months by meeting on Fridays and Saturdays only, one full week is set aside as 'Foreign Delegates Week'. This is organised by the GKV's Deputies for Relations with Churches Abroad, known as BBK. It provides an opportunity for sister churches of GKV to speak about themselves as well as to interact with any issues that they or the GKV is currently facing. Besides that, there were two major issues that the foreign delegates were invited to hear discussed and interact with. These were the GKV's discussions with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (formerly known as GKN, Vrijgemaakt, Buiten Verband) which highlight issues of the nature of subscription to the Confessions. The second issue had to do with the role of men/women in the church – most critically as this pertains to women and the offices.¹

This report provides a very brief summary of what was experienced during the week of May 27-31.

1. Deputies for Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK)

Approximately 30 delegates from sister churches in Scotland, Ireland, Kenya, South Africa, India, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Venezuela, USA and Canada attended. (OPC delegates were also present although they are still considering becoming a sister church of GKV.)

The format was that each sister church was given an opportunity to introduce itself, pass on fraternal greetings, highlight issues, needs and reasons for thanksgiving being experienced and, if desired, interact with critical issues facing GKV. There were many speeches, either in English with a written Dutch translation or vice versa. Responses, often of equally as long as the initial speeches, were given by various members of BBK. These were in the form of an interaction with the sister church as well as a response to concerns and criticisms expressed about GKV. Some of the sister churches, in particular the migrant churches with long, intimate ties with GKV spoke sharply and very critically and were replied to in kind. (It felt very Dutch to me!)

It was my privilege to introduce and send greetings on behalf of the RCNZ. I spoke of issues currently facing our churches in NZ and highlighted the remoteness of our churches from the GKV, but the importance of developing relations where our work intersects – especially in the area of overseas mission, international diaconal aid and the valuable work of ICRC.² The Rev Johan Plug (who attended Synod 2005 at Hamilton on behalf of GKV) responded.³

2. Men/women in the church

The report's own summary of this (book sized!) report is as follows:

The previous synod⁴ gave deputies M/W in the Church the mandate to investigate problems surrounding the position of women in our churches.

This investigation was conducted among some 2500 church members and 70 ministers. The results give a representative picture of the opinions as they exist in the GKV in 2007.

Important results were:

¹ Note that these very lengthy reports are available on the GKV website in both Dutch and English. They are therefore readily accessible.

² I would highlight the way many delegates from around the world spoke of great respect for and appreciation of the work of our br John Goris!

³ Transcripts of these speeches are available upon request.

⁴ Amersfoort 2005 (vG)

1. *women are involved in our churches in all sorts of manners;*⁵
2. *about half of the church members are in favour of female deacons;*
3. *a minority is in favour of female elders or ministers;*
4. *the opinions of church members are correlated to their level of education and age*⁶;
5. *there is difference of opinion and embarrassment*⁷ *with respect to the explanation of Biblical prescriptions*⁸ *regarding men and women.*

*In addition, literature was researched, for example, decisions taken by closely related Bible believing churches. This research makes clear that how one reads the Bible [as a whole, DvG] has a great influence on how one reads the Bible texts.*⁹

Hence deputies suggest:

1. *to invest*¹⁰ *in thorough study of Scripture, even if quick*¹¹ *answers will not be gained that way;*
2. *to try take [to make] a number of short term (temporary)*¹² *practical decisions.*

I have quoted at length so that what was discussed is clear. The intense discussion on the floor of synod when this report was introduced took place in what was called the ‘first round’. The deputies presented a brief summary of their report and allowed free discussion and input from the floor. More than 15 people, both synodical deputies and foreign delegates interacted. It was at this point that being able to understand Dutch was invaluable! While many of the delegates spoke English very well indeed, when it came to expressing matters about which they felt deeply, they could only do so in their own language.

It was noteworthy that most foreign delegates of European background interacted sharply, critically and passionately. Concern was expressed regarding the implicit hermeneutics understood to be behind the report and the methodology (that is, the place the empirical study has in this report). There was concern that it might create even greater confusion in the churches. It was pointed out that if the analysis of what the report claims about commonly held beliefs concerning women in the church is correct, it becomes a matter of challenging and correcting rather than trying to find ways of accommodating it. The fear that this pathway is parallel to that taken by the GKN (syn) and CRCNA was also voiced repeatedly.

There were also GKV synodical delegates who expressed concern and spoke positively of the minority report that was also on the table.

The deputies promised to take into account the points and issues raised on the floor of synod. Note that no motions were moved or decisions made at this point. There will be a ‘second round’ of discussions taking into account what has been said. Only after that will decisions be made. Furthermore, this synod will **not** make any decisions re opening the offices to women. My impression is that, at best, the GKV may well consider allowing ‘deaconesses’ to function in the church – but not with any ruling authority or as part of the local session. However, even that is speculative at this point of time. In connection with this, the CGKN, the Dutch sister church of GKV has recently decided not to allow women to be ordained into any of the offices.

3. Confessional Subscription in discussions with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken.

Summary as provided in the report:

⁵ Dutch term is ‘manieren’. Better translation: ‘ways’.

⁶ Younger and more educated members being more in favour of women as elders and ministers.

⁷ Again a poor translation of the Dutch word ‘verlegenheid’. It conveys the sense of uncertainty, paucity.

⁸ Dutch term is ‘voorschriften’ – givens/data.

⁹ Dutch: ‘Dit onderzoek maakte duidelijk dat het bij de uitleg van de Bijbelteksten veel uitmaakt hoe je de Bijbel leest.’

¹⁰ ‘investeer’, spend quality time and energy

¹¹ The idea here is short term, ill considered.

¹² That is, interim

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Interchurch Relations Committee – Addendum

For years delegates from the Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) and the Netherlands Gereformeerde Kerken have discussed confessional subscription with each other. The measure of agreement now reached implies that we no longer see the matter as a hindrance to ecclesiastical unity. In the course of the discussion mutual trust grew. Wherever there was a difference of opinion, it was not because of a difference of opinion on the authority of Scripture and confession. We consider it our common responsibility to continue working on ecclesiastical unity from this trust, as the Lord of the church calls us there to. (Note well that there were two minority reports on the table as well.)

That ‘measure of agreement’ has been written up in the form of an interim statement entitled ‘Interim Statement concerning the discussion between DKE (Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid, GKV) and CCS (Commissie voor Contact en Samenspreking, NGK) regarding the binding to the Confession.’¹³

It is difficult to summarise the both the mood and discussion behind this report. The desire for these denominations to reunite is real. At a local level cooperation is growing in some regions but not in others. It must be observed that there are various streams within both denominations – and it is especially true that in those NGK churches that have not implemented the ordination of women into the offices (one gets the impression that this is most of their churches) and where subscription by all office-bearers takes place (again nearly all of the churches) cooperation is possible. There were a number of reports of locations where this coming together is starting to take place.

It is both difficult and risky to predict what Synod Zwolle Zuid will decide. The NGK have reacted positively to it as an interim statement, but there is considerable concern from a significant number of GKV churches.

4. A personal note.

I had been invited to preach (in Dutch) in Amersfoort Zuid immediately after the synod. This is the second opportunity extended to me (the first being in Utrecht in August 2007). The message was well received and it proved an excellent way of introducing the RCNZ to the GKV. I appreciated the experience!

Dirk van Garderen.
(June 3, 2008)

¹³ This statement may be viewed in Dutch and English on the GKV website. The initials identify the two synodical committees.

Appendix 8

Report of Meeting with Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (CGKN)

Monday, 2nd June 2008)

After the General Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt (GKV) at Zwolle Zuid (27 –31 May, 2008) I was the guest of a close boyhood friend and his wife, Thijs and Betty Heij, who lives at Veenendaal. Staying there for three days enabled me to meet with the Rev Ge Drayer who is at the CGKN's 'Dienstbureau' (Ministry Office) – the national body that administers the overseas mission, evangelism programme and diaconal ministries of their churches and publishes the very impressive magazine *Doorgeven* 5 times p.a. The Rev Dirk van der Zwaag, one of deputies of the CGKN's ecumenical committee who represented their churches at our synod (Hamilton 2005) also lives in Veenendaal and I was able to spend some quality time with him as well.

Meeting at the Dienstbureau (Ge Drayer)

The purpose of this meeting was to share what our respective denominations are doing in the area of word/deed ministries at home and abroad with a view to seeing where our ministries intersect and to explore if/how we as sister churches can cooperate.

It was a privilege to receive a broad overview of what CGKN is doing at home and abroad.¹ The main emphasis of CGKN is in Africa and South-East Asia (including Indonesia).

Specifically:

1. CGKN has, via its diaconal ministry, given some support to C.A.R.E. India. The support they provide is centred on the C.A.R.E. work in Madurai. This project does not receive a lot of emphasis by them.
2. The second area is the development of Radio Ministry based in Sulawesi where one of the CGKN's workers (Rev Kees Buys) is based at Mamasa. Our missionary, Janice Reid, will be informed of this work.

The meeting with the Rev D. v.d.Zwaag, regarding our sister relationship with CGKN was helpful and informative. Being somewhat familiar with our churches as a result of attending our synod in 2005, it was good to be able talk on that basis.

1. This denomination consists of about 50,000 members, average size of the congregations being 200/250 members – with notable exceptions. (Veenendaal, in the heart of the reformed 'Bible belt' has 2 CGKN congregations, Peniel (1400) and Bethel (2000+). The former, where the Rev v.d.Zwaag serves as one of two ministers, is almost ready to move into a brand new church – a facility that is breathtaking!)

2. Rev v.d.Zwaag described the CGKN as consisting of three basic streams (stroomingen):

- a) The folks on the 'left' who are open to and more akin with GKV in outlook and worship practice.
- b) The centre: more traditional and pietistic in their outlook and expression of their love for the Lord and his church.
- c) On the right: those who are steadfast, often somewhat strident, in maintaining the traditional form of church life and, in many ways, not especially outwork looking.

The impact of para-church organizations such as the broadcaster E.O. (Evangelise Omroep) with

¹ For anyone Dutch reading person interested in finding out more I recommend subscribing to 'Doorgeven'. Contact the author of this article for details.

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it's distinctly American (evangelical/arminian) emphasis is real and growing.²

3. The ecumenical strategy of the CGKN.

- a) The main focus is on the Netherlands itself. Relations between the CGKN and GKV are generally positive, but union with them is not on the immediate horizon. There is also contact with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK) – the denomination established in the 1960s when they were separated from GKV. (They were originally nicknamed 'buitenverbanders'.)
- b) The next tier is a focus on Europe – with similar Presbyterian churches in the UK and confessional reformed churches across the continent.
- c) The third tier is with churches with whom they have traditional and historical ties – our churches in New Zealand fall into that category.
- d) Fourthly, there is the contact established and maintained via the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

4. Contact with the RCNZ is extremely limited beyond the formal interchange of each other's Acts of Synod, denominational magazines (*De Wekker*) and invitation to attend each other's synods. Br v.d.Zwaag indicated that CGKN was not sending a delegate to our 2008 (Hastings) Synod. We therefore exchanged greetings to our respective committees and churches.

The time we spent together was considered mutually beneficial. An awareness of some of the issues facing the CGKN internally and externally is helpful towards a better and deeper appreciation of what is happening in the Netherlands. I noted in particular the tensions that can arise within a congregation when there are attempts to make even minor liturgical changes. For example, in a congregation which was singing from the Psalter (old versification) in broad notes of equal length, a group of worshippers separated themselves to worship as a new fellowship, because long and short (*hele en halve*) notes were introduced!

Br v.d.Zwaag asked to be remembered by those he met while in NZ and conveyed that denomination's greetings to ours.

Dirk van Garderen,
June 4, 2008.

² For those interested, the book by Agnes Amerlink, *De Gereformeerde* while critical and sometimes unfriendly, is nevertheless informative.