

Comparative Reformed Church Polity, Fribourg, May 2022

On 23rd May 2022, an international expert meeting on Comparative Reformed Church Polity took place at the Faculty of Law of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. The conference was organized by renowned experts in the field of church and religion law René Pahud de Mortanges, from the host faculty and Leon van den Broeke, from the Theological University Kampen and the Faculty of Religion and Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The invitation to talk about the common features and differences in the constitutions and orders of the various churches was accepted by:

- *Auke Dijkstra*, attorney-at-law and doctoral student at the Theological University Kampen, who presented the latest developments in church law of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN). He focused in particular on the new forms of local communities in the church (house congregations, pioneer places, core congregations, etc.), the new style of classes (the introduction of the office of *classispredikant*), ecumenical cooperation between the different Protestant churches at the level of local congregations (some congregations are part of two denominations), church–state relations and the gradual abandonment of the concept of the people’s church (*Volkskirche*). He quotes from the strategic plan of the PKN: “It is an honest observation that the idea of a public church (‘volkskerk’) in the sense of ‘present everywhere’ is no longer tenable. It is not good to maintain the camouflage of the parochial system. In a positive sense, ‘open spaces’ say something about the missionary mission of the church and the explicit responsibility for areas where there is no longer an ‘ordinary’ church presence.”
- *Adam Csukás*, a lawyer at the Central Church Office of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) in Prague, Czech Republic, spoke about the implementation of the ECCB Strategic Plan of 2019, especially in relation to the church-law related tasks that result from it at the level of local congregations, classes and the denomination. He paid particular attention to the proposed

reform of the classes, which the Synod discussed a few days before the expert meeting itself and the implications of the Act on Property Settlement with Churches and Religious Societies for the ECCB.

- *Heinrich de Wall* from the Faculty of Law of the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg, Germany, a leading expert in the field of church, constitutional and administrative law, author of one of the most widely used German textbooks on church law, reported on the latest developments in the *Landeskirchen* and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) as a whole. He considered whether there is a difference between Reformed and Protestant church law in the case of the EKD and drew attention to the specifics of the historical development of German Protestantism and the influence of Reformed theology on the legal thinking of the church (e.g., the Barmen Declaration of 1934). He described the position of boards of elders and synods, and elders and ministers. He paid special attention to the organization and protection of Reformed minorities in the United *Landeskirchen*.
- *Johannes Smit* from North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, was unable to attend the conference in person or remotely due to technical difficulties. In his written contribution, he focused on the historical development of the various Reformed denominations in South Africa, not forgetting their links to the legal orders of their mother churches.
- *Burkhard Berkmann* from the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Munich, Germany, a member of many prestigious international societies and author of several important publications, focused his contribution on the comparison of the canon law of the Catholic Church with the principles of governance of Protestant churches. In a follow-up discussion he offered many valuable insights to the participants “from the outside”.
- *Matthew van Maastricht*, a fellow at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Jersey, USA, and pastor of the Reformed Church in America, provided a historical context and spoke about the organization of his church. He pointed out the split in the church because of differing views on the status of LGBTQ+ people in different classes; two new schismatic churches are currently emerging in the USA for this reason.

The organizers also sent their contributions to the conference participants in advance:

- *René Pahud de Mortanges* focused on the legal developments in the newly established Protestant Church in Switzerland (until 2019, known as the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches). Particularly noteworthy is the section on current legal issues (updating the liturgy, same-sex marriage, mergers of congregations, free choice of congregation, changing the status of deacons) and fresh expressions of church in the Swiss context.
- *Leon van den Broeke* contributed to the discussion with a cross-cutting article on the concept of church, state and church law in the Calvinist tradition in comparison with the Lutheran, Zwinglian and Bucerian traditions.

Participants of the expert meeting presented their draft papers, followed by a reflection of a predetermined speaker and then questions, suggestions or comments from the remaining guests. The papers and especially the many informal conversations show that the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren is going through the same changes as almost all its sister churches in Western Europe and overseas: a change in the position of churches in society, a decline in membership, a drop in income. Churches are responding to these challenges in similar ways, by reforming church governance, introducing new forms of local congregations, simplifying legislation and generally going back to their roots.

The conference concluded with a general discussion in which the participants were able to identify several common features of the church polity of the Reformed churches. René Pahud de Mortanges and Leon van den Broeke will elaborate on this in the final chapter of the forthcoming proceedings, in which the papers that pass the peer-review process will appear in print. The book will be published – hopefully in 2023 – by Summum Academic Publications in Kampen, the Netherlands.

Adam Csukás