


The inception of missions in *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*, and the concomitant origins of the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ 100 years ago

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In 2023, the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (MRCC), originally called *De Zulu Hervormde Zendingskerk*, celebrated the centenary of its existence in an intricate missional relationship with the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* (NHKA). This is a significant milestone. Over a period of 100 years, many churches have emerged, many have disappeared, many have merged and many have transformed, while many have persevered through challenges of all sorts. This article seeks to respond to a few questions: What were the circumstances that led to the existence of this church? Who were the key role players? What were the terms and conditions under which the new church was born? In seeking to respond to these and other probing questions, the author will primarily depend on archival research with primary sources as the main pool from which data collection is done. Using qualitative analytical tools, the author hopes to make an appraisal of this inception stage. In concluding, the author will attempt to juxtapose the current church against the church 100 years ago and evaluate whether initial objectives were met or whether over this time there were any deviations.

Contribution: To chronicle the emergence of mission work in the NHKA by which the inception of the MRCC came to existence in 1923. The article further investigates the prospects and challenges these beginnings had to face, and subsequently to evaluate this centenary history in retrospect.

Keywords: objections to mission; mission policy; Zulu Hervormde Zendingskerk; *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*; *Nederduitsch Hervormde Sendinggenootskap*; Rev. AR Smit; Rev. Andrew Mlaba; HCM Fourie; recognition and protection; racial segregation; Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ.

Introduction

Recent trends in missions suggest that when agents of missions consider initiating missional work, church planting or partnerships in missions, they do so often guided by motives, goals and methods. In this article, I will focus on church planting as it is more appropriate to my topic. Many established old churches did not come into existence as a result of carefully crafted methods. The beginnings of the Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (MRCC), it seems, were not born out of a planning session with charts on the wall and tested 'methods, goals and motives of Paul' as Alawode (2020) would suggest. Alawode posits that Paul's methods were (1) to preach to responsive people, (2) to target strategic cities and towns of the Roman Empire, (3) to seek individuals and families to establish house churches and (4) to contextualise the message according to the audience. However, the origins of the MRCC, I argue, were more of a partnership that was influenced by ecclesial and political expediency of the early 1920s.

What is in the name?

In this article, there are names that form an important part of the history of the two main churches under discussion, which I find necessary to present upfront to allay confusion. The name *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (Ned. Herv. Kerk) van Afrika* is the current official name of the historically white church discussed in this article which is responsible for the 'mission work' in the MRCC though presently in a much modified way. In the archival documents, it would be written without '*van Afrika*' or shortened as *Ned. Herv. Kerk* and abbreviated as, NHK or NHKA.

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Meanwhile, the traditionally African church, the MRCC has over this century changed names several times, from the initial name, *Zulu Hervormde Zendingskerk* (ZHVK), *Hervormde Bantoe Kerk* (HBK), *Bantoe Hervormde Kerk*, anglicised as *Bantu Hervormde Kerk*, (BHK), *Isonto leMpeduko* (a translated name to isiZulu), *Kereke ya Ntjhafatso* (a Sesotho translation), both which did not take root though appearing on some of the church's documents, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, and *Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika* (HKSA) (1977). There were several other names which were proposed in search for a suitable name for the black church (cf. Banda 1996:1, 78, 128). The MRCC is a recent name and was officially adopted in 2006 (MRCC 2006:15).

In this article, I discuss, firstly, the encounter between Rev. Andrew Mlaba and Rev. AR Smit which in a domino effect, led to the subsequent establishment of the MRCC as a 'missionary' church under the *Ned. Herv. Kerk van Afrika*. Secondly, I present a critical moment in the life of the NHKA as it was confronted with the decision to accept the offer of adopting the African church, the ZHVK, as its missionary responsibility. In this debacle, the internal tension within the NHKA about the theory and the compulsion to do mission are tested through the church's decision-making organ, its General Church Assembly (GCA). Thirdly, and finally, the establishment of a mission society, the *Ned. Herv. Sendinggenootskap*, is discussed as a breakthrough after the impeding stalemate that played out at the Church's highest decision-making organ.

In order to fully appreciate this initiative, I will give a historical account of Rev. A.R. Smit's church, the *NHK van Natal*, itself a new breakaway, which took upon itself to adopt the budding African church.

'NHK van Natal' is established

This opportunity was occasioned by a missionary of the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde (N.G.) Kerk of Natal*, Rev. AR Smit, when he broke away from the *N.G. Kerk* with his congregation and founded the '*Ned. Hervormde Kerk van Natal*' in December 1921 (Van der Westhuizen 1969:20).¹

Rev. Andrew Mlaba and his congregation join the 'NHK van Natal'

Rev. Andrew Mlaba approaches the 'NHK van Natal'

In January 1923, an evangelist, Andrew Mlaba, '*n geleerde, bekwame en koersvaste Zulu*' [a learned, capable and determined Zulu] (Van der Westhuizen 1969:21) and his congregation

1. Rev. Smit, who was working among white railway workers, left the *NG. Kerk of Natal* under the following circumstances: (1) a conflict on church procedures in appointing a 'spoorwegkommissie'; (2) shabby preparations for an evening meeting at which he was to preside (that was understood as a sign of his being not welcome); (3) refusal by the church council of Pietermaritzburg to offer him help in his work; (4) his controversial transfer to Charlestown, which sparked a schism in the congregation, for which he was not held responsible by the defecting group. Rev. Smit was subsequently suspended from his office '*als Spoorwegzendeling op aanklacht van 'seperatisme'*' for three months, but after this he received his discharge as a minister of the *NG. Kerk* (Van der Westhuizen 1969:18–19).

sought the 'protection and membership' (Mlaba 1923) of the '*NHK van Natal*'. Thereafter, they officially broke away from the Free Church of Scotland on 29 April 1923, under the circumstances described in his letter to the Rev. J. Dewar (translated from Afrikaans as follows²):

We have long been considering this step for reasons of conscience which the chief is the use of unordained men, contrary to the church law, for which requires an ordained man (Mlaba 1923; cf. Notule-NHK 1928:207).³

The church council of the '*NHK van Natal*' met on 22 January 1923 to consider the application. A mission commission was elected to investigate the matter. The mission commission went on to accept the Zulu congregation as its 'mission' church and thereupon ordained Andrew Mlaba as its minister on 23 April 1923. A new and independent church was established under the name '*Zulu Hervormde Zending Kerk van Natal, Gemeente Lufafa*' (Notulen-Gem. Verg. 1923). But the issue of joining the '*NHK van Natal*' caused uncertainty 'with some members' in the Zulu congregation. They were unsure of joining it because they were uncertain about the status of their church under the new order (Van der Westhuizen 1969:23). But for the leadership, this was apparently a necessary step under the prevailing circumstances at that time. It is important to sketch these circumstances in order to make an informed judgement about the probable reasons that led Rev. A.S. Mlaba to approach the *NHK van Natal* for 'protection and membership'.

The issue of the 'protection and membership' of a white church

The issue of 'protection' or 'recognition' for African churches at that time was very important because of the government's strict measures preventing the increase of African Independent Churches (AICs)⁴ (Makhubu 1988:30). It referred in the first place, to 'direct recognition' by the government because of the church's inherent characteristics that met the government's criteria for *recognition* and in the second place, 'indirect recognition', because it stood under the 'control' of an established white church. In Natal (and in the Orange Free State), the situation was worse as the authorities were very unsympathetic to the Ethiopian movement and applied stringent curbs in an attempt to control its growth and influence. The situation in Natal was aggravated by the Bambata Rebellion of 1906⁵ and also by the

2. I have translated all original Afrikaans versions of the cited documents to English using or adapting online Google Translator.

3. (1) *Personen bedienen de Sakramenten, die volgens hun mening niet bevoegd zyn*, (2) *zowel omdat zy niet de nodige opleiding daartoe gehad hebben*, (3) *alsook omdat daar ongewenste personen onder zyn* (Notule-4 NHK (Verslag) 1928:207).

4. AICs can be classified into two major groups: (1) the Ethiopian-type churches which are 'a symbol of African independence, emphasizing ecclesiastical and political freedom in the African context' and (2) the Spiritual-type churches (under which Zionist and Apostolic movements fall), which represent 'healing and spiritual freedom' (cf. Claasen 1995:15).

5. The Bambata Rebellion in which African men took to the bush accompanied by 'believers' – among whom was Moses Mbhele of the *Ibandhlo Li Ka Mosi Church* – who acted as their chaplain – was understood by the authorities as an attempt by AICs to 'drive Whites into the sea'. In suppressing this rebellion, the authorities killed between 3500 and 4000 Africans (25 colonists also lost their lives). After this rebellion, there was strong repressive action against AICs (Claasen 1995:16–18).

Bulhoek tragedy⁶ of 1921 in the Eastern Cape, which the authorities linked directly to African nationalism, which they alleged was spearheaded by AICs, or more precisely, by 'Ethiopianism' (Claasen 1995:16–18). As a sequel to the Bulhoek incident, a commission of inquiry to investigate the *Israelites* and AICs in general was appointed. The authorities were also highly suspicious of missionary bodies and placed them under government scrutiny (Claasen 1995:17). As a result of this commission, for the first time general rules for *recognition* of AICs were set down. The Government accepted the commission's recommendations published in 1925:

No church should be recognised until it had a continuous separate existence for ten years and only when it was a healthy organisation with a constitution, buildings, schools and other signs of growth. A church should have at least six different congregations, each with its regular meeting place. No minister should be recommended for a marriage licence without Standard VI or an equivalent qualification as well as at least two years special training for the ministry. The church should be conducted in accordance with generally accepted ethical standards ... each application be judged by its own merits (in Claasen 1995:18).

These conditions posed endless problems for AICs as they could not meet these requirements. On the other hand, churches which could achieve government recognition enjoyed the following privileges: (1) of marriage officers, (2) freedom of movement, (3) concessionary train tickets, (4) allotment of church and school sites, (5) the right to object to an application of a site by another church according to the 'radius rule', (6) subsidised church schools, (7) tax exemption for evangelists and (8) facilities to purchase wine for sacramental purposes (Claasen 1995:20).

Since these conditions were almost impossible for many AICs a better alternative for some was to opt for 'direct European control', that is to place themselves under the supervision of established churches, which was in fact a condition recommended by the Government (Claasen 1995:17).

Therefore, operating as a mission church under the auspices of a mainline church, especially an Afrikaner church, could have added advantage before the law, in case of a possible dispute. According to the findings of the Tomlinson Commission, there was also a perception of insecurity among the AICs because of a lack of theological and general education, and because of an absence of white supervision (Makhubu 1988:32, 36). Our analysis is that Rev. Mlaba approached the *NHK van Natal* before the 1925 recommendations were tabled and approved. He did that during a period when conditions were still severe for African churches with no official recognition. Therefore, his defecting from the Free Church of Scotland was actually exposing themselves to precarious conditions and possible extinction. Whether Rev. Mlaba's advances to the '*NHK van Natal*', and subsequently the *NHK*, were motivated by such factors

6. In May 1921 at Bulhoek, more than 180 *Israelites* – an AIC – were killed in a confrontation with police. All other AICs were implicated by this event (Claasen 1995:16–18). 'The radius rule stated that no other church could build inside the radius of five miles from the site of an existing church' (Makhubu 1988:29).

prevailing at that time cannot be said without further research, but it seems likely to have been affected by them in some way.

'Ned. Herv. Kerk van Natal' joins the NHK

In November 1924, Rev. Smit and his church approached the *NHK* with an application for incorporation (cf. *Komm-NHK* 1924:145). This request was processed and finalised on 31 January 1925 (*Komm-NHK* 1925:156). The name of the *NHK van Natal* was changed in this process to Pietermaritzburg congregation of the *NHK*.

NHK finds problem in accepting the Zulu Herv. Zending Kerk

To complicate matters further, the acceptance of the '*Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Natal*' by the *NHK* had controversial consequences for the *Zulu Hervormde Zending Kerk*. Its future as a mission church under the new dispensation had to be determined. It had to be resolved whether it would be accommodated by this incorporation, now as a mission church of the *NHK*. Consequently, the Church Council of the Pietermaritzburg congregation (formerly the '*NHK van Natal*'), in a bid to continue the relationship, proposed to the GCA in respect of the *Zulu Hervormde Zending Kerk* as follows: '*De Hoog Eerw. Alg. Kerkvergadering overwege de wenselijkheid om die sendingswerk onder Zulus in Natal wat deur die Ned. Herv. Kerk van Natal gedoen is, oor te neem*'⁷ (Barger 1926:186). The *NHK* was then faced with a direct confrontation or challenge to take up mission work as a church.

The proposal was deliberated upon by the GCA of 1925, with Rev. AR Smit providing the necessary historical background. However, it was rejected. If we consider the long history of opposition to mission work, this decision did not come as a surprise. Although the proposal was rejected outright, the GCA decided that, '*Aan de Algemene Kommissie zal opgedragen worden om voor de volgende Algemene Kerkvergadering 'n grondige onderzoek daaromtrent in te stellen en rapport daarover uit te brengen*' (Barger 1926:186). Such a decision, namely, to form a commission and wait upon its report, was not a new thing (cf. GCA 1916). The only difference – which was, in fact, an enormous one – was that here the commission had to deal with a live situation, not an abstract study nor a hypothetical proposal, but a real situation which was indeed beckoning for acceptance.

Therefore, a mission commission comprising Rev. Jae. van Belkum, Dr H.C.M. Fourie, Rev. A.J.G. Oosthuizen, Brothers Reyneke, and Chr. Joubert, was nominated. Dr Fourie was instructed to visit the mission field in Natal and carry out the research. This decision to do research on mission and to

7. The Most Honourable General Church Assembly is considering the desirability of taking over the missionary work among Zulus in Natal that was done by the *Ned. Herv. Kerk van Natal*

nominate a commission for that purpose was strongly opposed by some in the meeting, to the extent that the following persons (probably all elders as, with the exception of 'Venter', there were no such surnames among ministers of the NHK at that time) registered their opposition: Brothers V. Manen, Esterhuizen, Mamewick, Ras, Venter, Willemse, J.G. Steyn, G. Engelbrecht, Delpont, G.P.J. van Vuuren.

After the GCA of 1925, the discontent continued, and there were widespread misunderstandings within the NHK prompting the Commission of the GCA to publish the actual minutes of the 1925 GCA in *De Hervormer* (Barger 1926:186). On 27 January 1927, further discussion on this matter took place at a special GCA. The discussions at this meeting were based on the contents of Dr Fourie and Rev. Mlaba's letters, which basically purported that Rev. Mlaba had accepted Article II⁸ of the Church Law of the NHK, which forbids 'equalisation'⁹. Despite the 'positive' nature of the reports, according to Dr Fourie and Rev. Mlaba, this GCA of 1927 was not conclusive, as it considered the matter fit to be resolved by the GCA of 1928. This was another great disappointment for 'sendingvriende'¹⁰ and the Zulu *Hervormde Zendingkerk* (ZHVK) who had hoped for a speedy approval of mission work in the NHK. They had to wait for the next GCA in 1928. As such the GCA of 1928 was a critical meeting, and we could imagine that it was waited upon anxiously by the ZHVK and the 'sendingvriende'.

In preparation for this meeting, the two letters by Dr Fourie and Rev. Mlaba, and a third letter by Dr Fourie (dated 03 June 1928), were used as part of the report submitted at the 1928 GCA (Notule-4 NHK 1928:209–210). Extracts of this correspondence are given below to portray the position said to have been adopted by Mlaba in relation to the NHK¹¹:

1. What they desire is not just to have a white missionary or preacher, but only recognition and then training of native evangelists.
2. They find necessary to have a mature white supervision, and none other than that of the *Ned. Herv. Kerk*.

8.This Article II of the 1904 Church Law was later moved to Article V in 1937 and finally to Article III in 1951

9.NHKA by then had a protracted history of opposition to what they saw as political and social threat of being 'made equal' to Africans and other 'non-white' races and of integrating with other races in marriage and otherwise (more on this debacle cf. Banda 1996:8–9).

10.'Sendingvriende' are here described as individuals or organised group well disposed towards missions in theory and practice within the NHK.

11.1. 'Hun verlangen is niet zoozeer om een blanke zendeling of prediker te hebben, maar alleen erkenning en dan een opleiding van Naturellen Evangelisten,

II. 'Zy erkennen volmondig blanke toezicht nodig te hebben en willen onder geen toezicht staan dan van de Ned. Herv. Kerk ...

III. 'Mlaba...by hen ook besluit genomen is, dat geen blanke persoon lid van hun kerk kan zyn, evenals geen lid van hun kerk een lid van de Ned. Herv. Kerk van Afrika kan worden;

IV. 'de Zulu gemeente absoluut tegen gelykstelling is;

V. 'Zy willen zich niet met onze Kerk vermengen of afgevaardigden naar onze vergaderingen sturen;

VI. 'Zy willen apart en zelfstandig hun eigen kerk bouwen en ontwikkelen, maar onder toezicht en zeggingschap van een blanke Kerk.

3. Mlaba ... has also decided that no white person can become a member of his church, as well as, no member of his church can become a member of the *Ned. Herv. Kerk*,
4. The Zulu congregation is absolutely against equalisation (of Africans and whites).
5. They do not want to fellowship with our church, nor send delegates to our meetings.
6. They want to establish and develop a separate and autonomous church, however, under supervision and say of a white church.

The above-mentioned description of a letter of Rev. Mlaba, indicating that he accepted the policy of 'geen gelykstelling' was a handy tool for Dr Fourie and his associates in trying to move the NHK in the direction of accepting mission work. As can be seen, this report touched on the key issues that were most objectionable to the adversaries of mission, namely, no equalisation [*geen gelykstelling*], no financial support, no dealings or fellowship [*geen vermenging*] and separate development. But the presentation of Dr Fourie about the ZHVK (claiming to present the views of Rev. Mlaba) was so ideal that it was met with a lot of scepticism among the delegates at the GCA (Notule-4 NHK 1928:122). Even Rev. C.H. Rautenbach (who became a founder member of the NMSG) questioned the credibility of certain facts, claiming:

In February 1926, he [Rautenbach] went to Pietermaritzburg to help a little. There he met Mlaba. The first question he asked the speaker was: 'what is the Reformed Church going to do with us'. Involuntarily, the question gave rise to the counter-question: 'What do you want from our church?' Speaker got the impression that Mlaba and his people were expecting something. He doesn't want to distrust Dr. Fourie, but we must be extremely careful. He got the impression that it was a puppy with a tail, and therefore wanted to be sure that there was nothing behind it. Who knows the Zulus have not been impressed that in our Church there is a burning desire to help. When asked if he had anything against the free Scottish Church, the answer was negative. (Minutes AKV 1928:121)¹²

Rev. (later Prof.) Rautenbach's side of the story further casts a shadow of doubt on some aspects of Dr Fourie's version about Rev. Mlaba and his congregation. Rev. Rautenbach was under the impression that Rev. Mlaba had great expectations of the NHK. At a glance, these expectations do not seem to have included the possibility of fellowship or mutual dealings, which would of course not be feasible, given the geographical distance between the two churches, but most probably it did include financial or material support. However, the report of the commission on mission emphasised only 'recognition' and 'training of African evangelists' for the ZHVK. Whether this was a ploy to lure

12.In Februarie 1926, is hy [Rautenbach] na Pietermaritzburg om daar biekie te gaan help. Daar het hy Mlaba ontmoet. Die eerste vraag wat hy aan spreker gestel het was: 'wat gaan die Hervormde Kerk met ons maak'. Onwillekeurig het die vraag aanleiding gegee tot die wedervraag: 'Wat wil julle van ons kerk he?' Spreker het die indruk gekry, dat Mlaba en sy mense iets verwag. Hy wil nie Dr. Fourie wantrou nie, maar ons rnoet biesonder versigtig wees. Hy het die indruk gekry dat dit 'n hondjie met 'n stertjie is, en daarom wil graag eers verseker wees, dat daar niks agter is nie. Wie weet die Soeloes nie onder die indruk gebring is dat in ons Kerk 'n vurige verlange is om te help. Op 'n vraag of hy iets teen die vrye Skotse Kerk het, was die antwoord ontkenend (Notule AKV 1928:121).

members of the GCA away from the controversial to the more agreeable issues, cannot be said with certainty.

What then did the ZHZK 'want' from the NHK? – to repeat Rev. Rautenbach's question to Rev. Mlaba. Notwithstanding the doubts generated by the letters of Dr Fourie and Rev. Mlaba, the Commission's report to the GCA was highly attractive to the NHK. It contained arguments beautifully tailored to suit the prevalent condition of this Church. An opportunity had dawned for the NHK, and it was up to them to make the best use thereof or let it go begging, maybe never to return.

We therefore discuss first the events of the 1928 GCA with special reference to mission, and the events that unfolded thereafter.

The formation of the NHSG

Critical moment for the 'sendingvriende'

At the GCA of 1928, the mission commission [*die Algemene Kommissie oor Sending*], as mentioned above, tabled a report on its findings and recommendations regarding the *Zulu Hervormde Zendingkerk*. On the Agenda, there were also three draft resolutions [*beskrywingspunte*], numbered 103, 104 and 105 (Notule-4 NHK 1928:161) on the issue of mission¹³:

103. This General Church Meeting expresses its feelings against participation by the Ned. Ref. Church to Missionary Work under Coloreds and Natives in South Africa. (Church Council of Potgietersrust)
104. We request the General [*Church*] Assembly to be brief on the Mission matter and completely remove it from our Ned. Hervormde Kerk van Afrika and not to interfere further with the Zulus of Natal. (Verzoekschrift of Brs. W. J. Basson, C.J. Basson and D.M.J Wolmarans, Members of the parish of Standerton)
105. This General Assembly is kindly but urgently requested to put an end to missionary activity in the Hervormde Kerk by legislation. (Petition of Brs. J. H. Greyling, P.S. Botes, J.P.J. Greyling, N.S. Grobler and Ben Breyling, members of Sukkelaar congregation, Bethal)

For the purposes of discussion, the GCA required a single report that would embrace all the arguments – for and against – as contained in the commission's report and the three proposals. Therefore, a special commission was nominated in order to formulate such a report. But this *ad hoc* commission ran into a crisis because of differences of

13. Hierdie Algemene Kerkvergadering spreek haar gevoelens uit teen deelneming deur die Ned. Herv. Kerk aan Sendingwerk onder Gekleurdes en Naturelle in Suid Afrika.

Kerkraad van Potgietersrust.

Wij verzoeken de Alg. Vergadering om de Zendingzaak op te lessen en geheel en al te verwijderen uit onze Ned. Hervormde Kerk van Afrika en zich niet verder te bemoeien met de Zoeloes van Natal.

Verzoekschrift van Brs. W.J. Basson, C.J. Basson en D.M.J Wolmarans, Leden van de gemeente Standerton.

Hierdie Alg. Vergadering word beleef dog dringend versoek 'n end te maak aan die Sendingbedrywigheid in die Hervormde Kerk deur wetgewing.

Versoekskrif van Brs. J.H. Greyling, P.S. Botes, J.P.J. Greyling, N.S. Grobler en Ben Breyling, lede van Sukkelaar gemeente, Bethal.

opinion, and could not produce a single report. Instead, it submitted two reports, one signed by the majority of the commission, namely, Rev. T.F.J. Dreyer and elders P.A. Ras, J.H. Steyn, and F.W.C. Buitendag, which became known as the '*Meerderheidsrapport*' [Majority report]. It recognised the biblical proclamation to do mission, but for fear of the trouble it suspected may arise in case the church undertook to do mission among Africans, it recommended that proposals 103 and 104 be accepted (Notule-4 NHK 1928:211). Another report was written and signed only by an elder, J.H. Joubert of Rustenburg, which came to be known as the '*Minderheidsrapport*' [Minority Report]. It stressed a number of biblical passages to underline the divine mandate to do mission among Africans and recommended that the church adopt the Zulu congregation but as far as possible without giving financial assistance (Notule-4 NHK 1928:212,213).

In the discussion of these reports a lengthy debate ensued, ending with the tabling of three proposals which had to be voted upon. The first draft resolution (Notule-4 NHK 1928:124) was submitted in its amended form by Rev. J.J. Prinsloo. It contained three points, which had to be decided upon first, by separate votes.

This first point read as follows:

'The assembly fully realizes that it is its calling to expand the Gospel proclamation'¹⁴

This draft resolution was pitted against proposals 103, 104 and 105. The Assembly voted as follows: Rev. Prinsloo's first draft resolution was carried by 51 votes against 20;

The second point read:

Since the Ned. Ref. Church does not seem to be able to practically engage in missions, the meeting does not consider it necessary to express an opinion on the best method by which the Gospel proclamation should be expanded.¹⁵

Voting: The draft resolution was carried by majority of votes; and,

The third point read:

On behalf of our Church, no official recognition or interference or inclusion of the Zulu congregation will take place, but she refers the matter to the General Commission for advice and counsel and adopts a wait-and-see attitude.¹⁶

and,

This point was pitted against the second draft resolution by Dr Fourie, stating:

14. 'Die vergadering besef ten volle dat dit haar roeping is die Evangelie verkondiging uit te brei'.

15. 'Daar die Ned. Herv. Kerk sig nie prakties met sending besig kan hou nie, ag die vergadering dit nie nodig sig uit te spreek oor die beste metode waarop die Evangelie verkondiging uitgebrei moet word'.

16. 'Van wege ons Kerk sal geen offisiële erkenning of bemoeiing of opneming van die Soeloe gemeente plaatsvind nie, maar sy verwys die saak vir advies en raad na Algemene Kommissie en neem 'n afwagende houding aan'.

This meeting feels that the time for our church to officially take up external mission work has not yet arrived and therefore for the time being determines itself to doing internal mission but leaves it in the hands of members of our Church to take up missionary work. (Minutes -4 NHK 1928:123–124)

Voting was conducted as follows: Rev. Prinsloo (third point) – 23 votes and Dr Fourie – 37 votes.

Dr Fourie's draft resolution was then pitted against the third draft resolution by Rev. Barger's, which said:

This meeting officially nominates Dr. Fourie as counselor and intermediary for the Zulu congregation in Natal to supervise and help with advice there, for three years. (Minute-4 NHK 1928:123)¹⁷

In the voting, Dr Fourie's draft resolution scored 37 votes against Rev. Barger's of 13 votes.

At this stage, it would seem from the voting that took place that the meeting was inclined towards the suggestion of distancing the church from matters of mission to Africans and accepting a situation which allowed those members interested in that mission to operate outside the church, without the church being implicated financially, morally or otherwise. Nevertheless, the decision-making process, it seems, required further voting:

The majority report gets 38 votes and the minority report gets no vote. A re-voting takes place on Dr Fourie's proposal: for 39, and 34 against, and on the majority report 34 against and a large majority for. Both proposals were therefore adopted (Minute-4 NHK 1928:124).¹⁸

What this further voting meant is not quite clear. Regarding the voting on Fourie's draft resolution and that of the Meerderheidsrapport independently, it would seem that the practice was to establish the individual merit of each outstanding, but conflicting draft resolution. Beukes (1986) concludes that:

However, the majority report was adopted in the sense that the Church did not want to do missions officially, but that the individual is free to carry out missions unofficially.¹⁹ (p. 29)

The NHK, by accepting two conflicting proposals, revealed on the one hand, that it was, as a church, not prepared to undertake mission work among Africans for fear of 'bickering, strife and division'²⁰ (Notule-4 NHK 1928:211), but considered positively to permit those members who were favourably disposed to mission to undertake it in

17. *Deze vergadering benoemt officieel Dr. Fourie als raadsman en tussen persoon voor de Zulu gemeente in Natal om aldaar toezicht te houden en met raad te helpen, voor driejaar* (Notule-4 NHK 1928:123).

18. *Die meerderheidsrapport kry 38 stemme en die minderheidsrapport geen stem. 'n Herstemming vind plaats oor Dr. Fourie se voorstel: voor 39, en 34 teen, en oor die meerderheidsrapport 34 teen en 'n groot meerderheid voor. Albei voorstelle is dus aangeneem* (Notule-4 NHK 1928:124).

19. *Die meerderheidsrapport is egter aangeneem in die sin dat die Kerk nie officieel wou sending doen nie, maar dat die enkeling vry is om onoffisieel sending behartig'.*

20. *tweedrag, twis en skeuring*

their personal capacity. On that day, 20 August 1928, a new chapter for missions in the NHK was opened. To 'sendingvriende' in the NHK it meant that an opportunity to operate with a clear conscience had become a reality, despite opposition from many fellow *Hervormers*. For Dr Fourie it was not the best proposal, and certainly it was not the ideal decision (cf. Van Wyk 1986:602) but under the circumstances it was an acceptable one. It actually meant that there was at least an open door (no matter how little it was opened) through which he and the others could reach out to fulfil the Lord's great commission among the many Africans, expecting the Good News of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. This is the background to the formation of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Sendinggenootskap*.

A synopsis of the work of the NHSG (1928–c.1942)

The *Ned. Herv. Sendinggenootskap* was officially founded and registered as a company on 05 November 1929²¹ (NHSG 1929:1) after several months of preparations, which included the drawing up of the constitution free of charge by another 'sendingvriend', an attorney, Mr B.J.A. Lingbeek (J.P.). The registration as corporate body was particularly sought to fulfil a government requirement necessary when purchasing land (Van Wyk 1986:607) and a '*regspersoonlikheid*' [legal personality] to execute it (Vermooten 1930:1). The following were appointed as the first Board of Directors: Dr H.C.M. Fourie (Chairperson), Reverends L.E. Brandt (Treasurer), S. Vermooten (Secretary), Messrs. J. van Melle and J.W. Gehle.²²

The work progressed

The work progressed actively, with Dr Fourie and other members making regular visits to the congregations of the ZHJK. In the mid-1930s, especially after the publication of the booklet by Van Melle, *Ontstaan en Bedoeling van die Nederduits Hervormde Sendinggenootskap*, there was a vigorous campaign to promote the work of the Society among the members of the NHK (see letters in file NHSG Correspondence n.d.). However, in the late 1930s, judging from the minute book (Notule-NHSG 1929) and letters (file K27.8/12), there was a noticeable decline in the activities of the Society.

A few reasons can be suggested for this decline. As was apparent in the activities that led to the inception of the NHSG, Dr H.C.M. Fourie was the key person in the work of this organisation (Van Tonder 1977:13). His accepting a call from Johannesburg to Groot Marico in 1930 estranged him geographically from the other members of the Board of Directors of the Society who lived in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Vereeniging. The work continued, nevertheless, with Rev. L.E. Brandt taking the chairmanship intermittently in

21. Van Tonder (1977:12) has a different date: 7 November 1928. However, the official stamp of 'The Office of the Registrar of Companies' is dated 05 November 1929 (NHSG 1929:1).

22. Other shareholders were Rev. C.H. Rautenbach, Messrs. W. van Melle, H. Sondorp, A.H. Koomans and B.J.A. Lingbeek.

his absence. But the NHSG suffered a severe blow with the death of both Dr Fourie and Rev. Brandt in 1939, leaving only one of the original ordained members on the board of the Society, namely Rev. S. Vermooten. Until then, Dr Fourie had maintained most of the physical contact with the 'mission field',²³ that is the ZHZK. Therefore, his death and that of Rev. Brandt adversely affected the organisation of mission within the NHSG.

The NHSG then experienced a lapse in its activity and ultimately ceased to function under its original name between 1941 and 1942. Van Wyk (1986:607) has it on record that Rev. Vermooten indicated that it had been decided as early as 1937 to terminate the NHSG, because the purpose for which the society was registered, namely, to buy land for mission work could not be achieved. But this did not completely terminate the mission work itself. There continued to be contacts, though relatively few, with the ZHZK so that it was possible to revive the work to at least an operational level in 1942 (cf. Labuschagne J. 1942).

In the 10 years of its existence, the NHSG laid a solid foundation to the history of the MRCC. However, the work of the society was continued by the *Ned. Herv. Evangelisasie-Vereniging* (1942–1945) followed by the *Ned. Evangelisasie Kommissie* (1945–1951). (cf. Dreyer 1943:9, 11 and Dreyer & Vermooten 1948, Van Melle 1943:1–2)

An evaluation after 100 years of the inception

A period of 100 years is a very long period in the life of a church. After years of uncertainty, the NHKA finally adopted mission work as its Christ given obligation and instituted formal structures to manage and monitor the 'mission work'. This organisation, according to Dreyer (Wim), resulted in the formal theological training of Africans in the late 1950s, which became the responsibility of Prof. P.S. Dreyer²⁴. With this development new ministers were trained and ordained, while several joined with their congregations from existing churches. In 1977, the MRCC through bilateral discussions with the NHKA obtained an 'independent status' and named itself '*Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika*'. The current name Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ is a further indication of how the church has reconsidered its identity in an environment where English is the popular language of communication. However, these indications are not enough to provide a comprehensive qualitative evaluation of the church, especially that the focus of this article is on the events at

²³The use of the term 'mission field' especially in respect of the ZHZK is problematic. ZHZK was at that stage recognised by an NHKA missiologist, among others, as '*n georganiseerde ecclesia completa*' ([an organised complete church] in its own right' Van der Westhuizen 1992:1): I use it here as recorded in the sources to maintain the terms used by the respective authors.

²⁴Dreyer (Prof. Dr Wim), is the son of the late Prof. P.S. Dreyer (1921–1999), and the current Moderator of the *Kommissie van Algemene Kerkvergadering* [Chairperson of the General Church Assembly] of the NHKA.

Telephonic interview between Prof. Dr Wim Dreyer and Dr Z.J. Banda, 14 September 2023.

the beginning of the church's history through the actions of the missional activities of the white *Hervormde* Church.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed history of the origins of the MRCC and the role played by Rev. Smith, his church and the takeover by the NHSG with the permission of the NHKA. In the process to make this relationship work, we have noticed the internal struggle of the church (NHKA) on the one hand as an attempt to obey the great commission of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15–16, and on the other, the objections raised by those opposed to doing mission because of socio-political and economic fears.

Lessons drawn from this piece of history are that persistence pays, no matter how few you may be. But furthermore, in the context of democratic processes of the church meetings, the art and wisdom of crafting proposals in a manner that disarms the opposition is critical. Notwithstanding, we also observe that an ecclesial democracy under a presbyterial system can be problematic especially in the hands of theologically inept lay leaders. However, there is a mystery noticeable in this debacle of the church's decision-making conundrum. That two conflicting resolutions could be adopted is puzzling to say the least. It is my opinion that here we see the hand of God swaying history in favour of God's mission. Thus, the role of the Holy Spirit cannot be underestimated towards assisting those who have a burden for God's mission.

In conclusion, it is for the current church members to look backward with gratitude and thank God for the lives of their forbearers. It is also a moment of reenergising the church for the journey ahead with the necessary equipment towards the next century.

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Z.J.B. is the sole author of the article.

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Disclaimer

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