



Dordrecht, *Doleantie*, and church order

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Abstract

This article attends to the relationship between minor and major assemblies as prescribed by the foundational principles of Reformed church polity proposed by Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel. It reviews the limited autonomy of local congregations and the authority of broader assemblies in the Church Order of Dordrecht (1618/19), the touchstone of Dutch Reformed church polity. It considers the challenge to historic Reformed church polity posed by the ecclesiology of the *Doleantie*, a secession from the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (NHK) in 1886 under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Finally, it evaluates a contemporary church order (of the United Reformed Churches in North America), that explicitly codifies *Doleantie* ecclesiology. The church order fails to embody the principles of Reformed church polity set forth by Plaatjies-Van Huffel. This article concludes that it cannot be considered a Reformed church order.

Keywords

Reformed church polity; Church Order of Dordrecht (1618/1619); Doleantie; major assemblies; church discipline; United Reformed Churches in North America

Are there foundational principles of Reformed church polity to which all Reformed churches must adhere? Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel (2014:29) noted that “a blurriness of different systems of church governance is evident in Reformed churches,” which makes it “problematic to obtain an overarching definition of Reformed church polity principles.” Even so, Plaatjies Van Huffel proposed seven foundational principles of Reformed church polity: (1) Self-government under the sole headship of Christ; (2) the limited autonomy of the local congregation; (3) denominational ties serve the well-being of the church; (4) the restricted power and responsibilities of ecclesial assemblies; (5) the necessity and nature of Christian discipline; (6)

the right of appeal; and (7) the power of the major assemblies with regard to misconduct.

This article attends to the relationship between minor and major assemblies as prescribed by these foundational principles of Reformed church polity. The nature of the authority of the major assemblies is an old problem in the Reformed tradition, because Reformed polity “seeks to keep in balance (and tension) the rights and autonomy of the local congregations with the affirmed duty of the churches to unite in matters of common concern” (De Ridder 1983:19). Both congregationalism (or independentism) and denominationalism (or hierarchy) are anathema in a Reformed system of church government (De Moor 1986:337).

This article first reviews the limited autonomy of local congregations and the authority of broader assemblies in the Church Order of Dordrecht (1618/19), the touchstone of Dutch Reformed church polity. It then considers the challenge to historic Reformed church polity posed by the ecclesiology of the *Doleantie*, a secession from the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (NHK) in 1886 under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Finally, it evaluates the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA),¹ which explicitly codifies *Doleantie* ecclesiology. The URCNA Church Order fails to embody the principles of Reformed church polity set forth by Plaatjies Van Huffel. This article concludes that it cannot be considered a Reformed church order.

The Church Order of Dordrecht (1618/19)

The Dordtian Church Order (DCO), adopted by Synod of Dordrecht (1618/19), is the touchstone of Reformed church polity. It was not a new church order, but rather represents the culmination of developments in church polity over five decades. At the Synod of Dordrecht’s first session after the international delegates’ departure, on the morning of 13 May 1619, the church order adopted by the last national synod, ’s Gravenhage (1586),

1 The URCNA seceded from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) in the 1990s and early 2000s in opposition to the ordination of women in the CRCNA. It has no ecclesiastical relationship with the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), of which Plaatjies Van Huffel was a member, minister, and moderamen.

was read. In the afternoon session, the articles of the church order were “in substance approved by all of the delegated ministers and elders from every province” (Biesterveld & Kuyper 1982:176). The ’s Gravenhage church order was itself based on the decisions of several prior synods, including Emden (1571), Dordrecht (1574), Dordrecht (1578), and Middelburg (1581).

The first Reformed church order, adopted by the Synod of Paris (1559), stipulated: “No church may assume primacy or domination over another” (De Ridder 1983:44). The Belgic Confession says the same regarding ministers: “As for ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church” (Article 31). The first article of the Church Order adopted by the Synod of Emden (1571), the first national synod of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, echoes both the Synod of Paris and the Belgic Confession: “No church shall lord it over another church, no minister of the Word, no elder or deacon, shall lord it over another, but shall guard himself against all suspicion and enticement to lord it over others” (Paragraph 1). Nauta called this principle “the Golden Rule of Reformed church polity” (in De Ridder 1983:44). All subsequent Dutch Reformed church orders include it; it is Article 84 of the DCO – “No church shall in anyway lord it over another church, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons.”²

Some argue that the article’s purpose is “to maintain the independence of the local churches” (De Gier 1968:120). Indeed, a delegate at a recent Reformed general synod, misquoting Article 84, argued that “synods are not permitted to ‘lord it over’ classes or congregations” (Libolt 2018:26). But Article 84 does not refer to classes or synods, nor does it speak of the relationship between minor and major assemblies. Rather, it addresses the relationships between local congregations and between office-bearers within an ecclesial assembly. The article was written to define Protestant principles – the parity of office-bearers – over against Roman hierarchy, particularly the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

2 All quotations of early Dutch Reformed church orders, including the DCO, are from Biesterveld & Kuyper (1982).

Article 84 means: “A small church has the same representation at classis as a large church; a young, inexperienced minister the same vote and opportunity of influence as his older colleagues. Each elder or deacon has the same right and privileges in consistory” (Hoeksema 1926:80). Van Dellen & Monsma (1967:336) comment: “This article cannot be isolated from other articles of our church order that deal with major assemblies. ... Such an erroneous isolation might easily lead one to conclude that in the Reformed system classes and synods can only advise and that these bodies cannot take authoritative decisions. Nothing could, however, be further from the truth.” The autonomy of local congregations is, as Plaatjies van Huffel described it, “limited,” limited by the denominational ties that serve the well-being of the church.

Just as the autonomy of local congregations is limited, so also the power of major assemblies is limited. Herein lies an inherent tension in Reformed church polity. Article 30 of the DCO states: “In major assemblies only that shall be dealt with that could not be finished in the minor, or that which concerns the churches of the major assembly in common.” Some have argued that the local consistory “is the only ruling authority in the church.” “The authority of the higher assemblies is always less than that of the consistory because they are only allowed to deal with matters that could not be resolved in the lower assemblies” (Biesterveld & Kuyper 1982:12). That, however, is to misread Article 30. It reads a principal rationale – the lesser authority of major assemblies – into a regulation that was first proposed for pragmatic reasons.

The Synod of Emden (1571) stipulated that delegates to provincial synods “shall not present any other things than those which could not be completed in the consistorial and classical meetings, or such things that concern all of the churches of the province” (Chapter III, paragraph 1). Regarding the general synod, the Synod of Emden (1571) said that delegates were to bring “testimonies and credentials and orders concerning doctrine, church government, and special matters which could not be carried out or completed in the provincial meetings, or which concern and affect all the churches” (Chapter IV). The Synod of Emden (1571) did not explicitly prohibit major assemblies from dealing with matters that could be resolved in the minor assemblies. It disallowed delegates from minor assemblies

bringing to major assemblies matters that could be resolved by the lower assemblies, not because that would usurp the authority of minor assemblies, but “so that the provincial meetings are not lengthened with unnecessary problems” (Chapter III, paragraph 1).

The Synod of Dordrecht (1578) adopted the same restriction: “No matter shall be brought to major assemblies except that which could not be finished in the minor [assembly],” but did not include the rationale for it. The Synod of Middelberg (1581) revised the restriction to refer to matters with which the major assemblies dealt: “In major assemblies only that which could not be finished in minor [assemblies] shall be dealt with.” The same revision prevailed in the church order adopted by the Synod of ’s Gravenhage (1586), (Art. XXVIII) and the DCO (Art. 36). It is noteworthy that, *contra* Biesterveld & Kuyper (1982:12), these church orders did not restrict the major assembly’s authority to *only* matters which could not be finished by the minor assemblies. These church orders always included within the purview of major assemblies “matters which concern and affect all the churches,” including “doctrine and church government” (Synod of Emden [1571], Chapter IV) and “ceremonies and liturgies” (Synod of Dordrecht [1578], Chapter II, Article XXIX).

It is true, as Van Dellen & Monsma (1949:139) contend, that “no major assembly may needlessly interfere with the management of congregational affairs.” The key word here is “needlessly.” Van Dellen & Monsma’s own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), affirms that “classis stands above the church council, and it may not stand apart but must concern itself with the smallest item of congregational matters when difficulties arise within the congregation” (Sheeres 2013:384–386) and that “it is indeed proper according to Reformed polity for either classis or synod to intervene in the affairs of the local congregation, if the welfare of the congregation is at stake” (Acts 1982:55). Denominational ties serve the well-being – and protect the welfare – of the (local) church.

These affirmations were based on Article 36 of the DCO which states: “The classis has the same authority over the consistory that the particular synod has over the classis, and the general synod has over the particular.” This article appeared first in the Church Order of Middelburg (1581) (Article 27).

How that synod understood the authority of a major assembly over a minor assembly can be inferred from its responses to the following questions. When asked “whether the larger churches should submit themselves to the decisions of the synod and classis, as well as the small churches, and regulate themselves according to them?” synod answered, “All churches, large as well as small, are equally subject to the classis, as the classis to the particular synod, and the particular synod to the general.” (Biesterveld & Kuyper 1982:131). When asked “whether a classis has the right to rescind a decision of a previous classis made contrary to a decision of the national synod,” synod answered, “It not only has the right but also the duty to do so” (Biesterveld & Kuyper 1982:133).

These answers indicate that in historic Reformed polity minor assemblies are indeed subject to major assemblies; minor assemblies must submit themselves to the decisions of the major assemblies. Where the decisions of the assemblies differ, the decision of the major assembly takes precedence. Thus, a minor assembly must rescind or revise its decision to align with that of the major assembly. Major assemblies possess supervisory power over minor assemblies. Particularly with regard to misconduct, major assemblies have power. A major assembly may discipline, even depose, members of a minor assembly – a principle rejected by the Doleantie’s congregationalist ecclesiology.

***Doleantie* ecclesiology**

Abraham Kuyper developed the doctrine of the local church as an *ecclesia completa*, a doctrine that Kuyper himself acknowledged was a deviation from historic Reformed ecclesiology. In his Tract on the Reformation of the Churches, which Kuyper described as “as compendium of his ecclesiology” (De Bruijne 2014:445). Kuyper (2016:115) admitted: “The view presented here – that the local church is the primary manifestation of the church of Jesus Christ, and national churches arose only as secondary through the federating of these churches – is not generally held.” Both the NHK, from which Kuyper and the *Doleantie* churches seceded in 1886, and the Church of the *Afscheiding* (Separation), which had seceded from the NHK in 1834, spoke of one national church consisting of local congregations. Both used

the word “church” to refer to the denomination as a whole and the word “congregation” to refer to local churches (Bouma, 1995:146).

But for Kuyper (2016:128–129) the local church is “the starting point of all church government,” “the cornerstone of the entire system.” In *Doleantie* ecclesiology, the essence of the church is found in the local church. Church federations are always secondary (Kuyper 2016:90, 116, 275). A local church “would remain a church even if all other local churches to which it is connected were to fall away. ... The existence of the church always precedes the existence of the church federation, and the federation is born out of the churches” (Kuyper 2016:224–225). Kuyper (2016:158, 169) used the language of “correspondence” to describe the federative bonds between local congregations. This usage of the term deviates from its historic usage in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, which had “introduced correspondence between particular synods when [post-Dordrecht (1618/19)] the government refused to allow churches to meet in a general synod” (Zwaanstra 1991:32).

The *Doleantie* churches’ Provisional Synod of 1891 said that “it is impossible that there should be anything other than local churches.” Though these local churches “may work together on the level of classes and synods and thereby come into federation with one another, the church order does not recognize such a thing as a national church as an entity or a communion” (Bouma, 1995:161). De Moor (1986:339–340) rightly describes this as “a drastic departure from the traditional structure of the Reformed church.”

Kuyper thought that the polity of the Church of the *Afscheiding* left much to be desired. (Zwaanstra, 1979:172) The *Afscheiding van 1834* responded to the reorganization of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands under the *Algemeen Reglement* in 1816. Classes and synods were replaced by classical and synodical boards appointed by the king. The *Afscheiding* rightly objected to this violation of the autonomy the church, its right to self-government under the sole headship of Jesus Christ. The *Afscheiding* did not object to synodical authority per se, but to synodical *boards*. “They were willing to be governed by classes and synods, which are assemblies of ministers and elders delegated by lower assemblies, but not by state appointees who had no reason to uphold pure doctrine and worship” (Boonstra 1982:78).

In its declaration of secession from the NHK, the *Afscheiding* consistory of Ulrum said that it would adhere to the DCO “for the present” (Kamps 2014:246). The consistory of Doeveren and Genderen said that it would do likewise “for the time being” (Oostendorp 1964:63). These statements suggest that the *Afscheiding*’s commitment to the DCO was temporary or interim. Certain provisions of the DCO regarding the right of patronage³ – which violated the Reformed church polity principle of self-government under the sole headship of Christ – had become dead letters. There was general agreement at the Church of the *Afscheiding*’s first synod in 1836 that the DCO needed revision, but delegates disagreed about the extent to which revisions should be made. The synod decided that the DCO would be followed “for the time being,” leaving a final decision on the matter of church order to the next synod.

But one *Afscheiding* minister, Hendrick P. Scholte, did not wait for the next synod. He presented his own draft of a new church order (the Regulations for the Congregation of Utrecht) to the churches in South Holland, Utrecht, North Holland, North Brabant, and a section of Gelderland in the spring of 1837, before the next synod of the Church of the *Afscheiding* met (Heideman 2015:94). Scholte’s church order was a significant anticipation of the *Doleantie* ecclesiology of Abraham Kuyper.

As Kuyper would be, “Scholte was fearful of synodical authority and wanted each consistory to ratify the decisions of synod” (Kamps 2014:221). In 1838, he published two articles in *De Reformatie* explaining that he could not accept the DCO because of the supervisory authority it gave major assemblies (Heideman 2015:110). Scholte’s church order focused almost exclusively on the local congregation and its consistory and avoided any hierarchical relationship between minor and major assemblies (Heideman 2015:104).

Other leaders of the Church of the *Afscheiding*, including Hendrick De Cock and Simon Van Velzen, who would preside at the 1837 Synod,

3 The DCO includes provisions that gave the civil authorities the right to interfere in the calling of ministers and the government of the church (Articles IV, V, X). It also allowed that “the magistrates of the respective place, if they wish, may have one or two of their number, who are members of the church, meet with the consistory to listen and to deliberate concerning matters that take place” (Article XXXVII).

considered Scholte's church order a serious deviation from the tradition of Dordrecht. Under Van Velzen's leadership, the 1837 Synod of the Church of the *Afscheiding* revised the DCO – forty-two articles were revised, eight were eliminated, and thirty-six were adopted without change. The resulting Utrecht Church Order, named for the city in which the 1837 Synod had met, was set aside by the 1840 Synod of the Church of the *Afscheiding*, which declared that, except for the right of patronage, the DCO “was the only rule for the government, discipline and service of the congregations” (Heideman 2015:125). A commission was dispatched “to meet with the consistory in Utrecht and Scholte to admonish them to admit the irregularity of their actions and to accept the DCO as it was now accepted in this meeting of the synod.” Scholte refused, and the synod deposed him (Heideman 2015:140).

Kuyper objected to this hierarchical spirit in the Church of the *Afscheiding* that gave the general synod final authority (Bouma 1995:71). The *Doleantie* was deeply distrustful of synodical authority. Kuyper (2016:275) urged the Church of the *Afscheiding*, “to emphasize their independence as local churches in order to remove all remaining leaven of the collegial system” – a system in which the denomination is considered the church; the congregations, parts or divisions of the whole. Hodge (1879:119) argued that this unity of the church in which a small part is subject to a larger, and a larger to the whole, is a fundamental principle of Presbyterian (Reformed) church polity.

Kuyper (2016:118) himself appears to allow for a collegial system on the local level. He argued that the boundaries of the local church should coincide with those of its municipality, regardless of the size of the municipality. “If the municipality remains single, then the formation of the church ought to be one, even if it would include a hundred thousand individuals or more.” This does not mean, however, that the church cannot be divided into parishes, “as long as these parishes have as their head one consistory, representing the unity of the congregation.” Kuyper does not explain, however, why the same unity should not obtain for the church at a regional or national level. Why should the congregations of a denomination not have as their head one consistory, the general synod, representing the unity of the church?

The rallying cry of *Doleantie* ecclesiology has been “the autonomy of the local church.” Noting that “autonomy” literally means “a law unto itself.” De Moor (1988:55) suggests that “it is surely time to ask how this comports with the Reformed confession that ‘Christ is the only head of his church.’” As Plaatjies Van Huffel (2014:31) notes, when Calvin struggled for the autonomy of the church, it was not for the local church against the major assemblies that he struggled. Rather, it was for the church’s right of self-government under the sole headship of Christ. Calvin struggled for church’s right to discipline its members apart from interference by the civil magistrate.

Christ is the only head of the church. In Reformed polity, Christ’s lordship over the church is exercised by duly ordained office-bearers. Christ alone possess original authority in the church. He delegates his authority to office-bearers, not a particular ecclesial assembly, as his representatives. Ecclesial assemblies possess authority as they exercise the joint authority delegated by Christ to the office-bearers that constitute them. The nature of authority exercised by a major assembly does not differ in essence from that of a minor assembly, the local consistory. The authority of all ecclesial assemblies is consistorial. The major assemblies of classis and synod function as the consistory of the regional and national church respectively (De Moor 1986:342, 351).

As Plaatjies Van Huffel (2014:37) notes: “Failure to recognize the authority of major assemblies leads to an independent form of church governance,” one that deviates from the principles of Reformed church polity which recognize the power of major assemblies, particularly with regard to misconduct. Such a deviation from the principles of Reformed church polity is evident in the Church Order of the URCNA which codifies the ecclesiology of the *Doleantie* and cannot be considered a Reformed church order.

Church Order of the URCNA

In 1892, the churches of the *Doleantie* united with the Church of the *Afscheiding* to form the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN). Approval of this name by the Church of the *Afscheiding* was not without

considerable discussion, because “behind the question of whether the united churches should use the singular (*kerk* / church) or the plural (*kerken* / churches) in their collective name lay differing conceptions concerning the unity of the church” and of the authority of major assemblies (Bouma 1995:204). Adoption of the plural *kerken* was a victory for *Doleantie* ecclesiology. With this name, the GKN “declared that the congregations did not constitute one over-arching and embracing church, controlled by synodical regulation, but a federation of local bodies of believers, bound by the same confessions and church order” (De Jong 1995:295).

Similarly, the United Reformed Churches in North America are churches (plural); they are not a church (singular), as is the Christian Reformed Church in North America, from which they seceded. Throughout its church order, the URCNA consistently describes itself as a “federation of churches,” not a denomination.⁴ Herein we see the URCNA’s deviation from the principles of Reformed church polity. This deviation is evident in the URCNA Church Order’s provisions regarding the autonomy of the local church, which it does not limit; the power of major assemblies in the case of misconduct, which it explicitly denies; and the effective lack of denominational ties that serve the well-being of the church.

The URCNA acknowledges “Jesus Christ to be the supreme and only head of the church.” The Introduction to its Church Order says that “this headship is exercised in the churches by his Word and Spirit through the God-ordained offices.” However, rather than recognize that all assemblies are consistorial because all assemblies are constituted by those God-ordained offices through which Christ by his Word and Spirit exercises his headship over the church, the church order claims that “the consistory is the only assembly in the church(es) whose decisions possess direct authority within the congregation, since the consistory receives its authority directly from Christ, and thereby is directly accountable to Christ” (Article 21). It is not, however, the consistory that receives its authority from Christ, but the office-bearers. The consistory exercises the joint authority delegated by Christ to the office-bearers who constitute it, just as major assemblies

4 All quotations of the URCNA Church Order: [Online]. Available: <https://www.urncna.org/church-order> [Accessed: 29 May 2020].

exercise the joint authority delegated by Christ to the office-bearers who constitute them.

Contra the principles of Reformed church polity, the URCNA Church Order does not limit the autonomy of the local church. Calling minor assemblies “directly accountable to Christ” implicitly denies that they are also accountable to major assemblies. Indeed, the URCNA Church Order explicitly denies the power of major assemblies with regard to misconduct. Article 25 states: “No broader assembly shall have the power to depose an office-bearer or otherwise exercise church discipline, since these powers belong to the consistory.”

The power of a major assembly (classis) to depose a minor assembly (consistory) was controversial in the Dutch Reformed tradition from which the URCNA seceded. Advocates of *Doleantie* ecclesiology frequently argued that a classis can do no more than declare that a consistory has left the fellowship of the denomination (or federation). For a classis to depose a consistory (or its members) would be “a violation of the integrity and of the rights of the particular church concerned” (Van Dellen & Monsma 1967:328). Proponents of this position often appealed to Article 84 of the DCO: “No church shall in anyway lord it over another church ...” However, as noted above, Article 84 speaks to the relationship between congregations, not the relationship between minor and major assemblies.

Reformed synods have consistently rejected these appeals to Article 84. The relevant article is Article 36 of the DCO: “The classis has the same authority over the consistory that the particular synod has over the classis, and the general synod has over the particular.” This article grants major assemblies power with regard to misconduct. In 1926, the GKN Synod of Assen deposed Dr. Geelkerken and the consistory of Amsterdam-Zuid. This decision was devastating to advocates of *Doleantie* polity, particularly because it was supported by H.H. Kuyper and H. Bouwman, respected professors of church polity, who had previously argued that the most a major assembly could do was to disaffiliate the congregation of a delinquent consistory. Both acknowledged that their previous position, which reflected *Doleantie* ecclesiology, was in error. It was not consistent with the principles of Reformed church polity (De Moor 1986:168–169).

Plaatjies van Huffel (2014:38) notes with approval the provision in the constitution of Reformed Church in America “that a classis shall have the authority to supersede a consistory in the administration of a local church when, in its judgement, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfil the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis.” She laments the lack of a similar provision within her own denomination: “currently the major assemblies of the URCSA [Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa], however, have no power to intervene directly into the affairs of minor assemblies *inter alia* to take the initiative with regard to implementation of the decisions with regard to deposition or suspension” (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:39). Strangely, Plaatjies van Huffel fails to connect this lack of power with other provisions in the polity of the URCSA that effectively deny the denominational ties that should serve the well-being of the church, specifically the right of “a congregation through its church council [to] withdraw from the federation at any time.” “In URCSA, a congregation that decides to break with the federation is perfectly free to do so and no ecclesiastical assembly can prevent it” (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:39).

The URCNA Church Order grants the same freedom to local congregations: “A church through its consistory may withdraw from the federation at any time by submitting a written statement to the classis to which the church belongs” (Article 30). This freedom, however, undermines the accountability essential to denominational ties in Reformed church polity. Its logical corollary is to deny major assemblies the power to discipline office-bearers. It renders the right of appeal impotent.

The URCNA Church Order grants the right to appeal to the broader assemblies to any assembly that thinks that it has been wronged by the decision of another assembly. (Article 29) In both the DCO and the URCNA Church Order, the judgment of the major assembly is “settled and binding, unless it is proved that they are in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order” (Article 29; cf. DCO, Art. 31). Historically, conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order was proved to the next higher/broader assembly, or, in the case of an appeal to synod, to the next general synod. The Form of Subscription adopted by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618/19) expected that office-bearers submit themselves to the judgment of the major assemblies. The same was expected of the minor assemblies. But not in the

URCNA Church Order, which says that “consistories who are convinced that they cannot comply with a decision of a broader assembly ... cannot be compelled to do so.” They may persist in their error or misconduct.

“If a consistory refuses to comply with the final decision of the synod and a subsequent synod rules by a majority vote that submission in the matter is essential for the unity of the churches, the congregation is no longer eligible for membership in the federation” (Article 29). This removal of a congregation from membership in the federation is a corollary to the church order’s denial of the authority of major assemblies to discipline office-bearers. Though decisions of broader assemblies should be received with “respect and submission,” consistories cannot be compelled to comply. It remains the consistory’s judgment whether the major assembly’s decision agrees with the Word of God and the Church Order. Thus, the power of major assemblies is effectively denied. The consistory becomes a law unto itself. Contra the foundational principles of Reformed church polity, its autonomy is not limited. But, as Plaatjies van Huffel (2014:37) argued: “Failure to recognize the authority of major assemblies leads to an independent [that is, non-Reformed] form of church governance.”

To argue that either the local consistory or the general or national synod is the highest authority in the church presents a false dichotomy. It ought not to be an either/or. Rather, it should be a both/and. In Reformed ecclesiology, “every local church is simultaneously an independent manifestation of the body of Christ *and* part of a larger whole” (Bavinck 2008: 374). *Doleantie* ecclesiology and its expression in the URCNA Church Order deny that the local church is an integral part of a larger whole.

“The notion that no Reformed congregation stands by itself is a fundamental principle of Reformed church polity. ... The unity of the church is expressed in mutual relationship.” Local congregations have “a spiritual obligation to seek and maintain the unity of the church” (Plaatjies van Huffel 2014:37). “The basis of the mutual relationships between congregations is not primarily the practical desirability or necessity for cooperation, assistance and exchange of ideas. The need for the relationship, as indicated in Scripture, stems from the essential nature of the church” (Coertzen 1998:27). Local congregations must manifest the unity of the

body of Christ by joining together with other churches in regional and national ecclesiastical structures.

This obligation to manifest the unity of the church restricts the freedom of local churches to leave their denominations or federation. Contra Kuyper and *Doleantie* ecclesiology, though local congregations voluntarily enter into federative relationships with other congregations, they do not thereby retain the freedom to withdraw from those relationships. Federative (or denominational) relationships are a manifestation of the unity of the church and an expression of the church's catholicity. A couple voluntarily enters the covenant bonds of holy matrimony but does not retain the right to dissolve those bonds, because what God has joined together should not be separated. The same is true of the local and denominational expressions of the church of Jesus Christ in which God is destroying the barrier, the dividing wall, creating in Christ Jesus one new humanity (Eph. 2).

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