

12. Church meetings

Church meetings that are maintained are: Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod and General Synod (CO, art 29).

Each local church, i.e. each church in a particular place, is an independent church. Churches that are one with each other in Confession, liturgy and church government must also experience that unity practically with one another in denomination. For the experience of the unity of churches plenary meetings are necessary.

12.1 Limitation of powers

In CO, art 30, a number of limitations in the powers of church meetings are indicated:

1. Church meetings may only discuss church matters.
2. Church meetings should not deal with matters that can be handled by minor assemblies.
3. Plenary assemblies may not deal with matters that can be handled by minor assemblies.

12.2 Plenary assemblies

Minor assemblies delegate ministers and elders to plenary meetings. These delegates receive credential letters from the meeting that sends them, as proof of their delegation.

- 12.2.1 A credential letter is a document of evidence that a minor assembly gives to its delegates as proof that they have been legally delegated by the meeting. Based on the credential letter the delegates receive a deciding vote in the plenary assembly. Therefore it is essential that credential letters must be completed accurately; the names and offices of the delegates must be filled in correctly.

The calling Church Council of the plenary assembly should take notice of the correctness of the credential letters. Without legal/correct credential letters no person may acquire a seat in a plenary assembly, even though there is no doubt about his/their delegation. When a seat is given to someone whose credential letter is missing or not in order, the legality of the plenary assembly and all its actions come in jeopardy.

12.2.2 Open declaration

Plenary meetings gather on the basis of the unit in Confession, liturgy and church government, upon which denomination is based. This unity is expressed in the "Open Declaration" which is read at the start of every plenary assembly. Delegates show their agreement by standing. Whoever refuses to signify agreement thereto forfeits his seat.

OPEN DECLARATION OF THE SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The synodal/classical meeting of the Reformed Churches declares openly, and each member for himself, as follows:

We do hereby, sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare that we heartily believe and are persuaded that the doctrinal standard decided on the Synod of the Reformed Churches in Netherland at Dordrecht in the year 1618-19, published

and taught in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, does fully agree with the Word of God and that we will abide to it by the grace of the Holy Spirit, each one according to his office.

We also accept the liturgy as decided on by the mentioned synod for our corporate worship.

We will keep to the Church Order of the afore mentioned synod of Dordrecht as altered by the Synods of the Reformed Churches of South Africa in the ruling of our church.

We heartily invite to our church community all who received the same precious belief through the grace of the Holy Spirit and want to confess and adhere to it.

It is our wish to keep close brotherly community and correspondence with all local churches and those abroad who confess and adhere to the same standards.

May the Lord graciously sanctify his precious Word to many hearts. It is the desire and prayer of this meeting that through it and through the work of the Holy Spirit all the elect gather and all true believers will be united in one churchly community.

12.2.3 Assignments

Delegates should also bring along their "assignments". These assignments must be duly signed "by those who are sending them", thus the delegated meeting.

"Assignments" include points of description, petitions of protest, requests for revision and appeals to be included in the agenda of the plenary assembly. The reports of the deputies are also added to the agenda.

Only the meeting that delegates may give assignments for the agenda of the plenary assembly; a church council may not directly pass on assignments to the Regional Synod or General Synod, bypassing the Classis; the same applies appropriately for the Classis and the Regional Synod.

For practical reasons plenary meetings require that all assignments and other documents for the agenda reach the corresponding church council/deputies correspondence before a certain date. The purpose is clear: the agenda should be drafted and sent out to all parties involved for information and preparation. Late pieces can be included in the agenda by the meeting. Slackness and negligence must be eradicated as effectively as possible.

12.2.4 Deciding Vote

Each delegate in a plenary assembly has a deciding vote, except in cases where it concerns his own person or church in particular. Deciding vote is the vote cast during the decision-making process.

This means that only legitimate delegates may vote in plenary meetings. Ministers who are not delegated and theological professors attend in an advisory capacity, which means that they may only give advice. Visitors may be granted an opportunity to speak at the meeting; it means that they may only discuss matters.

12.3 Classis

A classis is a meeting of neighbouring churches who each delegate a minister of the Word and an elder or, where there is no minister, two elders (CO, art 41). These churches are represented by their church councils (elders and minister).

When no elder is available to be delegated, a deacon and (in exceptional cases) even a church member, may be delegated. Delegation of elders can take place through free elections or by turns.

Because a classis is a meeting of churches, it is obvious that all churches will have the same number of delegates, so that a smaller church is not dominated/overruled by a larger church.

The responsibility of the Classis is in respect of the following:

- Finances
- Classis “ramings”
- Sustentation
- Visitation
- Retirement of a minister
- CO, art 13 medical disability
- The PGT of the minister
- Taking care of emeriti
- Medical assistance care

The Classis is not a permanent meeting, but lasts only from constitution to closure. A next Classis is another Classis, albeit a meeting of the same churches.

The place and time of the next Classis is determined by the previous meeting. Classes usually meet at set times.

At the last meeting of the Classis before the Regional Synod delegates to this Synod are chosen.

12.4 Regional Synod

The regional synod is an assembly of neighbouring classes, to which each classis delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the regional synod. The regional synod shall meet annually, unless, in the opinion of at least two classes, it has become essential to call an extraordinary regional synod. (CO, art 47).

The regional synod meets annually. This, however, is not a principle that should be enforced, but a practical measure. If the scope of the agenda for a particular year does not justify the gathering of a Regional Synod (provisionally determined by the corresponding Church Council/deputies for correspondence in consultation with the calling Church Council) it does not need to be called. The General Synod should however make such a decision advance to give the calling church council the authority to do so. The final evaluation of the scope of the agenda with the purpose of calling the Regional Synod or not, should be done with the advice of the Classis in whose jurisdiction is the calling church council resides.

If an extraordinary Regional Synod or one that is put forward is essential, at least two Classes must agree.

Naturally the Regional Synod just before a General Synod, must meet; because delegates to the General Synod, as well as members of the regular and broader curatoriums, must be appointed.

The responsibility of the Regional Synod is in respect of the following:

- Finances
- Regional Synod “ramings”
- Sustentation – feedback about allocations
- Making proponents available to call
- Taking care of emeriti
- Church Order, artt 79, 80
- Christian education
- “Transoranje Instituut”
- Points of description, petitions of protest, appeals

12.5 General Synod

The General Synod is a meeting of all the Regional Synods to which each Regional Synod delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders as determined by the General Synod. The General Synod meets every three years, unless it is deemed necessary in the opinion of at least two Regional Synods to call an extraordinary meeting (CO, art 50).

The responsibility of the General Synod is in respect of the following:

- Deputy reports
- Points of description, petitions of protest, appeals
- Finances
- “Ramings”

12.6 Assignment of Corresponding Church Council

Every plenary assembly appoint a Corresponding Church Council or deputies for correspondence who receive and keep all papers and documents of the meeting and submit its acta at the next meeting.

The Corresponding Church Council should handle all unfinished correspondence; certain items of correspondence are completed during the meeting by the scribes, but most of the correspondence arising from the meeting must be completed by the Corresponding Church Council.

Furthermore, the Corresponding Church Council must receive all agenda documents.

In their report to the meeting the Corresponding Church Council must mention assignments carried out and documents received for the meeting. The report of the Corresponding Church Council usually forms the agenda of the meeting and is usually presented right after the constitution and the report of the Calling Church Council.

The Corresponding Church Council must keep all documents safe and advise the meeting from time to time as to which documents should be sent to the church archives.

12.7 Assignment of Calling Church Council

Each plenary assembly appoints a Calling Church Council to call and receive the next meeting at the appointed time and place, or else at the time and place that the Calling Church Council determines, in the case of the Regional Synod, according to the advice of their Classis, and in the case of the General Synod, according to the advice of the Regional Synod.

The Calling Church Council receives the credential letters and check it in light of the Church Order and applicable Synod resolutions. Furthermore the Calling Church Council arranges everything related to the session times of the meeting, provision of food and accommodation of delegates.

The chairman of the Calling Church Council also leads the constitution of the meeting.

12.8 Point of Description, Petition of Protest, Appeal

12.8.1 A Point of Description

A point of description is a proposal that is submitted, for which a church meeting's decision is required.

Before a motion can be tabled, it must first be determined whether previous meetings had not taken already decisions on the matter (proposal) (CO, art 46).

Also, in the case of plenary assemblies, it must be determined whether the case really belongs in the plenary assembly and whether it could already have been finalised in a minor assembly (CO, art 30)

In dealing with a point of description the elucidator (proposer) introduces the matter and gives a brief motivation for why a decision on the matter is necessary.

The chairman gives an opportunity for discussion. Everyone's input should be aimed at helping the meeting to reach a decision. Discussion is not debating various points of view, to try to convince others of a point of view. Therefore Scripture, Confession and Church Order should guide the discussion.

Decision-making preferably takes place by mutual agreement (*mutuo consensu*), because the churches are one in doctrine, service and discipline (cf. Eph 4: 3-6 - and churches confess their unity in Christ together (Apostles' Creed, Confession of Nicea, HC 21:54, BC art 27).

Certain matters may result in decisions made by majority vote. Here, the minority must either conform (go along with it) or, if the belief is that the decision is against Scripture, Confession and Church Order, follow the way of petition of protest.

12.8.2 Petition of Protest (gravamen)

A petition of protest is essentially a point of description. The difference is that it brings a matter that was already decided about, back to the table and requests that a new decision is taken on the matter. With a petition of protest an objection is made to a particular decision because the decision is contrary to Scripture, Church Order or decisions already taken by church meetings. Therefore the objection is made about the decision taken with the meeting which took the decision.

However it must be determined whether the matter pertains to the particular meeting (CO, art 30) and if the matter actually has not already been finalized (CO, art 46). In practice this means that a petition of protest brings new information (matter) to the meeting, which must be weighed anew by the meeting.

A requirement for a petition of protest is that the decision (in dispute) that was taken must be presented correctly. In addition, the petition of protest must provide proper grounds (motivation) for objection, which should/can convince the meeting to change the original decision. These two points determine the susceptibility of a petition of protest.

In dealing with a petition of protest, the objector states his case and motivates his objection.

Discussion follows, in which each person participating does not get stuck in a debate, but makes a contribution to help the meeting to reach a responsible decision.

Petitions of protest are NOT administration of justice. Therefore (as in the case of an appeal) hearing and hearing again (replication) is not allowed in the dealing with and decision-making with respect to petitions of protest.

12.8.3 Appeal

Appeal means appealing to church polity (based in Scripture, Confession and Church Order). Appeal is made from a minor assembly to a next plenary assembly. The real motivation for appeal is that violation of polity occurred. This violation of polity must be proved by the appeal.

In dealing with appeals administration of justice is asked for.

For the requirements, submission, processing and judgment in an appeal, see Acta General Synod 2023:55-63.