

# Leadership in Mission: The Reformed System of Church Governance in an Age of Mission<sup>1</sup>

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## Introductory Case Studies

Some years ago, Roger S. Greenway, the *éminence grise* of mission from Calvin Theological Seminary, presented a lecture at a conference on urban mission in Pretoria, South Africa. Someone from the audience asked him what he thought about the rule that missionaries of the Reformed Church in South Africa (the “Doppers”) were required to be ordained as pastors, an ordination that required a full six years of academic theological training before entering missionary practice. Greenway responded immediately with something like this: “We must be careful not to educate our pastors away from the poor.” His point was obvious: A monolithic, traditional European view of the minister as someone well trained in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, hermeneutics, and many more subjects, renders those ministers we send out largely unfit for many contemporary mission fields. A pastor living in an immigrant neighborhood in one of our cities in the Netherlands once told me: “I’d rather have spent some years learning Arabic than learning Bible languages.” As long as our idea of what and who a minister should be is almost completely shaped by habit rather than the contemporary situation, it is difficult to be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances.

A second example comes from my own Dutch context. Since the late 1990s, several smaller Reformed denominations in the Netherlands have been engaged in missionary church planting,<sup>2</sup> a work that has been

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of my lecture presented at the consultation “What Type of Leadership Does the Western Church Need Today?” held at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam, November 14–15, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For further description and reflection, see Stefan Paas and Hans Schaeffer, “Reconstructing Reformed Identity: Experiences from Church Planting in the Netherlands,”

blessed and has resulted in new believers. However, because most of these new plants had been started by nonacademically trained theologians or by gifted evangelists, none of which had formal theological education, problems emerged. The high standards these denominations held, both for the training of their pastors and for baptism—to be administered only by an ordained minister—required that ordained pastors come in from elsewhere to baptize the new believers who had been evangelized and nurtured by their own church planters. In this way, the organic connection between evangelism and baptism was severed, distributing different stages of evangelization and nurture over different roles and leaving the formal “icing on the cake” to a pastor who had no intimate relationship with the new believer at all. The Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands<sup>3</sup> found this situation unbearable; It now permits church planters without an academic theological education (but with at least some theological formation) to administer the sacraments, but only in the church they have planted. In practice, then, this denomination has created a dual ministry of the Word: “traditional” (academically trained) pastors who may preach and baptize everywhere and a special category of “evangelists according to Article 4 of Church Order” who may only perform as a minister in their own local congregation. Their proven qualities in building a church and proclaiming the gospel are apparently considered a sufficient qualification, but only there.

These two rather similar case studies demonstrate several ways in which a missionary age challenges our ministry structure with new requirements; the emphasis here lies on flexibility and contextualization and the problems traditional Reformed governance practice is facing in this respect. Underlying this challenge are deeper and more structural problems, rooted in the practice of centuries. Lesslie Newbigin, for example, reminds us that the ministry structure of the Reformation (and, for that matter, of the entire Christendom arrangement) was focused on the maintenance and governance of the church rather than on witnessing to the world. In the earliest church, ecclesial leadership was foremost a “leadership in mission”; in the churches of Christendom the primary task of the offices was to teach and look after the congregation.<sup>4</sup> He illustrates this tendency with a familiar example from secular Europe. Churches that

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<sup>3</sup> *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, established in 1892, has about 70,000 members in about 175 congregations.

<sup>4</sup> For Newbigin’s critique of Christendom ecclesiology, see Michael Goheen, “*As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You*”: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s *Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), 244–57.

see their membership shrink and in some areas their presence disappear, often decide to reorganize, with the result that their pastoral resources are concentrated in areas where there are still enough members to pay a minister. This reinforces an inward-directed tendency that can only accelerate decline. According to Newbigin, churches should instead send their best people, and especially their ministers, to those areas where the church is under pressure and where it is bleeding members. This is what leadership in mission means.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, this is not the natural reflex of our churches, nor is it the way we look at our church offices.

## Structural Problems

### *The Hybrid Nature of Reformed Ministry Structure*

It may seem that such problems are more or less the consequence of changed circumstances. One could say: In this age our churches are pressured by secularization and that is why our practice of ministry suffers. Or, one could say: Now that we have entered post-Christendom, the older arrangements must be revised, even though they were perfectly all right back then. This, though, is only part of the truth. As I already suggested when I quoted Newbigin, I believe that our Reformed theology and practice of ministry contain some theological and practical problems that have probably been there from the very beginning. We might compare this to a bridge designed to bear vehicles weighing up to five tons. So long as trucks weigh no more than five tons, the hidden weaknesses are not revealed. As soon as the bridge is forced to bear heavier weight, however, the entire context changes, the cracks become holes and the bridge threatens to collapse. In my opinion, this is where the church finds itself today. Let us look at some of these tensions and inconsistencies.

It is well known, that the Reformed doctrine of ministry is not a “garment without seams” (John 19:23). There are differences among Calvin, Béza, and Bucer, between the Belgian Confession and the Ordination Forms, and between the Reformation and the Further (or Second) Reformation.<sup>6</sup> Part of this has to do with the rather “hybrid” character of Reformed ministry: It finds itself located between the Radical Reformation and Roman Catholicism—mediating between “high” and “low” ways of being church and negotiating between “sacramental” and “functional” views of church ministry. Let me mention just one example of a question that has never

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 235–36.

<sup>6</sup> For a lengthier discussion see C. Graafland, *Gedachten over het ambt* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1999).

been resolved satisfactorily: which tasks belong to the official and which tasks belong to the lay ministry? What does it mean to assert that a certain task is “ministerial” or “official”? In fact, the Reformed tradition is characterized by an ever-recurring discussion about this question.

The pastorate, for example, is generally considered to be a ministerial task, but in practice this leaves much room for interpretation. Does this mean that all pastoral work must be done by officially appointed ministers or officials? This question becomes increasingly relevant—at least in the Netherlands—because of the emergence of nonordained, theologically educated “church workers” and “pastoral workers.”<sup>7</sup> These professionals are working in pastoral ministry, church development, catechesis, youth work, and evangelism. Sometimes they lead Sunday worship services. Should they therefore be ordained or “officialized”?<sup>8</sup> In one very conservative Reformed denomination in the Netherlands (the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*) all pastoral workers are elders. The reason for this seems to be that pastoral work should be done by officials. I encountered an even stronger example of this point of view in the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* in Pretoria, South Africa, a large church with about fifteen thousand members (Moreleta). This church had hundreds of house groups, and it was sufficiently Reformed as to have all their home group leaders appointed as elders. The logic is very transparent: Leadership of a home group is an extension of the ministry of the Word (teaching and shepherding). It should, therefore, be an official task, not just in terms of final responsibility (supervision by officials) but also in terms of execution.

The practices just described raise questions: Do they leave any room for church work that is not “official”? Or, to use a rather unfortunate term, do they leave any room for lay ministry? Will everything be sucked up by the particular offices? In a practice like this, new functions that emerge spontaneously will easily be officialized time and again. For example, should those who visit the elderly and sick be appointed to some sort of office? If so, who is next? Youth workers? After all, they teach and preach to some extent.

On the other hand, if a church does not officialize everything that is done in the church, another question arises: What distinguishes official from lay ministry? A classic issue in my own denomination is this one: Sometimes nonordained people receive a “license to preach” because they are very gifted in evangelism, or they are skilled in sign language for the

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<sup>7</sup> Stefan Paas, “The Church Work Profile in The Netherlands,” in *Bridging the Gap: Proceedings of the IAPCHE-Europe Conference April 2009*, ed. A. de Muynck, J. H. Hegeman, P. H. Vos (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2011), 227–36.

<sup>8</sup> Henk Post, *De kerkelijk werker en het ambt* (Kampen: Kok, 2006).

hearing impaired. But, because they are not ministers of the Word, they do not actually preach; according to the Church Order they “speak an edifying word.” What, however, is the difference between the (official) ministry of the Word and the (lay) speaking an edifying word? While such a practice clearly creates room for a nonofficial yet recognized ministry, this happens through a largely artificial construction. Is it possible, for example, to imagine the same distinction between the sacraments: a minor (lay) baptism and a higher (official) one?

The inconsistencies could be resolved by opting for a high-church solution: Make everything official. A low church solution on the other hand could disconnect preaching and the sacraments from the offices. Reformed practice seems to hover between these two options. This could be taken as a strong point because it allows more flexibility in local situations. In practice, however, it leads to confusion and frustration in many places. Whatever may be the case, Reformed churches do not have a clear, unequivocal view of these matters, nor of their practical application. What then does it mean to be Reformed in these matters?

### *Critique from Other Traditions*

All this may be experienced as one of those inevitable issues implied in the application of theology to the concrete church. After all, we do not live in a perfect world, and there will always be loose ends, but this response may be too pragmatic. After all, the somewhat inconsistent nature of Reformed ministry is also highlighted by theological critiques coming from brothers and sisters outside the Reformed tradition.

Several recent Dutch studies, written by Reformed theologians, argue that Reformed churches must be prepared to learn from more catholic versions of ministry theology.<sup>9</sup> These studies point to the fact that Reformed church practice with its emphasis on the local congregation, and its lack of strong supra-local structures, suffers from a debilitating lack of unity. Reintroducing the office of bishop might be a remedy. Reformed churches should consider to what extent their continuing fragmentation is the result of their aversion of anything that smells of power and their fear of hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> From a missionary perspective, bishops can be helpful, as the Anglican Church shows if local parishes are not taking up the challenge

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., Margriet Gosker, *Het ambt in de oecumenische discussie: De betekenis van de Lima-ambtstekst voor de voortgang van de oecumene en de doorwerking in de Nederlandse SOW-kerken* (Delft: Eburon, 2000); Hans Kronenburg, *Episcopus Oecumenicus: Bouwstenen voor een theologie van het bisschopsambt in een verenigde reformatorische kerk* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Eddy van der Borght, *Het ambt her-dacht* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2001).

of mission or if they even work against it. There is beauty in the local principle, but there is also a great danger in permitting one local church to have a complete missionary monopoly over its parish. There are cases in the Netherlands where a local church actively resisted a new church plant or a missionary project, even though the church itself was completely inward-focused or completely liberal, or both. The authority of a bishop, or a superintendent, overseeing a city or a region with several parishes, could be a great help against local church councils that jealously guard their turf.

Of course, there is another side to bishops. Reformed Hungarian students who come to Kampen to study missiology often complain that their bishops do everything to keep their church as traditional and as nonmissional as they can and that their power gives them ample opportunity to be effective at this. As a Protestant, I am inclined to say that there is nothing against the office of bishop, as long as the person occupying it is a good one! There may, however, be ways to define the office of bishop so that those occupying the office receive a limited task description—one focusing on the empowerment and facilitation of mission rather than on authority over all church affairs. This might ameliorate the risks of having bishops while allowing the strengths of this office to affect the cause of mission.

On the other side of the ecclesial spectrum, John Howard Yoder, for example, critiques the marks of the true church as defined in article 29 of the Belgian Confession. This article states that the true church “engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; and it practices church discipline for correcting faults.” These marks, argues the Anabaptist Yoder, are in one or another way connected to the particular offices and are thus overly clergy-centered; they concern the “superstructure” of the church. If the officials do their job well, then there is a true church.<sup>11</sup> Something similar can be observed in the Church Order, which builds on the stipulations of Dordt: A new church is constituted when the offices are instituted. The presence of a faith community, a congregation of the saints, before that time apparently does not define a church in the Reformed sense of the word. But, is this really what a church is? Should these marks of the true church not contain, at least, some statements about the quality of community, mutual love, suffering, conflict management and reconciliation, mission and service, and so on? All these matters are absent from the Reformed characteristics of the true church. Is this not a serious limitation on the Reformed understanding of the nature of the community of faith?

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<sup>11</sup>John Howard Yoder, “A People in the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1994), 75–76.

Finally, there is the critique from newer missionary movements such as emerging churches or Neo-Pentecostals: the lack of mobility in traditional church structures, Reformed or other. Often, this critique is shaped as a plea for more “apostolicity.” This may include the return of real apostles, as in neo-Pentecostal circles, but it also may take a more generic shape in the critique of parish structures, bureaucracy, “institutionalization,” and so on. Alan Hirsch and Pete Ward advocate a flexible and simple structure that allows the church to be constantly on the move; to be “liquid” and adaptable.<sup>12</sup> The church is not about buildings, Sunday worship, and offices; it is about communities of people on a mission. Whatever we may think of this point of view, it reflects an ancient ethos that can be seen in the early church, the monastic movement, Zinzendorf and his Moravians, Wesley and his Methodists, and the mission societies of the nineteenth century. There has always been the need for “movement structures” alongside “stability structures”; to have itinerancy alongside the parish.<sup>13</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Thus, it seems to be the case that whatever problems we experience with the Reformed structure of ministry are not just caused by external factors (changed times); they are inherent and structural. Moreover, these problems hinder our mission in the secular West. In order to move this discussion further, I will first comment on the most important problems and then move on to suggestions for renewal or improvement. The previous discussion suggests that there are three major difficulties with the Reformed ministry structure: (1) the lack of a consistent theology of the laity; (2) the lack of a supra-local ministry structure representing unity and mission; and, (3) the lack of movement and mobility created by an institutionalized church that is linked with a geographical parish system.

First, as the Anabaptists and others have argued, in Reformed ministry the nature and mission of the church are too exclusively connected with the special offices. There is an inadequate view of community, the ministry of all believers, and the congregation as the “hermeneutic of the gospel” (Newbigin). It seems that the Reformed emphasis on the priesthood of all believers has never been worked out in a convincing and consistent way, possibly because it remains in tension with a high view of

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002); Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the twenty-first-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> For this, see also Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), esp. 337–53.

the special offices.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, this common priesthood remains, as Hendrik Kraemer put it, a “forgotten office.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, the Roman Catholics argue that Reformed ecclesiology by and large lacks a supra-local ministry structure. The only ordained office in the majority of Reformed churches is the minister of the Word who only represents the local church. There are synods, but, in general, the autonomy of the local church is sacred: No church shall rule over another church. This is a good principle, but it may need to be counterbalanced with an office that reflects the unity and the mission of the church. Such an office may be able to solve conflicts, but even more importantly, it may bring the mission of the church to the doorstep of local parishes, as happens nowadays in England.

Third, every new missionary movement points to the tendency of traditional church practices to institutionalize and fossilize. The issue arising from this is how older churches can create room for itinerancy and movement within their own structures. Put in terms of ministry structure, this would require “apostolic” or “evangelistic” offices that have the authority to move around, to experiment, and to create new communities wherever they feel called to do so. Of course, this would require a structure of accountability: Perhaps a bishop works in concert with a local church that sends out these apostles or evangelists.

## **In Search of a Missionary Revision of Reformed Ministry Structure**

### *The Core Elements of Reformed Ministry Theology*

In the previous section, I suggested several remedies for discerned problems in ministry structure—remedies that may suggest, however, that the Reformed ministry structure has become obsolete. After all, what is left if bishops, apostles, and evangelists are allowed, and the territorial system is abolished or at least complemented by a system of movement? In what follows, I will focus on what I consider to be the core elements of Reformed ministry and how they can be preserved in a revised ministry structure.

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<sup>14</sup> For a very illuminating study on this “general priesthood,” see Hank J. Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic and Contextual Perspective* (PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *Het vergeten ambt in de kerk: Plaats en roeping van het gewone gemeentelid* (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1960). English translation: *A Theology of the Laity* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College, 2005).

The two elements I will discuss below are generally understood to be typically Reformed and were confirmed by colleagues when asked what they thought were the two most important characteristics of the Reformed doctrine of ministry. Independent from each other and unaided by me, they gave the same answers. First, the core task of the office is “the ministry of the Word.” The church is a creation of the divine Word and the office is, in Calvin’s word, an “instrument” in the service of this Word. Second, in a Reformed view, the government of the church is collective in nature: There is a church council of elders and (often also) deacons who exercise authority over the congregation. Thus, collegiality is an important characteristic of Reformed ministry structure.

### *The Ministry of the Word*

A clear vision of the meaning of the offices can only be based on a clear view of what the church is. The church begins with God who has sent out Christ in his world who sends his disciples out into the world as the beginning of his church. Father and Son pour out the Spirit on this community. The church, and therefore its offices, receives its significance only from this triune perspective of the *missio Dei*.<sup>16</sup>

This means that the church and its offices become the servants of God’s mission in this world. The judging and liberating word of God enters this world through the church. The church and its offices are therefore outward directed in their essence—they are “missionary by their very nature”—because it moves where Word and Spirit go. The gospel must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth and the end of time. This does not, however, happen in an abstract, impersonal way. The Word of God always encounters us through persons, in the way of incarnation. When Ephesians 4:11 lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers, it gives the impression of a certain structure, perhaps even a sort of rudimentary task description. This is the core insight of the Reformation: It pleases God to select people from among his church to be ministers of the Word in a variety of functions and tasks, with a central role assigned to the preaching the Word. To put it differently, whichever differentiation of the offices we apply (and Calvin already said that such differentiations depend on context—the *necessitas temporum*), time and again it will be based on and derived from service to the Word of God that has come to us through human beings, and it will go on through our own humanity. Therefore, the crucial question in every ministry structure is: How can

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<sup>16</sup> Thus, for example, Eddy van der Borgh, “To be or not to be: The identity of the minister in terms of his office within the reformed tradition,” *Nederlands Gereformeerde Theologies Tydskrif* 46 (2005): 248.

the proclamation and propagation of the Word be optimally realized in any given time and place?

Reformed Christians tend to think of pulpit preaching as the ministry of the Word, but this is by far not the only form people can use to minister the Word. Were it not so we would run the risk of identifying the essential ministry of the Word with our current practice of ministry, one usually and almost exclusively entrusted to the ordained pastor. But this is not so: The New Testament tells about Euodia and Syntyche, two women from Philippi, who “worked together” with Paul “in the gospel” (Phil. 4:2–3); and about Priscilla and Aquila, a wife and husband who catechized the learned Jew, Apollos. Then there is Timothy whom Paul appointed to do “the work of an evangelist,” and Paul’s fellow workers in all sorts of congregations and throughout his travels. Who knows to what extent these people were ordained if that practice existed at that time? Whatever may have been the case, it seems that the ministry of the Word in the New Testament was not the exclusive prerogative of the apostles and, apparently, not of men either. Moreover, this ministry is much more than just preaching. In 1 Corinthians 14:23–26 the whole congregation “prophesies,” addressing an “unbeliever” who attends their meeting. All this suggests that having only one official for the ministry of the Word, and this mainly in the form of preaching, is a very impoverished practice of ministry. It may not be forbidden in the Bible, but neither does the Bible encourage limiting the Word ministry to preaching from the pulpit.

Ephesians 4:11, where four or five positions of ministry are distinguished (depending on the issue of whether we must separate the teacher from the shepherd) presents us with a problem. It is well-known that this was a core text for Calvin as he developed his theology of ministry. The hermeneutical step he subsequently makes is remarkable: Calvin assumes a difference here between regular and extraordinary offices, without providing a rationale. The extraordinary positions are those of the apostle, prophet, and evangelist. The Lord raised them at the beginning of his kingdom, and there is no reason why he would not repeat this whenever the circumstances required it. But regular functions they are not; they do not belong to the continuing ministry structure of the church. This leaves Calvin with the “shepherd-teacher,” which receives a central place, even though it is mentioned last. In addition, Calvin interprets the offices of the apostle, prophet, and evangelist in such a way that they are nothing but shepherd-teachers in a special context and for a special time. The Dutch church historian C. Graafland argues that this is a consequence of the central place in which Calvin reserves his theology of the offices

for the ministry of the gospel.<sup>17</sup> But I wonder if that is the case. After all, apostles, evangelists, and prophets are servants of the gospel, so there is therefore no reason for them not to be part of the Calvinistic ministry structure. The true cause, it seems to me, is the general absence of a crosscultural missionary vision in Calvin's doctrine of ministry. He was not without a missionary desire<sup>18</sup>, but apparently this did not influence what he considered to be the core of ecclesial identity and structure. This lack of a boundary-crossing missionary vision continues to influence the Reformed doctrine of ministry today. Graafland admits as much when he says: "In fact, the world-embracing missionary task was not crucial for Calvin. Therefore, this task has not received an ecclesial form in the Reformation, making Calvin, in this respect, a child of his time."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the Reformed doctrine of ministry was designed during the Christendom era. The New Testament describes the church as a small, scattered network of missionary communities in a large pagan world. In Christendom, however, the pagan world no longer existed: the tension between the church as a Christian society and the world outside had virtually disappeared. This situation was the background for the ecclesiology of the Reformation. Reformed confessional documents did not define Christianity over against non-Christian worldviews such as Islam. First and foremost the confessional documents defined a specific current of Christianity over against other currents of Christianity. In that context, theology has other Christians as its prime conversation partners; rarely, if ever, are they non-Christians. Seldom do our confessions refer to the mission of the church.

As argued above in terms of Newbigin's analysis, this affected the doctrine of ministry. But he is not alone in his critique of the lack of missionary sensitivity. The British theologian Stuart Murray may be the most outspoken critic today of a church that has been formed by Christendom. Inspired by the Anabaptist tradition, he points to serious problems that are the result of a Christendom mindset.<sup>20</sup>

Christendom congregations became larger than those of the first centuries, a growth that led to decreased participation of members in the liturgy. The congregation thus became more passive, and the distance

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<sup>17</sup> Graafland, *Gedachten over het ambt*, 62–63.

<sup>18</sup> There is every reason to consider his attempts to plant churches in France as a form of mission. In addition, we may think of the short-lived enterprise of establishing a Reformed mission in Brazil.

<sup>19</sup> Graafland, *Gedachten over het ambt*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange and New World* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 124–30.

between clergy and laity grew. The clergy increasingly manifested itself as a separate group, a church within the church; often they felt more connected to each other than to the community that called them and that they served. Because churches had become larger, participation of members decreased, which in turn limited the variety of liturgical forms.<sup>21</sup> As a result, interaction suffered as the church grew larger. In *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange and New World*, Murray points to the growing emphasis on the monological sermon for this growth. Of course, the apostles preached, and the church must as well, but in Christendom there emerged an almost exclusive emphasis on the sermon as the only means through which the Word could be administered. While the sermon is an important means of salvation and an efficient practical tool for the instruction of large crowds, especially when these crowds contain large numbers of nominal Christians, it nevertheless represents a reduction in the rich liturgical variety displayed by the early church and missionary movements such as the Moravians or the early Methodists. The New Testament speaks of a congregation where “everyone has something to share,” where the whole congregation could prophesy to an “outsider” who entered the worship area. Moreover, the sermon as a ministry function has serious setbacks. The preacher has to invest an enormous amount of time in preparation; it employs a one-sided learning style; it may not be an optimal use of the time invested. One might call this critique a typical sign of modern times, but that would be to forget that an exclusive accent on monological sermons is a sign of certain times itself. Thus Murray.<sup>22</sup>

How can we give Word ministry its proper place in a ministry structure that is revised for mission in a secular age? I believe that (most) Reformed churches would need a more differentiated ministry in order to achieve this, as for example, the dual ministry of the Word developed by the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This provides flexibility for evangelism and church planting without slowing down these activities because of an overly academic approach to training for ministry. However, this specific model is still bound to one local church. It may be worth considering a more complete pioneer ministry: ministers who have the authority to do itinerant work, going where they feel called to do mission, sent out by a local church, and supervised by a classis or synod, or perhaps a bishop. A missionary bishop could also be an important extension of the Reformed Word ministry. Such a model could stimulate the supra-local cause of mission and break through local stalemates.

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission*, 265.

Apart from this extension of ministry structure, Reformed churches in general should allow more room for forms of Word ministry that are not dependent on monological preaching. The liturgy could provide opportunities for dialogue, interaction, conversation, prophecy, and spontaneous contributions. The Word of God inhabits the congregation and not just the minister's house (cf. Col. 3:16). If the whole church is called to mission, the special vocation of some of its members to minister the Word is not necessarily in tension with the active involvement of many members in such ministry. Ordained ministers should apply themselves to equipping and empowering other Christians to contribute to Word ministry in the context of worship and liturgy.

### *Collective Government*

The church council of ordained and non-ordained offices forms a specific part of Reformed ministry structure. Here follow a few comments on collective government in the interest of mission.

First, experts point out that "government" and "order" have been loaded onto our ministry theology by Calvin and even more so by Theodorus Beza.<sup>23</sup> Graafland points to a shift (in combination with a stronger focus) from the presbyter as a teacher-shepherd in Calvin, toward the elder (*ancien*) as supervisor and administrator of discipline in Beza. This represents a shift from the material authority that proceeds from the authority of the Word to a rather formal authority that is given with people's appointments to certain positions. The Reformed tradition has emphasized this formal, functional, or political authority more than does the New Testament. The New Testament speaks about gifts of ruling and governance, but does so rarely. The core text, Ephesians 4:11, does not refer to ruling as a ministry task. Perhaps this emphasis needs critical review. Why should a shepherd also be a leader? Could a teacher not instruct without having the task to govern? Such a view might make room for more teamwork in the leadership of the church: a group containing shepherds, teachers, evangelists, and leaders, sometimes complemented by a travelling missionary or church planter. Even if this team has the final responsibility to solve problems, it would also be prepared to take direction from those within the congregation with prophetic gifts. Perhaps there should be less focus on full-time paid professionals in the church. Working more often with bi-vocational people might provide opportunities for creating teams and for informal (volunteer) leadership.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Graafland, *Gedachten over het ambt*, 104–10; Gerben Heitink, *Biografie van de dominee* (Baarn: Ten Have, 2001), 49–50.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 184–92.

Regardless of how we approach the practicalities of all this, it remains important to see that the ministry structure pictured in Ephesians 4:11 is all about a spiritual structuring in which the gospel can work in rich and surprising ways. It is not primarily about a well-governed or “ordered” church. Much of the fear of empowering a congregation and democratizing government might flow from a one-sided focus on order and governance in the church.

This brings me to church discipline. One of the consequences of Christendom and increased distance between clergy and laity was the disappearance of mutual discipline, as it is mentioned in Matthew 16 and 18. Church discipline became officialized and formalized. As such, it could even become an instrument of ministerial control over the church instead of a shared expression of a common priesthood. What was originally meant as an instrument of restoring and building relationships, could easily be turned into an instrument of suppressing deviating behavior and thought. If we want to reform the practice of discipline, it is important that a church not be too dependent on a group of leaders who are responsible for the execution of that discipline. This only fosters a consumerist mentality by which certain members of the congregation expect the church council to discipline other members. We are responsible for each other. Therefore, a church council should equip the membership in evangelical conflict management and reconciliation.

My third and last comment is a question: Why are we so fond of collective government? This may be a Dutch question rather than one that fits the American situation, but I have found that our Dutch preference for leadership by collective bodies does not always make for missionary effectiveness. Church councils are instruments for deliberation. They limit the risks of damage by taking time, talking everything through, finding compromises, and postponing or softening painful decisions. This is probably wise when our environment does not change too rapidly and when developments are predictable. However, our times have changed and developments follow each other at breathtaking speed. This requires church leadership that is more effective and courageous, less focused on damage control and more focused on missionary opportunities that arise as a result of rapid changes. While this may increase the possibility of power abuse, that possibility must not be countered by creating ever more checks and balances but by a more thorough selection of church leadership. The church must be willing to truly assess its leaders in terms of spiritual maturity and character. Once it has leaders that have passed such assessment it should take care that it does not lose them. Deep in our Protestant genes there is a justified fear of the concentration of power—the one priest or bishop or minister who decides everything. But, if the

remedy is an ever-expanding bureaucracy, as is often the case, does this really help the church? To avoid the abuse of power, we have often created a culture where nobody takes responsibility, where there is much investment in careful procedures and elaborate protocols, but where there are not fast and flexible responses to missionary opportunities. Why do we not consider the possibility that the abuse of power is not primarily caused by a failing control system but by spiritual failure? A healthy ministry structure is not primarily fostered by checks and balances but by a healthy spirituality that is rooted in a clear theology of the offices.<sup>25</sup>

### Concluding Summary

Let me summarize all this by returning to the leading questions above: How can Reformed ministry structure be revised for mission in a secular age? How can the core identity of Reformed ministry be preserved in such a revised structure? Answering this question brings us to a focus on the ministry of the Word of God. Throughout this article, I have emphasized two points, one regarding the outward structure, or differentiation of this ministry, and the other regarding the way it functions in the Christian community. I review them and add suggestions.

- A. Differentiation of the ministry of the Word needs a missionary expansion. We need the following:
  1. Different types of ministers of the Word, who receive both academic and/or other forms of education. This also requires a more flexible and differentiated training program for our ministers, including “missionary tracks” as for example in the Church of England;
  2. A supra-local office, a bishop, with a specific but limited task of guarding and stimulating the church’s mission, and with the authority to override the decisions of local church councils in the interest of mission;
  3. “Apostolic” and “evangelistic” ministries, such as church planters and evangelists, who are authorized to follow their missionary calling to places where there are few or no churches and who are accountable to their bishop and to the church that sends them;
  4. Structures of leadership that allow us to respond more creatively and flexibly in view of rapid cultural change. This means less emphasis on bureaucratic checks and balances and more focus on spiritual maturity and character in church leadership.

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<sup>25</sup> Van der Borght, “To be or not to be,” 248–49.

- B. Within the local church, the current practice of Word ministry needs to be corrected or “purified” from its Christendom remnants. We especially need a well-developed theology of the laity which implies:
1. We must experiment with a more varied liturgy, encourage lay people to participate, and train ordained ministers to equip and empower Christians to be part of the ministry of the Word. Some new church plants may function as laboratories for developing a new style of ministry;
  2. We must re-establish mutual discipline in the church and focus on the restoration of relationships and a culture of reconciliation in the church.

Reformed ministry can be restructured for a time of mission by concentrating on its most important characteristic, the ministry of the Word of God. Such a revision will maintain the Reformed emphasis on collective and democratic leadership, even if this means taking a step away from traditional bureaucratic structures and empowering the laity to take responsibility for Word ministry and discipline.