



The challenge of hierarchical church polity in the Presbyterian Church in Malawi: A case of the CCAP Blantyre Synod

Zgambo, Humphreys Frackson
North-West University
hzzgambo@gmail.com

Abstract

Hierarchical church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod operates contrary to basic tenets of the Reformed tradition in Malawi. Hierarchical church government functions in the CCAP Blantyre Synod as a result of technical influences from European church government and method of evangelisation by the Scottish missionaries. The aim of the study is to investigate how the structures of the CCAP Blantyre Synod were established based on hierarchy, compromising the Reformed church tradition and how to restore this legitimate church polity in the synod. In Reformed church polity perspective, Christ is the Head who governs His church; and the legitimate church polity must be rooted in the Scripture through the Spirit.

Key words

Hierarchy; the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP); church structure; church government

1. Introduction

This study investigates the challenge of hierarchical church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in contrast to central tenets of the Reformed tradition in Malawi. The history of the CCAP in Malawi indicates that hierarchism functions in the structures of the church as a result of technical influences from European systems of church government and method of evangelisation by the Scottish and South African missionaries when they established the church in 19th century. “Collegialism” found its point of orientation not in Scripture, but in state government that influenced church polity discourse in the 19th century (Smit 2018:3–4). In this period,

the “collegialistic” form of government mostly found expression in a form of oligarchy executed by permanently elected functionaries of the church (synod). In this construction of the church, the synod becomes known as the church, or as it is sometimes expressed, the synod as the sum total of the different congregations (Smit 2018:3–4).

2. Definition of terms

According to the Collins English Dictionary (Complete and unabridged, 12th ed), the word ‘hierarchy’ means a “system, especially in a society or an organization, in which people are organized into different levels of importance from highest to the lowest. In the social/political hierarchy people or things are arranged in a graded order (Hornby 2015:717). “Hierarchical structure” means the arrangement of and relations between the parts of something complex, the quality of being well organized, or gives structure to something (Pearsall 2002:1423). In the ecclesiastical terms, the word *hierarchy* means a body of persons in holy orders organized into graded ranks (Collins English Dictionary 12th ed).

Cowan and Engle (2004:1f.) define a church hierarchy as a general system of church government that ranks leaders into various levels of authority. The Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchy: laity, pastors (priests), bishops, and the pope, with bishops being classified as bishops, archbishops, or cardinals, depending on their appointments and level of responsibility.

Some Protestant denominations also have a hierarchy that includes laity, clergy, and bishops (but no pope). Du Plooy (1982:16–17) argues that church polity is the theological science whose task is to determine from Scripture what God’s justice for His church on earth embodies. It should elucidate it systematise it and make it applicable. Church polity does not formulate justice; God has done this in His Word. Church polity should serve the church, which in turn, employs the scientific contribution of church polity once it has assessed and weighed it critically in the light of Scripture. Church polity studies God’s justice and applies it as the norm; for instance that there should be specific offices in the church, that the incumbents should be called, that the sacraments should be administered, that discipline should be applied and many more (Du Plooy 1982:17).

3. Study objectives and methodology

The study aims at investigating how the structures of the CCAP Blantyre Synod were established based on hierarchy and clericalism, compromising Reformed tradition and how to address it and eventually restore the Reformed church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod. This study mainly comprises a purely descriptive literature which includes where applicable, a focus on exegetical, historical and contemporary resources. Interpretive and qualitative approaches in data collection and analysis are applied. Questions such as: How did the Scottish and South African missionaries' influences impact the establishment of hierarchical structures of the CCAP Blantyre Synod? How could hierarchical systems in the CCAP Blantyre Synod be assessed from Reformed church polity perspective? How could the challenge of hierarchy be addressed and Reformed church polity be restored in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi, are the guidelines for the study. Therefore, this study confines its definition and delimitation to the hierarchical-based structures of the CCAP Blantyre Synod, its impact and how the system could be addressed and eventually restores the legitimate Reformed church polity in the church in Malawi.

4. Overview of influences from Scottish and South African missionaries in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi

How did the influences from Scottish and South African Missionaries impact the establishment of hierarchical structures of the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi?

4.1. Influences from Scotland

The person who initiated missionary work which developed into the establishment of the CCAP Livingstonia and Blantyre synods was Rev Dr James Stewart. He could originally be traced back to Scotland but settled at Lovedale Mission in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. According to Sundkler Steed (2000:467–80,795ff), the life, work and death of David Livingstone in 1873 inspired at least three missions societies to begin their work in Malawi namely: The Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland and the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), later called the Anglican Church from England. After attending the funeral of Livingstone in Westminster Abbey, Rev Dr James Stewart felt strongly that launching a

mission in Central Africa in memory of Livingstone was imperative and on April 18, 1874 the indelible impression caught fire in his mind. He appealed to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland to support the noble cause. Rev Dr James Stewart passionately concluded his speech by the following words:

I would humbly suggest, as the truest memorial of Livingstone, the establishment by this church, or several churches together of an institution at once industrial and educational, to teach the truths of the Gospel and the arts of civilized life to the natives of the country, and which shall be placed in a carefully selected and commanding spot in Central Africa, where from its position and capabilities it might grow into a town, and afterwards into a city, and become a great Centre of commerce, civilisation and Christianity, and this I would call Livingstonia (Selfridge 1976:19–20).

A young ordained medical doctor read the report of Stewart’s speech in the newspaper and exclaimed: “There is the very thing I have been preparing for all my life!” When Rev Dr Stewart met him later he thought, “There is the man for us!” His name was Rev Dr Robert Laws, who was to spend over fifty years in Africa (Selfridge 1976:20). By May 1875 a pioneer party under Edward D. Young, veteran sailor, left for Africa. Other members were Rev Dr Robert Laws, a medical officer, John McFadyen, and Allan Simpson, as engineers; George Johnston, a carpenter and William Baker, a seaman (McCracken 1977:47–64). Henry Henderson who was sent by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to find a suitable site for establishing a mission station also accompanied them. In South Africa, Rev Dr Stewart recruited four Xhosa Africans namely Shadrach Mnqunana, William Koy, Isaac Wauchope and Mapassa Ntintili to serve as teachers and evangelists (Shepperd 1971:20).

4.1.1 The CCAP Blantyre Synod

4.1.1.1 Brief history of the CCAP Blantyre Synod

The Blantyre Synod was established by Henry Henderson in 1876. The Church of Scotland group consisting of a medical doctor and five artisans separated themselves from the Livingstonia party and they went up to Soche, and Ndirande Hills in search of a site for their mission station

among the Yao tribe that would become the Centre for Christian mission, commerce, education and agriculture in the Southern Region of Malawi. Soon, Samuel Sambani accompanied Henry Henderson and identified a place at Kabula area where Henderson set up the “Blantyre Mission” base named after the birth-place of Dr David Livingstone on 23rd October 1876 (Selfridge 1976:32).

The Scottish missionary beginnings at Blantyre were difficult, dramatic and controversial. In this ethnic Yao dominated area, refugee slaves would turn up, seeking shelter at the missionary’s house. Small communities were established, a motley group of refugees and individuals from varied backgrounds, including educated Kololo. The mission estates employed them all and at the same time gave them the foundations of an education. In the Mission village they were exempted from the traditional chief’s control. The mission staff, often European lay artisans, exercised virtual chiefly authority, taking over the role of Magistrate and Civil Governor. In one instance the “Blantyre Atrocities” in 1878, severe disciplinary action, led to death. The event was widely publicized and the Mission both in Malawi and in Scotland defended its position with difficulty. The injurious effects of “Social Darwinism” had led to an estrangement between white and black (Selfridge 1976:32).

At this difficult time, the Blantyre Mission was fortunate that it received a new leader, Rev David Clement Scott, one of the outstanding missionaries of his time (at Blantyre 1881–1897 when he left Malawi for Kenya). Rev David Scott insisted on the David Livingstone heritage, combining “Christianity, Civilization and Commerce,” (popularly known as three Cs), a formula which Rev Scott translated as the “Gospel and Modern Culture” which also meant deep respect for African culture. He and his successor, Alexander Hetherwick, insisted on generous opportunities for the African co-workers:

Africans as co-inheritors of world culture-in African forms was his educational formula; to make the African a conscious member of the Catholic Church of Christ-his ecclesiastical program.

The church building at Blantyre Mission, the St Michaels and All Angels, was built with the leadership of Rev David Scott and it stands to this day as the inspiring architecture combining Western and Eastern traditions

in a beautiful style of its own, “not Scottish, nor English but African”. The school system was well developed with mission stations founded in the districts.

Rev David Scott had a gift of encouraging his African co-workers. In 1893, three of his African colleagues Joseph Bismark, Rondau Kaferanjira and Donald Malota became deacons. The other notable ones who ordained were Harry Matecheta, John GrayKufa and Harry Mtuwa. Scott gave them all tasks to do in which they had responsibility and virtual autonomy, apart from infrequent supervisory visits from missionaries. However, Rev Scott found little support for his “radical views” among European settlers. Scott produced a dictionary of the Chinyanja language that evidenced not only considerable linguistic abilities, but also a deep and sympathetic grasp of African culture.

However, many other British missionaries of the day, Rev Scott’s views on African race and culture were progressive. He opposed certain elements of traditional culture as incompatible with Christianity (e.g. initiation rituals, polygamy) but he did not condemn African customs wholesale. In 1898, he was forced to resign his post probably for health reasons and Alexander Hetherwick his assistant assumed leadership. After his furlong in Scotland, Scott proceeded to Kenya where he founded the Kikuyu Mission called the Presbyterian Church in East Africa. Rev David Scott died after he succumbed to thrombosis of the legs in 1907. In 1909, the Blantyre Mission opened the Henry Henderson Institute (HHI) which became an important facility, training Africans in the same areas as the Overtoun Institute of Livingstonia Mission. The boarding school for both girls and boys at Blantyre Mission was as prim and proper as any on the continent where emphasis was on English language, mathematics, higher learning and African culture (Sundkler & Steed 2000:799).

4.1.1.2 Hierarchy in the CCAP Blantyre Synod

However, Alexander Hetherwick was responsible for the architect of hierarchical tendencies engrafted into the Blantyre Synod because he recommended that the system of church government for the church resemble the civil government where the chief and headman ruled over his council of elders. The system, according to Hetherwick, represented the true rule of the church, like that of the bishop in his synod of presbyters, of

the minister in his Kirk session, and moderator in the Church of Scotland. Since then, the Synods of Livingstonia and Blantyre were characterized by high hierarchism similar to the episcopal system of church government. Therefore, historically speaking the Presbyterian Church system which the Blantyre Synod and the Livingstonia Synod inherited from the Scots from the beginning of their missionary enterprise was highly professional, hierarchical and clerical in orientation – a fact that compromised the traditional reformed church polity.

In the local congregations, the pastors, elders and evangelists went about doing their tasks. A leading personality who then turned a minister was the Rev Harry Kambwiri Matecheta, a Yao connected to the Presbyterian Mission at Blantyre, who served among the Southern Ngoni of Bemvu in Ntcheu for forty years. In 1933 he was elected moderator of his church. He was ably assisted by his wife. Her last words on her deathbed sum up the faith and aspiration of a whole generation of forgotten women in the church with simple eloquence:

My way is open. I am glad my children are all educated, married and settled. I am not worried. I have done my duty (Sundkler & Steed 2000:799).

The church polity in Blantyre Synod was characterized by tendencies of “hierarchism”. Ecclesiastical power in Blantyre Synod was the establishment of the all-white “Mission Council” of the Blantyre Mission as the “first governing assembly”. This was followed by the founding of a Kirk Session around 1900 at the St Michaels and All Angels Church, the Blantyre Presbytery in 1904 and the Blantyre Synod in 1956. The powerful ecclesiastical “Mission Council” was responsible to the “Home Committee” in Scotland. Ross (1996:172,177) observes that although in some areas indigenous structures were set up, the “Mission Council” was always the real source of both ecclesiastical power and authority in the hierarchy of Blantyre Synod. It controlled the larger resources including land, all buildings, schools, hospital, churches and funds.

The local session and presbytery had little or no control over major elements in the staff and property of the churches in their area. The “Mission Council”, in effect a white oligarchy, controlled all the major financial resources in the field, paying African ministers, teachers and evangelists (for most

full-time staff), and controlling their posting and work. Neither the Kirk Sessions formed in 1900 nor the Blantyre Presbytery founded in 1904 had any authority over these vital matters. Matters pertaining to vision, mission and directions in which the church should expand appeared on the agenda of the “Mission Council”. Between 1904 and 1924, the Blantyre Presbytery was officially the highest ecclesiastical court for Europeans and Africans in all church matters, but in reality the “Mission Council” was responsible for everything in Blantyre Synod.

Informed by their Reformed church polity tradition, the missionaries at Blantyre Synod took an early bold step to train African office-bearers. Ross (1996:112) describes the first stage in the training:

The training of Africans took more shape in 1893 with an announcement that a deacon class of seven but a representative of many more will in like manner devote themselves to service, meets every morning at 7.00 o'clock. All these successfully completed their training and were ordained as deacons on 4th November 1894.

In 1893, the ordained deacons were given responsibility together with Rev David Clement Scot to exercise church discipline, work and life of the mission and were sent to establish churches in villages around Blantyre. However, the Malawian office of the “deacon” was not properly familiar to the traditional Presbyterian Churches in general (Ross 1996:112). It was the innovative creation of Rev David C. Scot who wanted to use the knowledge and wisdom of the Africans, especially in the area of native evangelization, to care for the vulnerable and church discipline.

In the spirit of the Reformed tradition which advocated for the priesthood of all believers and distribution specific offices of minister, elder, and deacon according to gifting, Rev David Scot felt the need to take the challenge and put his ministry on risk. However, many European Missionaries opposed the ordination of natives because it implied a kind of “equality” which was wrong. They conceived that it was wrong to teach that an African was “good” as the white man because he was not. If he were good, he would be on a “level” with the white man, but it was because he was inferior that was why he was under the white man.

In 1956, the Presbytery of Blantyre attained status of a synod. In 1958, the Blantyre Synod received autonomy from the Church of Scotland and Rev Jonathan Sangaya became the first African to take the position of General Secretary in 1962 (Zeze 2014:175ff). Gradually, Blantyre town grew up around the mission station and today it is a city with two and a half million inhabitants. It still proudly bears the name of Blantyre City (Selfridge 1976:31–32). Blantyre Synod has 600 congregations and 300 prayer houses with 1.6 million members across the southern region of Malawi. Blantyre Synod manages Mulanje Mission Hospital, Zomba Theological College, Chigodi Women’s Centre, and Likhubula Youth Centre, Blantyre Synod Development Commission (BSDC), Blantyre Synod Radio and many other institutions of social development.

4.1.1.3 Fundamental principles of the CCAP Blantyre Synod

The fundamental principles of the CCAP Blantyre Synod are claimed to be based on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God and Supreme rule of faith, life and conduct. The church avows to the fundamental doctrines of the Universal confessions as interpreted and taught by the Protestant Reformation. The Blantyre Synod believes in the historic Confessions known as the Westminster Assembly catechism, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene as containing the sum and substance of the faith of the church.

However, according to the constitution of the CCAP Blantyre Synod (2004: Sect. 4, 5, 6.1, & 7.1), “the Synod constitutes a bond of union, confidence and love amongst all congregations and presbyteries, and is the organ for the expression of the judgement of the whole church. The Synod shall have both original and appellate jurisdiction”. “There are three hierarchies of courts, namely: Kirk session – at congregational level, Presbytery Assembly – presbytery level, Synod Assembly – higher level and General Assembly – General Synod highest level”.

Part of the section 6 of the CCAP Blantyre Synod Constitution says: “each court shall have executive, judicial and legislative powers subject to the jurisdictional limits prescribed herein and in the constitution of the General Assembly”. A session is formed for each congregation as the lowest and private court by presbytery. Presbytery has the general oversight of

all congregations within its bounds which are demarcated by the Synod. While synods are autonomous in their operations, General Assembly is rather federal in its work. In this case it should be highlighted as section 7.1 of the CCAP Blantyre Synod Constitution which holds that, “the synod shall have appellate jurisdiction in appeals from presbyteries, all matters specifically laid down in the constitution as matters within the exclusive jurisdiction and such matters as may be prescribed.”(Constitution of the CCAP Blantyre Synod 2004: Sect. 4, 5, 6.1, & 7.1).

4.1.2 The CCAP Livingstonia Synod

4.1.2.1 Brief history of the CCAP Livingstonia Synod

The establishment of the CCAP Livingstonia Synod in 1875 was started by Rev Dr Robert Laws. After some difficult travelling up the Zambezi River from Mozambique and on land they reached the Shire River in Malawi, the country of their destination, and on 12 October 1875 they sailed onto the Lake Malawi itself. Young called for the Old Hundredth (Psalm) to be sung in praise to the Lord their God. They eventually came to drop anchor at Cape Maclear:

“Livingstonia is begun,” wrote Laws, though at present is a piece of canvas stretched between two trees all that stands for the future city of that name (McCracken 2000:66).

The difficulties of inhospitable climatic conditions, illnesses and deaths of the missionaries forced them to move to Bandawe among the Tonga in the Northern part of Lake Malawi in 1881. An overwhelming response from the lakeside Tonga resulted in church congregations being planted. The earlier “Christian village” program at Bandawe was abandoned and replaced by evangelization and schools in the Tonga villages. The Tonga schools enrolled more than 1 000 students in 1880s. They moved again to Kondowe in 1884, and Rev Dr Robert Laws named the new mission site “Livingstonia.”

4.1.2.2 Hierarchy in the CCAP Livingstonia Synod

In this discussion reference is also made to the existence of the hierarchical system of church government and method of evangelization in the Livingstonia Synod. From the beginning of the Livingstonia

Synod, tendencies of hierarchy and clericalism characterized the church polity for the synod. Ecclesiastical power in the church was expressed in the establishment of the all-white “Mission Council” influenced by the mother church in Scotland the “first governing assembly”. The powerful ecclesiastical “Mission Council” was responsible to the Home Committee in Scotland. McCracken (1977:224) holds:

It is one of the ironies of Livingstonia Mission that a Presbyterian Free Church Mission should have organized on highly centralized autocratic lines. The Free Church of Scotland was a decentralized body with semi-autonomous parishes controlled by a minister supported and to some degree supervised, by a committee of lay elders.

However, the Livingstonia Synod harboured strong tendencies toward hierarchism and clericalism, providing ministers with exclusive authority similar to the administration of the archbishop or bishop in prelacy church government. The matter of parity among minister, elder and deacon did not receive any consideration. Thompson (1995:178) quotes the remarks made by Rev W.A. Elmsliein of the Livingstonia Synod who sharply said about his African colleague:

He is an assistant to me, working under my supervision. He has no congregation of his own. He lives on the station with me and takes his work according to my guiding.

The missionaries of the Livingstonia Synod came from the Liberal Free Church and failed to practise the Reformed church polity and order of the sending “mother body” at home. Furthermore, Thompson (1995:178) and McCracken (1977:290) quote Donald Fraser who again sharply emphasized:

Our native pastors are not equal with European ministers.

In the process they felt out of convenience to carry out the ministry of divide and rule even among the ethnic Tonga, Tumbuka and Nkhonde in the Northern Region in 1875. On the seat of authority in the church, the Livingstonia Synod held the concept that Christ rules the church through office-bearers. The authority of the church is centred in the offices that constitute the highest assembly. Therefore, the synod is the highest juridical court of the church, with the presbytery as the basic governmental unit

and the church council as the lowest court. In the Church of Scotland, the presbytery was confirmed as the basic unit in the government of the church. Ministers were considered as first, among all, to become members of the Presbytery and Synod by their separation in ordination, through Christ's sacraments, His Word and Spirit using office-bearers with representation in assembly as found in the Scottish Presbyterian ecclesiology as was maintained. In 1956, the Presbytery of Livingstonia attained the status of synod (Zeze 2014:175ff.). The Livingstonia Synod has 170 congregations, 1 000 prayer houses with 200 000 members in its 24 presbyteries, numerous primary and secondary schools, mission hospitals, Livingstonia University and the Voice of Livingstonia Radio.

4.1.2.3 Fundamental principles of the CCAP Livingstonia Synod

The fundamental principles of the CCAP Livingstonia Synod are claimed to be based on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God and Supreme rule of faith, life and conduct. The church avows to the fundamental doctrines of the Universal Confessions as interpreted and taught by the Protestant reformation. The CCAP Livingstonia Synod believes in the historic confessions known as the Westminster Assembly catechism, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene as containing the sum and substance of the faith of the church.

4.2. Influences from South Africa

4.2.1 The CCAP Nkhoma Synod

4.2.1.1 Brief history of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod

The origin of the fourth mission initiative to arrive in Malawi was from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) of Cape Town in South Africa. Rev Andrew C. Murray first arrived in Malawi in 1885. He toured mission fields in which his synod would work and recommended that “it was time for them to open up a new field” (Selfridge 1976:60). In July 1889 Rev TCB Vlok, the second missionary of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM), arrived in Malawi. With the help of Rev Murray, Rev Vlok toured the southwest of the lake and on 28th November 1889 they chose a new site in the central region near Chiwere's Village and called it “Mvera”, (Obedience) in Dowa (Weller & Linden 1984:114). The stations of Livulezi

(1896) and Malembo (1895) were taken over from the Livingstonia Mission because they were located south of the 13th degree latitude which was considered the boundary between the Scottish Mission of Livingstonia and the Dutch Mission of Nkhoma. The work of the Dutch Reformed Mission (DRCM) was under the supervision of the Livingstonia Mission until 1897 when it became independent.

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRCM) of the Western Cape soon established the Nkhoma Mission Station at Mvera and drew ethnic boundaries in the central region of Malawi in 1889 among the Chewa who took pride of the secret traditional Nyau cult and Ngoni warlike tribes (McCracken 1977:47–64). Sundkler and Steed (2000:478) hold that in the three stations of Mvera, Livulezi and Malembo, the number of Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) Missionaries increased accordingly. They met baffling problems affecting the African population including the hut tax and migrant labour.

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) Missionaries later became advocates for the Africans against the colonial government policies. The effects of migrant labour roused them to imaginative measures in the form of home craft and industries, weekly markets, mass literacy campaigns and emphasis on care of the family. The other emphasis of the Afrikaner Mission was on agriculture; at the same time, it was part of the school programme to politically resist the English language as far as possible. Every African Christian member at Mvera and Nkhoma was required to have a garden for modern farming (Sundkler & Steed 2000:478).

An impressive African School Inspector, Albert Namalambe, a former slave, eventually looked after a rapidly expanding network of schools (Sundkler & Steed 2000:478). The new centre at Nkhoma Mission soon became a little town with post office, hospital, nurses training college, teacher's college, theological college, printing office, carpentry workshop and commercial shop (Pauw 1980:65ff,190ff). In 1903 a governing council, the council of congregations, was set up to be responsible for the practical functions of the presbytery and later it became a synod. Nkhoma Synod has 124 congregations, 1298 prayer houses with 800 000 members, Nkhoma Mission Hospital, and numerous primary and secondary schools. It trains its church ministers at Nkhoma Institute of Continued Theological Training (NICTT).

4.2.1.2 Hierarchy in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod

In this study again reference is made on the existence of hierarchical and clerical tendencies of church government in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Although the CCAP Nkhoma Synod is in orientation, in which Jesus Christ alone exercised His rule and authority through His Word and the Holy Spirit using office-bearers who assembled in formal ecclesiastical assemblies. The church is organized as a top-down system with clerical officers on committees and at synod level being particularly powerful (Ross 1996:183). One of the reasons was that the Nkhoma Synod developed the hierarchical-based system in the context of its geographical landscape, and under the social-political, economic and Christian-ecclesial conditions in which certain aspects were able to influence negatively its polity discourse and practice. In addition, the Nkhoma Synod uncritically imitated ruling systems of society, religious bodies, and other churches such as Scottish Missions, the Nyau secret society and the Malawi State government (Msangaambe 2011:63f).

4.2.1.3 Fundamental principles of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod

The fundamental principles of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod are claimed to be based on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God and Supreme rule of faith, life and conduct. The church avows to the fundamental doctrines of the universal confessions as interpreted and taught by the Protestant reformation. The CCAP Nkhoma Synod believes in the historic confessions known as the Heidelberg and Canons of Dort, and the Apostles Creed as containing the sum and substance of the faith of the church.

5. Analysis of the hierarchical church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi

How could the hierarchical church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi be assessed from the Reformed church polity perspective?

In light of the above discussion, the hierarchical-based church system of the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi could be assessed as follows:

5.1 “Hierarchical” church government

The study established that the hierarchical system of church structure characterized CCAP Blantyre Synod (Ross 1996:66). The CCAP Blantyre Synod is not seen any more as an assembly of believers, but the synod and its structures become the church and the representative of the church (cf Smit 2018:4–5). The moderator is the “head” and “spiritual father” of the church and the General Secretary is the “chief executive” of the church (Blantyre Constitution Sect 4.4.1a-h, 4.5.1 a-q).

In this system believers do not come into their own right as the church, but they add a place alongside the church which is mainly indicated as the synod with its own prevailing structure (cf Smit 2018:4–5). The church ministers are exclusively and principally political leaders who behaved like hierarchical rulers under the influenced of President Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (Ross 1996:85,103). The CCAP Blantyre Synod has lost its vitality in favour of an historical and abstract view of church, typical of the high conjuncture of “collegialism” of which church government implications remain distorting. Christ’s government through the Word, becomes church government by the synod as the sole interpreter of the Word and legislative authority of the church (cf. Smit 2018:4–5).

The Reformed church polity (seen by some scholars as clearly Calvinistic) characterizes an anti-hierarchical orientation (Van den Brink & Dankbaar 1967:273), while Leo Koffeman sees it as a presbyterian-synodal system (Koffeman 2009:71) meaning that the responsibility for leadership in the church rests with the church councils – the local churches are the *presbyterium* while the broader meetings are the expression of the synodic character of this form of church government. The theology behind this form of church government is according to Koffeman the collegial exercise of authority by the offices in the church (Koffeman 2009:72). Independent churches and non-denominational church fellowships eschew all hierarchy outside of local congregations, considering the local church to be an autonomous self-governing body.

Koffeman (2015:3–5) argues that church polity relates to church life, in need renewal that can play a role in different fields. Under the guidance of the

Holy Spirit, churches can develop new forms of diaconal work or missionary outreach. Pastoral work, Christian education and catechesis, liturgical forms, songbooks and Bible translations can be renewed. Such renewal is due to changing circumstances, new theological insights with regard to the *missio Dei*, and – together with these – a renewed understanding of Holy Scripture (Koffeman 2015:3–5).

A church order is necessary and must be maintained, but it must be borne by living faith, a humble walk with God and obediently hearing his Word (Coertzen 2004:203). God works through His Word and Spirit together. According to Koffeman (2015:4–5), church polity has, (according to Barth), to meet four criteria. It has to be a law of service; it has to be liturgical, living, and exemplary. Here, first of all the third criterion is relevant: church polity is “living”, alive, because the Lord is alive. This implies that church polity has always to be ready to respond anew to changing circumstances: it is dynamic and basically human, as a matter of on-going obedience to Christ, and it is essentially provisional. Fundamentally, church polity is *iushumanum*, human law. Barth declines the concept of *iusdivinum*, divine law (Koffeman 2015:4–5).

However, Viola (2008:156,296) defines hierarchical church government (developed in Blantyre Synod) as one that is built on a chain-of-command social structure. Hierarchical leadership is rooted in a worldly concept of power and is present in the vicious forms of liege/lord feudalism and master/slave relationship. But it’s also present in the highly stylized sphere of the military armed forces.

Hierarchical government structures characterize the spirit of the gentile philosophy (Viola 2008:156ff). Hierarchical leadership style is undesirable to God’s people because it reduces human interaction into command-style relationship. Such relationships are foreign to the New Testament world of thinking and practice (Viola 2008:226). Christ warned the disciples against the gentile view of leadership: “It shall not be so among you!” (Mt 20:26).

In the Reformed church polity perspective, offices precede the church in principle. Christ never transfers his authority to the office bearer in the church, but He charges them with the task of ministering Him in the church. The office bearers are nothing more than instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit. They are not dignitaries with an authority based in their

higher office, but first of all believers in service of Christ as the first and last authority for the whole church (Vorster 2011:15).

In the legitimate Reformed church government, therefore there is no such thing as personal office hierarchy and ecclesiastical influence or power. Therefore, hierarchical church government in the CCAP Blantyre Synod is not scriptural, neither sustainable in light of the Reformed Church polity.

5.2 “Political” church government

The study established that the political church government characterized CCAP Blantyre Synods. Zeze (2014:167) holds that Malawi’s regional political system was the major factor that had direct influence on church policy and practice in the CCAP. Both the CCAP and the Government of Malawi adopted the highly centralized hierarchical political and administrative system developed by colonial European masters from the 19th Century (Zeze 2014:175f.). The method of evangelization using particular dominant culture, practice and language for easy acceptance in various structures was also political. Historically, when one officer was in authority; he strongly hovered above the office-bearers who were considered juniors. It could be observed that a similar traditional system of autocracy existed during pre-missionary and pre-colonial relations: senior kings had a number of subordinates or tributaries who owed allegiance to them locally (Zeze 2014:167ff.). Structurally, political power and authority were vested in one person, thereby enhancing ethnic allegiance to a group of ruling class. Eventually, the CCAP Blantyre Synod copied and practised similar authoritarian and political systems of government.

In the Reformed church polity perspective, there is a clear separation between the task and territory of the church and state. Both the church and the state are servants of God and, each in its own way serves the kingdom of God (Isa 49:23, Du Plooy 1982:109). The separation of the church and state is imperative. However, each governs its own territory and neither may dominate the other (Du Plooy 1982:109). Separation of the church and state must not be antagonistic (Smit 2013:131–132).

It is shocking to learn from the media that church ministers re-position themselves for appointments in state government in Malawi. Some church ministers sympathise with state government in order to get political

appointments in the chaplaincy for government departments, as well as membership in boards of statutory organisations for authority, fame and resources (Pass 2007:127). This “political” church government encourages nepotism, corruption, fraud which is not scriptural, normally unattainable, and not in line with the Reformed church polity perspective.

6. How to address hierarchy and restore the Reformed church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi

How could the challenge of hierarchy be addressed and the Reformed church polity be restored in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi?

6.1 Christ must be the Head of CCAP Blantyre Synod not the moderator

According to CCAP Blantyre Synod Constitution (Sect 4.3, 4.4), the Synod is responsible and has ecclesiastical, juridical and legislative powers to constitute the bond of union, community and mission among all its congregations and governing bodies. In practice the moderator of the Blantyre Synod is the “head and spiritual father” of the church. Cowan and Engle (2004:1ff.) holds that the New Testament does not support an extended church hierarchy covering large geographical areas. No “elder” in the New Testament was ever given authority over another elder, and each local assembly had its own elders/bishops/pastors. Even the modern distinction between clergy and laity is a product of church tradition without scriptural basis (the apostles saw themselves as “fellow workers” with us, Phil 1:24, Cowan & Engle 2004:1ff.). Therefore, to address the challenge of hierarchy, the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi, must acknowledge the “headship” of Christ over every detail of the life of the church, according to the Reformed church polity. The doctrine, liturgy and Constitution of Blantyre Synod 2004: controversial sections of 4, 5, 6.1, & 7.1 must be reviewed, rectified to address hierarchy and reflect the Reformed church polity principles in Malawi.

6.2 Local church must be an *ecclesia completa*, not a synod

In the Reformed church government, each local church is an *ecclesia completa* (Smit 2018:6), the assembly of believers (Calvin and Kerr 1989:133). This emphasis is based on the New Testament revelation of the

universal and local church. The one universal church finds expression in this dispensation in the local church. A local church is the universal church in a specific place. Local churches recognise one another on the basis of the same confession as true churches and live in specific relationship with one another. Christ gives all the necessary gifts in a local church to be church (Smit 2018:6–10). This relationship does not find expression in a formalized structure of churches, but in minor and major assemblies.

Church community is not a matter of formalized church structures, but the expression and experience of the spiritual bond which exists between local churches (Smit 2018:6–10). The understanding of the CCAP Blantyre Synod on government of Christ's church must begin with the Lord Himself and His Kingdom authority. Christ is the "Head" of the church; not the "Synod Moderator", Christ's rule is unique and incomparable. Therefore, it is not the synod that has the last say on the matter of the church, but the Word of God (Smit 2018:7–10).

6.3 The legitimate church polity must be rooted in Scripture not human decrees

6.3.1 The church polity based on headship of Christ and Scripture

The Reformed church tradition claims that the legitimate church polity must be rooted in the principles of Holy Scriptures illuminated by the Spirit (Koffeman & Smit 2011:9f.). Human decrees and systems in church government should be fully divine in character, and the church should have a true and legitimate constitution a well-organized form of government. Our understanding of the government of Christ's church must begin with the Lord Himself and His Kingdom authority. The church shows the organic life of Christ's body, it lives as an organism, not just an organization. The church is not like the kingdoms of this world, for it is organized for service not dominion. There are points of differences between the church and state. The focus for church government in CCAP Blantyre Synod is on spiritual dimension, while the state is responsible for the physical dimension. The church is a religious body that should not depend on the state for its functioning and for development of both church and state (Smit 2013:131). The best governments are those who submit themselves to the governance of the eternal King, Jesus Christ.

6.3.2 *The church polity based on stewardship and service*

Government in the church is stewardship: its leaders are servant managers, who use their authority only to advance the interests of those they represent and serve (Clowney 1995:202). The office bearers are nothing more than instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit. They are not dignitaries with an authority based in their higher office, but first of all believers in service of Christ as the first and last authority for service (*diakonia*) of the church (Vorster 2011:15). Therefore, the legitimate church polity in CCAP Blantyre Synod must be the science that studies and formulates God's justice for His visible and institutional church in the light of His Word and the Confession and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Its objective must be the historical and contemporary *iusconstitutum* after testing by measuring it against the *iusconstituendum* (Du Plooy 1982:17).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article studied the question of hierarchical church polity in contrast to the Reformed church polity in the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi. The history of the CCAP Blantyre Synod indicated that hierarchism exists in the structures of the church as a result of influences from European systems of church government and method of evangelisation by the Scottish and South African missionaries when they established the church in 19th Century in Malawi.

In Reformed tradition, therefore, there is no control and authoritarianism because the church as an organism is called to live by divine life, the same life that exists harmoniously within the triune Godhead (Viola 2008:226). There is no human head of the church; Christ is the only Head of the Kingdom of God who governs His church through the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary way. Cowan and Engle (2004:1ff.) argues that the Bible gives basic instructions on how a church should be organized, but it does not indicate a global or regional church hierarchy. The two biblical offices are elders and deacons are for service (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 3:8–13), with Christ as the head of the church and its supreme authority (Eph1:22; Col 1:18).

A local church is an *ecclesia completa*. A local church is the universal church in a specific place. Local churches recognise one another on the basis of the same confession as true churches and live in specific relationship with

one another (Smit 2018:6–10). This relationship does not find expression in a formalized structure of churches, but in minor and major assemblies. Church community is not a matter of formalized church structures, but the expression and experience of the spiritual bond which exists between local churches (Smit 2018:6–10). Therefore, it is not the synod that has the last say on the matter of the church, but the Word of God (Smit 2018:7–10).

Therefore, to address the challenge of hierarchy, the CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi must restore its compromised historical Reformed traditional heritage and restructure church polity into an opportunity for growth and healthy diversity. The CCAP Blantyre Synod in Malawi must review its position on the headship of Christ over every detail of the life of the church, the constitution, doctrine and liturgy according to the Reformed church tradition.

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