



## **The other side of whiteness: The Dutch Reformed Church and the search for a theology of racial reconciliation in the afterlife of apartheid**

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### **Abstract**

This article will provide an overview and analysis of developments in the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) General Synod concerning race, racism, and racial reconciliation from 1986 until 2019. It seeks to extend the multiple accounts of the DRC's adoption and rejection of apartheid theology by tracing its further attempts at grappling with questions of racism during and after the transition to democracy, into the present. Three primary discourses are explored, namely the search for an inclusive ecclesiology, the commitment to community involvement in the reconstruction of South Africa after apartheid, and the transformation of interpersonal ethics towards greater respect and care for others. Thereafter, the article highlights four territories that remain largely unexplored within the DRC in the past quarter of a century and argues for their future exploration. These trajectories could contribute to a deeper transformation and conversion from the white Christianity historically tied to the DRC.

### **Keywords**

*Dutch Reformed Church; apartheid; racism; whiteness; reconciliation*

## Introduction

In this article, we provide an overview and analysis of developments in the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) General Synod concerning race, racism, and racial reconciliation from 1986 until 2019. This attempt at identifying the contours of how the DRC has dealt with race in the afterlife<sup>1</sup> of apartheid is conducted through a close reading of DRC General Synod agendas and minutes. We consider these contours through the varied use of language and concepts used in speaking about the legacy of apartheid (and colonialism) over time. By studying this linguistic landscape, we hope to demonstrate how the DRC relates to broader critical debates around anti-racism in South Africa, noting the limitations, omissions, and theological emphases in the General Synod documents.<sup>2</sup> Finally, considering this analysis, we suggest future action for the DRC concerning a critical theological and ecclesial engagement with race and whiteness in the context of South Africa and in response to its particular history with apartheid.

While our own academic work has a focus beyond the confines of our denominational backgrounds, this essay cannot be divorced from our history and positionality as ordained ministers of the DRC. More specifically, the paper is born from our involvement in a recently constituted DRC General Synod task team for "Reconciliation and Identity" (Handelinge 2019:198). With this research, we hope to trace its institutional antecedents and probe its limitations.

Some might rightly argue that there has been an exhaustive amount of research on the DRC's history with race and racism (Serfontein 1982; Kinghorn 1998; Weisse & Anthonissen 2004; Moodie 2020). However, this article starts where many of these engagements end – with the DRC's well documented general turnaround in relation to apartheid in 1986, when its policy document *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society) was first

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1 For use and interpretations of the phrase "afterlife" in the South African context see Modiri (2017), Vosloo (2021) and Pretorius (2017). See also Rambo (2017) for a similar use on broader questions of trauma.

2 This is inevitably but one perspective on the DRC and does not necessarily reflect the lived religion of its members or the witness of congregations. Yet it does provide an important lens on the formal discourse within the church.

accepted and then revised in 1990. It extends to the most recent General Synod meeting in 2019.

## **The Dutch Reformed Church on racism**

In 1986, the General Synod of the DRC, in what is typically considered a landmark policy shift in its position regarding apartheid, defined racism in the following way:

Racism is a grievous sin which no person or church may defend or practise. Whoever in theory or practice, by attitude and deed implies that one race, nation, or group of nations is inherently superior, and another race, nation, or group of nations is inherently inferior, is guilty of racism. Racism is a sin which tends to take on collective and structural forms. As a moral heresy it robs the human person of his dignity, duties, and rights. This leads to oppression and exploitation and must therefore be rejected and fought in all forms (Kerk en Samelewing 1986:22).

This can be compared with a definition given 30 years later. Noting with concern that members of the DRC were involved in “racist incidents”, the moderation of the DRC sent a pastoral letter on racism to all members in 2016 (Agenda, 2019:69). Here, racism is described as follows:

Racism takes many forms, but at its core lies superiority, that is, the contempt of people just because they belong to a particular race, prejudice, general assumptions, disrespect, incomprehension, envy, abuse, and humiliation. Racism can therefore be a way of thinking and living that is found and nurtured in people of all races (Agenda, 2019:141).

Although found in documents of different genres over a span of 30 years, the understanding of racism remains fairly constant: an attitude of superiority and feelings of contempt. Notably, structural dimensions of racism that were explicitly acknowledged under apartheid South Africa, such as in *Church and Society*, have no prominence in the contemporary discursive repertoire of church language around racism.

Little explicit work on racism can be found over the last three decades. At times, there is mention of the work on racism within broader ecumenical bodies (e.g., Agenda 1998:52; Agenda 2004; Agenda 2019), and racism is often mentioned as part of lists of problems facing the country. Most of the attempts at formally initiating programmes around racism will be mentioned in the discussion below. The origin of the aforementioned task team on “Reconciliation and Identity” illustrates this hesitancy in formally and explicitly engaging with the language of racism as well. It was born from an instruction to establish a task team on “racism and justice” (Handelinge 2019:12), but in setting up programmes following the General Synod, the focus was shifted into what, as we will illustrate below, more closely resemble DRC discourses: questions of reconciliation and identity.

In the two sections that follow, we first trace four discourses through which the DRC sought to construct a response to its history with apartheid over the past 35 years. Thereafter, we raise a series of responses that we argue could have been offered but have remained largely unexplored to date.

## **Responding to apartheid**

The following three discourses contain many interrelated themes and subjects. They should not be read as closed discourses that can be neatly cordoned off. They also do not seek to be original, stand-alone constructions that can be segregated from one another or from other themes or theological discourses in the DRC. As discourses, they collate the ways in which language has functioned in describing a move away from apartheid while also combining practical examples of where this language has functioned. Other discourses could be added, and future research would need to add even greater nuance to these initial interpretations.

### **Inclusive ecclesiology: “Die NG Kerk is oop”**

The first official, decisive, and clear break that the DRC made with the political and practical system of apartheid is attributed to its 1986 General Synod where Church and Society was first tabled. This break was defined by the DRC’s choice for an inclusive ecclesiology. Paragraph 270 of the 1986 document reads: “Die lidmaatskap van die Ned Geref Kerk is oop” (“The membership of the Dutch Reformed Church is open”), implying that

anyone previously racialised as belonging to a race other than white was now allowed to become members of the (white) DRC (*Kerk en Samelewing* 1986:46). According to Church and Society (paragraph 244), this inclusive ecclesiology was based on the belief that unity exists amongst all members of the “volk van God” (God’s people), and that this has a “hoër binding” (higher binding) than “aardse groeperinge en verskeidenheid” (earthly groupings and diversity) (*Kerk en Samelewing* 1986:42).

From the General Synod documents, it is clear that an ecclesiological shift to being open to other races did not imply an immediate shift in an explicitly white ethnic Christian identity. The 1982 synod unequivocally stated that “rasbewustheid” (racial awareness) and “volksliefde” (love of ethnic-national group) is not sin. This sentiment is repeatedly drawn on in 1986 and 1990 in reports as diverse as a response to the Kairos Document on the one hand (Agenda 1986:65), and British Israelism on the other (Agenda 1990:100). A 1994 report utilises “volksliefde” when warning that “volksliefde” should be tempered by the command to love your neighbour (Agenda 1994:100), and the notion is again drawn upon in the 1997 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) submission of the DRC (*Die verhaal van die NGK se reis met apartheid* 1997:72). Thereafter, this concept disappears from formal church language. The point of this insistence on defending “volksliefde” following the 1986 decision is to emphasise that opening membership (ending formal segregation) does not necessarily imply critically interrogating the intertwined nature of a white ethnicised Christianity.

Since 1986, the developments regarding international ecumenism and church unity within the so-called DRC family<sup>3</sup> of churches can be read as a continuation of this attempt to make the DRC more inclusive, diverse, and accessible to those excluded under apartheid. A significant example of ecumenical recognition of the DRC’s rejection of apartheid and a test of their understanding of its new inclusive ecclesiology took place in 1998. At the time, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches required the DRC

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3 This “family” includes the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA). While we retain the common reference to the DR family, it must be noted that the awkward “Dutch” reference to describe African churches has already been changed by two of the “family members”.

to reject apartheid (defined as “the forced separation of people of differing races denying the fundamental biblical teaching that all humanity is equally created in the image of God”) not merely in its implementation but as wrong and sinful in its very nature (Agenda 1998:42).<sup>4</sup>

Another significant recognition that the DRC had changed its former ecclesiology was the DRC’s readmittance as a member of the World Council of Churches in 2016 (Kenny 2016; Jackson 2016). However, many have argued that the “acid test” for the DRC’s break with the ideology of race undergirding apartheid would be the acceptance of the Belhar Confession, and with that, church unity with the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) (Botman 1999; Boesak 2008; Mahokoto 2019; Fortuin 2021).

This quest for structural and visible unity has a very long and multifaceted history. For the purpose of this reflection, we can merely state that it remains outstanding at best, and in many parts of the church an indefinite postponement seems to best describe the situation. Similarly, after some recent signs of change, the formal inclusion of the Belhar Confession into the confessional basis of the church is seemingly at a dead-end (Van Wyngaard 2019; Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Modise 2017).

In his reflection at the turn of the century on whether there has been any change in the DRC since apartheid, Smit ends with piercing honesty. He

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4 This was the third and final requirement issued by the WARC at its 21st General Council at Ottawa in 1982 and reiterated in a pastoral letter to the Moderamen at the 23rd WARC General Council meeting in Debrecen in August 1997 (WARC 1997; Cf. Henriksson 2013). The three requirements were: “Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from Holy Communion; Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid (“separate development”); Unequivocal Synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the church to dismantling this system in both church and politics” (WARC 1983:176-180). The Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa (RICSAs) report also confirmed this distinction, stating: “Even in their documents submitted to the TRC, the DRC continued to make a distinction between “good” and “bad” apartheid, arguing that they supported apartheid when applied with justice. In other words, apartheid was not evil or unjust in essence, but only became bad when it took on the character of an ideology” (Cochrane, De Gruchy, & Martin 1999:37). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Faith Communities Hearings were substantially guided by RICSAs at the University of Cape Town. RICSAs compiled a substantial report from over one thousand pages of submissions and oral testimonies, of which an abridged version appears as part of the TRC Report.

writes, “For those of us interested in apartheid and its legacies ... and who long for a credible, lasting, and public witness by our churches to what we believe to be the truth and the power of the gospel, the fundamental changes have not taken place and seemingly never will” (Smit 2004:142).

Against the hope of many, and perhaps to the embarrassment of the DRC, this initial impulse to open its doors has not resulted in any significant visible and structural change in the DRC’s composition as a white, Afrikaans church.<sup>5</sup>

### **Community involvement: “Die dienskneggestalte pas nou die beste”**

The second response can be collated around being involved in and caring for the needs of the community. While the opening of church membership signified the first steps in rejecting apartheid, the discourse around community involvement has become the primary way the DRC negotiates its place within South Africa. While this discourse is drawn upon in a broad range of reports, we look at it by focusing on the initial and continued responses to the TRC and its legacy as an explicit and exemplary expression of how the DRC sought to contribute to the repair of society after apartheid. The fundamental response recollected here is thus the ideology of apartheid that made the DRC self-serving and inwardly focused on the white, Afrikaans community. How the DRC has attempted to invert this by looking anew to the needs of the community therefore becomes of value.

Insofar as reconciliation became the national and public galvanising symbol of a response to apartheid in this initial transitional era, understanding how reconciliation is imagined and expressed by the DRC is important for reading its overall response to apartheid. Not merely for the TRC, but for all theological, social, and political responses to apartheid, reconciliation was, and remains, a contested symbol with multiple interpretations (Solomons 2018; Van der Borgh 2015). The DRC’s response to the TRC serves as a

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5 In 2015, the DRC General Synod approved a Common Set of Rules (“Tussen-orde”), a set of church orderly provisions that gives a legal base to cooperation between churches on the road to unification (Handelinge 2015:57). See the document issued by the DRC and the URCSA that also contains a draft Provisional Order (*Pilgrimage to unity, so that the world may believe*, n.d). While there has been some examples of congregations and presbyteries uniting through this process, they remain exceptions, and often continue to function as united congregations with largely separate worship spaces.

telling and appropriate way to gauge how it chose to deal with the afterlife of apartheid, not merely in broader society, but also within its own ranks. Piet Meiring, a DRC minister who served on the TRC, acknowledges that official decisions taken by the DRC, such as declaring apartheid a sin and a heresy, should not be mistaken for a fundamental shift away from apartheid's lasting impact on DRC members. He writes, "It was not that difficult, it seems, to erase apartheid from the statute books, from the official policy documents of the church – but to get it out of our hearts, was quite another matter! It may take generations to do that" (Meiring 2003:255). Even before the official hearings started in 1996, there were vastly different reactions to the TRC within the DRC. Differentiating between formal and informal responses within the DRC would help account for this diversity and provide different perspectives on the relationship between the DRC and the TRC (Thesnaar 2013).

In the DRC's official responses, reconciliation was largely interpreted as community involvement, with at least two noteworthy coordinates in its linguistic landscape: aspects of a changing discourse on mission, and a focus on diaconal service (including dealing with poverty). Both these concepts have been historically intertwined with a racial imagination, and in the present, remain the primary focus of a church response to the contextual social challenges facing South Africa. Mission and diaconia have always been core ministries of the DRC, especially in the church's involvement in broader society. However, this involvement with the broader (multi-ethnic, multi-racial) community or South African society was reframed as a response to the political transition to democracy and a demonstration of commitment and taking responsibility for contributing to the new political dispensation.

To return to the TRC and the DRC's response to the call to reconciliation, two formal responses demonstrate this focus on community involvement. The first is the document, *The Story of the Dutch Reformed Church's Journey with Apartheid: 1960–1994*, that seeks to capture these theological and historical contours of apartheid and demonstrate how the DRC has changed. This document is summarised in 26 statements and is included in the General Synod Agenda of 1998. The full-length document emphasises the DRC's commitment to reconciliation by listing its extensive social welfare ministry, combining its report on both diaconate and mission



activities under the heading of community involvement. Reconciliation is considered to find expression in alleviating poverty. It further states that the DRC had previously considered itself a powerful institution, but after apartheid, the church should take the form of a servant, as this is deemed to be both theologically sound and contextually appropriate: “die dienskneggestalte pas nou die beste – en dit is op stuk van sake wat Christus van sy kerk vra” (the form of a servant is now the most fitting – and this is ultimately what Christ asks of His church) (Agenda 1998:45).

After much deliberation, the General Synod Commission also decided on a second formal response.<sup>6</sup> They allowed the moderator, Freek Swanepoel, to appear at the TRC’s Faith Communities Hearing on 19 November 1997 in East London (Agenda 1998:47–49). Swanepoel emphasised that his contribution did not represent the whole DRC, though he believed the majority of the church wanted to rise to the challenge of reconciliation. The focus of his forward-looking contribution was thus on the church’s role in the “practical implementation of reconciliation” that lay ahead (Agenda 1998:47–49). A cornerstone of this response is described as “the healing of the community and the solving of problems” with reference to, amongst others, a commitment to supporting the development of living conditions (mention is made of the Reconstruction and Development Programme) and alleviating poverty (Agenda 1998:48). Swanepoel briefly acknowledges the DRC’s failure to respond to poverty and the needs of “a large number of people” in society during apartheid and admits that the DRC has the desire to contribute to the “radical improvement of the living conditions and future opportunities of people who have been deprived in South Africa” (Agenda 1998:48). This association of reconciliation with poverty is most clearly seen in the 1998 decision to appoint an ad hoc *Commission for Reconciliation, Poverty, and Moral Repair*. This commission’s work was later handed over to the Working Group on Missional Diaconia.

The 2004 General Synod occurred approximately 18 months after the TRC’s final report to President Thabo Mbeki. In response, the General Synod instructed that, together with ecumenical partners, recommendations that relate to churches should be attended to (Handelinge 2004:19). By 2007,

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6 For a full list of submissions sent to the TRC by DRC members and representative groups, see Cochrane *et al* (1999:192).

this response to the TRC’s recommendations was referred to the United Ministry for Service and Witness (UMSW), a united initiative between the four churches in the DRC family of churches that combined the ministries of mission and diaconate (Agenda 2015:422).<sup>7</sup> This task team was instructed to urgently develop “guidelines for reconciliation” (Handelinge 2007:378–379). Though the work of the UMSW continued, by 2011, this process came to an end as far as the General Synod is concerned, with the result being a workshop report (Agenda 2011:55) and a Bible study guide on reconciliation (Meiring 2010). When a proposal was tabled at the 2007 General Synod that the DRC required a new policy document “similar to *Church and Society*” that could provide a theological grounding and a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing the church’s involvement in the community, this was also referred to the UMSW (Agenda 2007:373).<sup>8</sup> In the UMSW’s recollection of the historical antecedents of how these ministries of mission and diaconate are related, the racialised dimension of how they were distinguished from one another under apartheid becomes clear. For the DRC, alleviating poverty amongst the white community was referred to as “barmhartigheidswerk”, but amongst black communities this was regarded as mission (*Ons roeping tot diens en getuienis in eenheid*, n.d.).<sup>9</sup>

The legacy of the TRC has remained an important marker in the DRC’s response to the racialised divisions and legacy of apartheid through its missiological and diaconal commitments as an expression of reconciliation. This includes how the DRC responded to the TRC’s final report and re-enactment held in October 2014 to revisit the commitments and recommendations made at the TRC’s Faith Communities Hearings. At this 2014 re-enactment, the DRC moderator, Nelus Niemandt, again highlighted the church’s missional pledge to community involvement

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7 For the DRC, its focus on mission and community involvement (diaconate) had already merged in 2004 to form the *Algemene Diensgroep Diens en Getuienis*.

8 The UMSW had five areas of focus. Apart from mission and diaconate, this included theological reflection on missionality, public witness, and church unity (Handelinge 2015:423). By the time the DRC’s 2019 General Synod convened, the UMSW was no longer operating.

9 This is set out in the document *Ons roeping tot diens en getuienis in eenheid*. [Online]. Available: <http://noordkaap.ngkerk.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2013/08/Ons-roeping-tot-diens-en-getuienis-in-eeheid.pdf> [Accessed: 20 July 2021].

and the upliftment of poverty to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation (Thesnaar & Hansen 2020:52).

Various examples suggest that playing a “reconciliatory and serving role in society” was considered essential for the DRC in regaining their credibility after apartheid and demonstrating that they had “overcome all racial prejudice in own ranks” (Agenda 1998:316). Two more instances are thus worth mentioning in relation to how the DRC explicitly responded to the question of its role and function in post 1994 democratic South Africa.

The first is found in the Missional Framework Document that was first issued in 2013 and is directly related to this question (Van der Merwe 2014:83–89). It served the function of finding a new identity in the DRC’s missional calling in democratic South Africa. An important antecedent to this document was the “Seisoen van Luister” (Season of Listening), launched in 2005. According to Niemandt, this Season of Listening was the clearest indication of the DRC’s missiological shift to “a renewed commitment to Africa and to the healing of South Africa” that paved the way to a focus on local communities. Its flagship project expressed this community involvement by using the metaphor of crossing borders (“Groei oor Grense”) (Niemandt 2010:100).

The second example is the DRC’s statement of vocation (Roepingsverklaring), issued in 2002 (Handelinge 2002) and amended in 2007 (Handelinge, 2007). This statement became an important reference point in terms of the general focus and functioning of the General Synod. Its origin is traced to the 1994 General Synod that first raised the question of the DRC’s position and role in the new political dispensation. This led to the 2002 statement that described the DRC’s commitment largely in terms of community involvement (Agenda 2007:373). Its 2007 amendment states its commitment to the continent as a part of the body of Christ in Africa, and highlights some of the ongoing contextual challenges, including poverty. It affirms the church’s willingness to contribute to solutions to these challenges and to be of service in the world “unconditionally”. This response is motivated by their conviction of being faithful witnesses in service of the coming of God’s kingdom (Handelinge 2007:129).

Some critical remarks on these formulations are worth noting. The DRC’s understanding of mission, as demonstrated in the Missional Framework

Document, has been considered to fall short in its ability to offer an accurate, theologically sound, and contextually sensitive response to the changing landscape of South Africa. Its ability to respond to the real socio-economic needs of the communities at the margins of society is also considered insufficient (Botha & Forster 2017:7). This is due to the fact that it displays limited proximity between the broader church and the communities it seeks to serve and be involved in. This maintains racialised power imbalances between the predominantly white DRC and these marginalised communities, illustrating a continuation of the issue of power in the “border” metaphor as used in the Season of Listening. It runs the danger of uncritically caring for communities across the boundaries of race and class without requiring white participants to investigate their own racialised identities and their historic relations of power. These power relations would then continue to permeate new relationships (Bowers Du Toit & Nkomo 2014; Van Wyngaard 2014b).

In its vocational statement, the DRC positions itself in relation to the contextual challenges and the context of Africa as being sent to care for others. The church’s implicit self-exclusion from the challenges to which it is called further maintains a position of power as one called and able to serve. Furthermore, the frequent omission of any references to its own historical or contextual position, and therefore any particular responsibility for its inheritance, must be noted.

While there were many other developments in how the DRC chose to engage with mission and diaconate that cannot be covered here, these examples highlight the contours of this general response of community involvement as caring for others beyond the apartheid boundaries.<sup>10</sup>

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10 One important lens that will require a separate analysis is the public witness of the DRC – the way in which it engages with questions of policy and public debate on matters of national concern. This would include, for example, statements and reports on violence, land reform, and economics. Here, its particular racial formation has been visible in the past (Van Wyngaard 2012), but the ways in which it contributes to calling for structural shifts from the apartheid past (or not) would be of significance.

## Transforming interpersonal ethics: “Die Seisoen van Menswaardigheid”

The language of human dignity is not new to the DRC, and the most recent formal discursive space where questions of race and racism would (and perhaps could) have been engaged was the *Season of Human Dignity*, launched in 2013. This was a joint initiative within the DRC family of churches. That racism robs a person of their dignity forms part of the 1986 DRC decision on racism, and the language of human dignity can be found throughout the 35 years of General Synod meetings under discussion. It also has a broader appeal; it was drawn on in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church’s (DRMC) 1978 decision that later led to the Ottawa pronouncements on apartheid and the drafting of the Belhar Confession (Naudé 2010:67–69). It is also foundational to the South African bill of rights.

However, the 2004–2011 period sees this through the lens of “diversity”. During this period, an office for gender and diversity was established that initially focused on labour-related discrimination against female clergy. The commission on women became one on gender and diversity, which later morphed into diversity or “diversity management”, increasingly focusing attention on questions of interpersonal values as these changes are affected (Handelinge, 2004:20; Handelinge, 2007:223).<sup>11</sup> Diversity is, at times, described as a core value equal to the unity and confession of the church (Agenda 2011:229). However, the primary focus here is on the act of respectful listening to diverse voices. It should be noted that while race is repeatedly mentioned as a priority, when its final 2011 report on diversity is presented, strong language around gender equality is found, while race is euphemistically shifted to the language of “strangers” with whom relations should be built and on whose behalf congregations should act as advocates – thus calling forth the mission lens previously mentioned (Agenda 2011:236).

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11 This subtle change of language is noteworthy. What was described in 2007 as a diversity desk became diversity management by 2011 (Agenda 2011:228). This aligns the church more closely with corporate human resource practices popular during this time (Van Wyngaard 2014a).

In 2011, the focus on diversity was consciously shifted to human dignity, but as a continuation of the previous emphasis. Drawing on language already embedded within church culture, this also functions as a key element in talking through questions of race. For example, a pastoral letter noted a range of contentious issues typically associated with the contemporary debates on the legacy of colonialism and apartheid – land reform, farm murders, racial transformation in labour space, and university protests. Here, the response is to call members to follow the Season of Human Dignity and commit to respect and listening, as opposed to disrespect and a failure to listen (Agenda, 2019:142). In a different example (a report on land reform), the DRC points to the Season of Human Dignity as a concrete expression of its rejection of racism. It describes the content of this season with: “Four values are promoted, namely respect, listen, embrace and love” (Agenda 2019:130).

One way in which questions of racism got drawn onto the formal agenda of human dignity was when the moderatures of the Dutch Reformed family of churches formally indicated their support for the World Communion of Reformed Churches’ (WCRC) Churches Addressing Racism in Southern Africa programme and referred it to the Steering Committee for the Season of Human Dignity (Agenda 2015:220). As far as meetings of and feedback to the General Synod were concerned, this programme was, however, never heard from again, with the exception of the message of greeting from the URCSA at the 2015 General Synod (Handelinge 2015:202).

Throughout this history, the language of human dignity has been employed to call forth interpersonal ethics that are strongly related to notions of respect, listening, and caring. Despite some references to structures that perpetuate undignified life, it primarily informs a vision of interpersonal relations which is more sensitive and respectful towards others. While at times related to questions of racism, this receives scant attention. Instead, the period under discussion is, to a large extent, dominated by reports on homosexuality, where the language of human dignity is employed extensively (e.g. Agenda (Aanvullend) 2015:80–99). Ironically, what remains outstanding is the key task ascribed when human dignity was approved as a priority of the General Synod: revisiting our theological anthropology. The Diversity Task Team reported to the 2011 General Synod that our problems around race, gender and sexuality seem to be

rooted in a lack of a responsible theological anthropology. In shifting the General Synod's language from diversity to human dignity, they then emphasised that "[t]he task team must also advise with regard to research on a responsible anthropology for the church" (Handelinge 2011:107). A decade later, we should note this task as being of increased importance and also increased difficulty. It is increasingly evident that modern conceptions of the human – including those explicitly named as Christian – have centred around the white male, and that something different from a mere expansion of the human to include female, queer or black bodies would be required.

## **Unexplored territories**

Thus far, we have highlighted some of the dominant trajectories in the DRC's attempt to grapple with its legacy as an ethnically and racially constituted church and its explicit involvement in apartheid. Even if more time may be needed to interrogate these discourses in depth, we note immense limitations in these trajectories' ability to consciously engage with questions of race and racism within the church. In this last section, we wish to highlight a few avenues that, we would argue, could have been on the church's agenda at this point, and might prove to be important avenues of exploration.

### **The ongoing formation of whiteness**

The struggle against apartheid produced some interesting moments of critically interrogating whiteness from within a Christian tradition before the language of critical whiteness studies emerged onto the academic, and later more public, landscape. Examples of these are the white work done in the Christian Institute, in tandem with black consciousness (Kleinschmidt 1972), or the Institute for Contextual Theology's late 1980s whiteness project in solidarity with black theology (Van Wyngaard 2016).

Despite an increasingly public debate around the question of whiteness in South Africa and the recognition by the DRC that it remains largely bound to its ethnic origin, any critical and conscious examination of how to respond to this formation and its implication for Christian identity and discipleship remain outstanding. While the privileged economic position

of its members and the responsibility this would entail for community involvement is indeed at times acknowledged, none of the threads responding to the church's historical involvement in the very formation of race in South Africa, and supporting apartheid, allows for the question of how whiteness is maintained in the present.

Globally, some examples of church resources along these lines do exist.<sup>12</sup> Locally, one regional DRC working group in the Western Cape has been engaging around this theme over the past few years and recently produced a first version of a 40-day Lenten journey around a critical Christian exploration of whiteness (Van der Riet, 2021). However, while these initiatives may confirm the possibility of such a process within the church, there is little indication that this conversation has found its way into either local congregations or the General Synod.

### Spirituality and Liturgy

Although spiritual formation and the development of liturgical practices remain the primary function of local congregations and are much less influenced by the General Synod, spiritual formation directed towards consciously and deliberately dealing with racial formation remains largely unexplored territory for the DRC. Despite suggestions made in the past, such as the liturgical celebration of 16 December as Reconciliation Day (Agenda 2002:333), the historical and contextual realities of the legacy of apartheid have no recognised place in denomination-specific liturgical practices.

What we consider as the work of developing liturgical practices or disciplines is aligned to what can be regarded as orthodox within Christian spiritual formation or even within the Reformed tradition – practices such as confession, repentance, forgiveness, and lament. However, how these could be consciously related to race and whiteness remains unexplored (Van Wyngaard 2020:151). The majority of research and resources on liturgy that attempt to deal with the afterlife of apartheid have centred on

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12 See, for example, the Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network's *Cracking open white identity towards transformation* (2012)



the theme of reconciliation (e.g., Wepener 2009), without dealing explicitly with how race and whiteness function.<sup>13</sup>

### Conscription and (inter)generational Trauma

From 1968, military conscription in the South African Defence Force was compulsory for all white males in South Africa. The racial formation and trauma incurred through these experiences have been widely studied (and addressed), though not by the DRC (e.g. Edlmann 2012; Verwoerd & Edlmann 2021). Thesnaar underscores this treatment of former soldiers and chaplains by citing the sole suggestion in any DRC synod or commission to deal constructively with this trauma – an Eastern Cape Synod decision taken in 1996 (Thesnaar 2013:396). There has been no substantial, formal programme or initiative by the DRC to assist its ministers and members in dealing with their trauma. This raises questions of pastoral care for these former combatants who served either in the “Border Wars” or were deployed domestically during the mid-1980s anti-apartheid conflicts. It also raises questions about the DRC’s implication in this defence of apartheid as it provided chaplaincy services to the military and police.

According to *Journey with Apartheid*, the DRC’s involvement in chaplaincy work in service of the military and police was offered to defend the “atheist ideology of communism”, and not in support of an unjust system of oppression (*Reis met apartheid* 1997:75). The DRC chaplains conducted “good pastoral work under difficult circumstances” and were seemingly unaware of covert operations (*Reis met apartheid* 1997:76). This generational trauma matters, though, as this generation still acts as the elders and leaders in both church and society. It still affects intergenerational dealings with race and racism and is vital for making sense of the still deeply racially divided South African society. The DRC will therefore need to deal with the healing and transformation of these conscription experiences.<sup>14</sup>

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13 See, for example, the resource developed in the Season of Human Dignity (Van Wyk & Simpson 2016).

14 That this could have been on the agenda of the church more broadly is perhaps illustrated by concrete informal initiatives that do exist (e.g. Hansen 2018).

## Black and liberation theologies

In 1986, the General Synod ratified a scathing rejection of the Kairos Document (Agenda 1986:61–65; Handeling 1986:595; 607) and emphasised its strong rejection of liberation theology (Handeling 1986:607; 1990:561). As evident in more recent debates around the Belhar Confession, the general assumption (within DRC theology) remains that liberation theologies are at the very least unwelcome, but more likely fundamentally flawed (Van Wyngaard 2019:11–15). In its iteration as black theology of liberation, this most explicit critique of white theologies has, despite the rejection of apartheid, never received any careful consideration within the DRC. This theological trajectory would pose critical questions of the DRC's dominant attempts at moving away from its apartheid past. To take but one clear example: Klippiess Kritzinger's (1988) longstanding reminder of the challenge that black theology poses to mission would remain of utmost significance to the present movements away from apartheid via a missional commitment to the needs in South Africa.

Such a deliberate exploration would seem to be a prerequisite for any possibility of engaging with the ever-sharpened critique of race and colonialism associated with notions such as decoloniality. Here, the tension between faith convictions of being called and sent by God for service in an African context and historical realities of ecclesial traditions born in tandem with colonial conquest seem to call forth a discernment for which the language is still to be formed. While the tension between the historical processes that established churches and their present faith in God's call to the context in which they arose is not unique to the DRC, it does take on a particular urgency in this case.

## Conclusion

The 1997 submission to the TRC, affirmed at the 1998 General Synod, concluded with the words: “Die Ned Geref Kerk het sy reis met apartheid voltooi. Hy het die albatros vir eens en altyd van sy nek afgegooi” (“The Dutch Reformed Church has completed its journey with apartheid. He has thrown the albatross from his neck once and for all”) (*Reis met apartheid* 1997:76). Looking back, it is perhaps easy to see the naivete of this conviction, though more can be added than “not yet”. Rather, the

DRC itself perpetuates the afterlife of apartheid. It remains a structural continuation of the very segregationist imagination that gave apartheid its name. It is also not inevitable that the DRC will commit to the ongoing and persistent dismantling of its white supremacist formation in the near future. Rather, it too remains a site of struggle.

If anything, we should recognise that the journey of its formation within the whiteness of a particular Christian faith preceded both the 1948 election and the 1857 synod, and its rejection of this formation would indeed imply a longer journey than the decisions of 1986 or 1998. What we hope to have illustrated here is the limited theological resources within this church to consciously respond to its own fateful formation. While we do not want to suggest that we have presented the necessary contours for what would lead to some finality on apartheid – or even claim that as a possibility – we do want to suggest there are possible avenues that could be explored in the medium term to develop a more conscious response from within this church tradition to the persistent question of racism and the whiteness of Christian faith to which it has historically been bound.

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