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Facing whiteness: A South African missional theological problem

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Abstract

This article examines whiteness as a neglected theological problem within South African missional theology. Although missional theology has significantly influenced South African churches since the early 1990s, particularly in response to the transition from apartheid to democracy and the challenges of post-Christendom, its engagement with race and whiteness remains limited. Drawing on critical whiteness studies and theological scholarship, the article argues that this omission represents a significant missional blind spot, particularly within the predominantly white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC).

The article identifies several factors contributing to this neglect, including the adoption of Western theological frameworks that insufficiently account for South Africa's colonial and apartheid histories, the influence of predominantly white and middle-class theological spaces, the protection of existing privilege, the role of language and culture in maintaining racialised identities, and a reductionist understanding of the Missio Dei. These factors contribute to a form of maintenance theology that inadvertently preserves white interests rather than critically challenging the structures and cultural assumptions shaping the church.

Revisiting the missional insights of Karl Barth, Lesslie Newbigin, the Gospel and Our Culture Network, and David Bosch, the article emphasises that the church is not only an agent of God's mission but also a recipient of the gospel's transformative critique. It argues that a genuinely missional ecclesiology requires contextual and cultural self-criticism, an honest reckoning with historical complicity and ongoing privilege, and a willingness to be transformed through encounters with those historically marginalised. The article concludes that confronting and dismantling whiteness is essential if predominantly white South African churches are to move beyond maintaining their institutional and cultural interests towards participating faithfully in God's mission.

Keywords

whiteness; missional theology; missional ecclesiology; Missio Dei; Dutch Reformed Church; white privilege; post-apartheid South Africa; critical whiteness studies.

Background

Missional theology, which emerged in the 1990s in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), is rooted in the ideas of Karl Barth and Lesslie Newbigin. It emphasises mission as emanating from the Triune God and as a product of the *Missio Dei*. Newbigin's insights into the challenges faced by churches in the UK were particularly influential and were later adopted by scholars in North America. Subsequently, the Gospel and Our Cultural Network (GOCN) further explored this, focusing on the local-church-in-mission (Mouton 2023: iii). As such, missional theology guides "the shift from a cultural church to a church that reflects and engages actively with its immediate community" (Dames 2007: 36). Moreover, since missional theology aims to move away from mission as an ecclesiocentric activity, the importance of a missional ecclesiology was highlighted. GOCN highlighted five key tenets of a missional ecclesiology: the *Missio Dei,* the centrality of the Trinity, the Kingdom of God, the church as a hermeneutic of the gospel, and the church as an alternative community (Guder et al. 1998: 3–4).

In South Africa, dramatic cultural and political changes in the early 1990s led churches, especially mainline churches, to seek new ways to be faithful witnesses in the new context. It seems that missional theology provided the necessary impetus. In line with GOCN, South African missional theology emphasises the local congregation as the missional agent and explores themes such as missional ecclesiology, congregational structures, local community development, missional leadership, discipleship, worship, and environmental concerns. These contributions encourage critical reflection on the missional functioning and visioning processes within congregations, while also demonstrating the evolution and entrenchment of missional theology in the South African church landscape (Mouton 2023: iii). Although such reflections confirm that the missional church

is missional through-and-through, it also reveals that race, particularly whiteness, has not been adequately addressed, despite the historical and ongoing racialised context of South Africa. The impact of whiteness on the South African reality and the work done in other theological disciplines on this issue call for more attention within missional theology.

Facing whiteness (in South Africa)

Whiteness can be understood as a "socially constructed" identity (Green, Sonn & Matsebula 2007: 393), an ideological framework (Foste 2017: 3), a "master narrative" (Steyn 2001: 3), and "a way of being" (Jennings 2020: 9) that guides, benefits and perpetuates white identity. As such, whiteness operates as a dominant and normative cultural framework that confers structural advantage upon white people, rendering white cultural norms and practices largely invisible and unexamined, while positioning all others in relation to this normative standard (Frankenberg 1993). In general, whiteness is supported by concepts such as: *white privilege* (long-term systemic advantages from colonialism and apartheid); *white fragility* (defensive responses to racial stress); *white talk* (conversations that perpetuate privilege and/or counter vulnerability); *implicit bias* (unconscious negative attitudes); *institutional racism* (policies and practices creating white advantages); *structural racialisation* (hidden structures shaping biases and outcomes); *cultural racism* (discrimination based on cultural differences); and the *ignorance contract* (unwritten agreements perpetuating ignorance) (Mouton 2023: iv).

Tellingly, discourse on whiteness and missional theology both emerged from contexts like the USA, Western Europe, and South Africa, regions with colonial and slave trade histories. However, there are notable differences influenced by demographic features, such as whether whites are a majority or minority, and the legacies of (settler) colonialism and apartheid. Although there are similarities with global whiteness, South African discussions on whiteness address its unique characteristics within the local context (Steyn 2001).

For one, as opposed to other settler colonial countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where whites have the demographic,

political and economic power, rendering it invisible, whites in South Africa are in the minority, which makes whiteness and its accompanying advantage very visible and whites very conscious of their whiteness (Hunter & Van der Westhuizen 2022: 11). For another, white South Africa is characterised by a complex intersectional positionality. Because whites as a grouping are "sociologically indigenous" and not aboriginally indigenous, the bond with international whiteness is maintained and nurtured (Steyn 2001: xxiv). Also differentiating South African whiteness is the unique South African "multiplicity of Whitenesses" (West 2010: 117). White South Africa is divided culturally, "geographically, politically, religiously, and economically" (Salusbury & Foster 2004: 93). The most public and historically significant schism, however, is between Afrikaans (or Afrikaner) and English-speaking whiteness (2004: 93). Afrikaner whiteness is characterised by the belief that they are elected and God-ordained (Van Wyngaard 2019: 44, 190), while centred around the themes of religious, racial and cultural purity, superiority, calling, paternalism, *volkstrots* (people's pride), noble suffering, Calvinist decency, land and the Afrikaans language (Verwey & Quayle 2012: 553). Conversely, English-speaking whiteness claims culturelessness and individualism that enables them to consolidate their social and economic status (Salusbury & Foster 2004: 99, 107), while also drawing "on global Anglo whiteness" (Van der Westhuizen 2017: 25), which enables a more global belonging and retention of close links with Western cultural concerns. Nevertheless, despite their differences, after the National Party took power in 1948, national coherence and solidarity between these different white groupings was gradually achieved, with both defining themselves "in disassociation from the 'non-white' racial groups" (Steyn 2001: 26). As such, "the centre was constituted around the marginalised" (Steyn 2001: 43).

Of course, this situation was never going to hold. The early 1990s saw the demise of official apartheid, resulting in white South Africa losing political power. This led to a *dislocated whiteness,* with white South Africans grappling with significant adjustments (Steyn 2003: 38), reacting in ways ranging from fundamentalist to constructivist (Steyn 2001: xxxi, 152). South African whiteness is also a *shameful whiteness*, dealing with loss and shame emanating from apartheid atrocities (Steyn 2001: 155–162). Whereas, more recently, a *decolonising South African whiteness* requires

deep self-reflection, awareness, humility, active silence, and engagement with people of colour (Steyn 2018; McKaizer 2011; Van Wyngaard 2015; Vice 2010). Nevertheless, despite being a minority and lacking political power, whites in South Africa still hold symbolic, material, and economic advantages (Van der Westhuizen 2018: 35). Thus, as Van Wyngaard (2016: 2; 2019:232) confirms:

> (South African) … "whiteness is constructed globally (such as the relation to economic power) but also reveals the particularities of South African whiteness (such as the particular way in which whiteness is tied to land or language) and also that whiteness in South Africa changes over time (primarily in how whiteness is constructed in relation to the state)."

Whiteness as a theological problem

Examining the entanglements between whiteness and religion is crucial due to whiteness' significant role in shaping global societies (Schneider & Bjork-James 2020). Through religion, whiteness is produced relationally (Hunter & Van der Westhuizen 2022: 30). This is especially true of Christianity. Dyer (1997: 17) asserts, "Christianity is of its essence white," while Jennings (2010: 35) notes that Christian formation has been "reconfigured around white bodies."

James Perkinson (1999, 2004) thus clarifies that whiteness is tied to salvation and supported by soteriological presuppositions. European Christianity associated goodness and purity with white, evil and sin with Black, and impurity as mixed, resulting in salvation becoming a progressive "enlightenment" (1999: 439). Whereas the soteriological presuppositions equated blackness with non-election and being unsaved, creating theological and everyday boundaries between blackness and whiteness (2004: 58–60).

Willie Jennings (2010, 2020), on the other hand, describes whiteness as a theological problem stemming from colonial contact, where Christian theological imagination became entwined with "processes of colonial dominance" (Jennings 2010: 8). Underlying this movement of whiteness from Europe is *supersessionism*, i.e., the belief that the church replaced

Israel in God's favour, conceptualising itself as "a universal theology of whiteness" (Van Wyngaard 2019). This led to a distorted social and Christian imagination, "where some people hoard, and some people have been hoarded", and race, religion, and nation were "crafted in the power of Whiteness" (Jennings 2020: 136).

Consequently, whiteness, besides being a social, ethical, political, and economic problem, is increasingly identified as a theological problem (Van Wyngaard 2019: 11, 59). Christianity gives content to whiteness. This recognition highlights the importance of a responsible and critical white theology aimed at reinterpreting theology steeped in whiteness. It should work towards changing whiteness and its broader structures and focus on dismantling and disentangling theology from whiteness (Barrett & Marsh 2022: 3). Perkinson (1999) therefore advocates for a responsible white theology seeking the reconversion of whiteness. As such, it must be self-referential and other-oriented, actively pursuing a new way of life. This theological struggle inevitably leads to mourning in the face of fear and loss and involves realising that white theology exists in the tension between what is and what could be, and the exorcistic and the humanising. This, in essence, calls for what Snyman (2021) terms a *hermeneutics of vulnerability*, in which white people allow themselves to be unsettled by acknowledging moral injury, complicity, and the epistemic violence embedded in colonial and apartheid histories, even when this entails a fearful loss of power, certainty, and moral self-regard. Such a hermeneutic invites a reconversion of whiteness through *difficult empathy*, where vulnerability is not embraced as victimhood but as an ethical openness to being transformed by the presence of the "other", fostering greater response-ability and responsibility toward those historically marginalised.

Whiteness in South African theological discourse

According to Van Wyngaard (2019: 4), white theologians, as wounded racial beings, must probe their own wounds. However, many white South African theologians tend to withdraw from this challenging task. Nevertheless, over the years, some white theologians have ventured to explore their positionality, with contributions differing between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

During apartheid, the focus was on solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle, addressing white racism, and responding to black theology and black consciousness.[1] In the post-apartheid era, attention shifted to the enduring effects of whiteness on theology. This involves finding appropriate white responses to these ongoing effects through self-awareness, white consciousness, critical self-reflexivity and sensemaking of the white self – a process also referred to as *White Work* (Van der Riet and Verwoerd 2022a, 2022b).[2] This self-reflective process aligns with shifts in critical theories such as feminist, queer, and race theories, which have moved from solely focusing on the experiences of the victims and the oppressed to also examining the causes and perpetrators of oppression, like whiteness and racism.

Thus, acknowledging whiteness as a theological problem is crucial for the missional church to engage effectively with its context. The missional church must critically reflect on how whiteness has shaped its understanding of missional ecclesiology and its engagement with the world. This understanding helps the church address and dismantle the structures of whiteness, promoting a more inclusive and just mission.

Whiteness in South African missional discourse

Bowers Du Toit (2022: 13) asserts that theological research in South Africa must address the impact of "colonial and apartheid narratives and practices" on faith communities, rather than being "colour-blind: or post-racial. Ignoring race overlooks its significant historical and contemporary influence. While an assessment of the South African missional discourse demonstrates a thorough understanding of missional theology, it mostly neglects the impact of race, particularly whiteness.[3] This issue is probably exacerbated by the discourse being largely dominated by contributors from

1 See Bosch 1972, 1974; Kleinschmidt 1972; Kritzinger 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Nettleton 1972 and Pretorius 1981.

2 See De Villiers 2018; Snyman 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2015a, 2015b, 2021; Pretorius 2018; Schneider 2017; Van Wyngaard 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021; Verwoerd 2000, 2020; Van der Riet and Verwoerd 2022a, 2022b; Van der Riet and Van Wyngaard 2022; Van Heerden 2023 and Wepener and Nell 2021.

3 See Mouton (2023) for a detailed assessment.

the predominantly white DRC. Given the history of white supremacy in South Africa and the origins of missional theology, this lack of explicit reflection on whiteness is problematic.

Missional theological blind spots

Consequently, there seem to be at least three theological blind spots in South African missional discourse. Firstly, whiteness is widely recognised and confronted as a theological problem in other theological disciplines but not in missional theology. This omission can lead to embedding a white habitus through missional formation, processes and practices.

Secondly, the ecclesiological focus in missional theology makes the church vulnerable to the critique of church theology. Positioning the church as missional through-and-through can make it more dynamic externally but less self-reflective internally, thus neglecting its relationship with culture, society, race, etc. This creates a blind spot for whiteness if it is the norm within the church. A critical tension must always exist between the church and the patterns influencing it.

Thirdly, South African missional theology does not sufficiently heed Newbigin and the GOCN's countercultural and self-critical insights. They emphasised that the church is not only the gospel's messenger but also the recipient of the critique offered by the gospel. Whiteness, as the elephant in the missional theological room, must therefore be confronted if missional theology aims to tell an alternative story.

By ignoring these factors, missional theology essentially misses a core point of missional theology: God works not only *through* the church but also *in* the church. Even the best-intentioned agents of mission must sometimes become the receivers of God's mission. Failing to address whiteness *in* the church only serves its interests. It contributes to making it invisible in a church where whiteness is the norm.

Summary discussion

Several factors may explain the limited awareness of whiteness's ongoing influence on missional theology and congregations. It may reflect what Gloria Wekker (2016: 17) describes as *white innocence*: an actively maintained form

of "not-knowing, but also not wanting to know" that presents whiteness as morally neutral while disavowing its historical and ongoing complicity in systems of domination. This innocence intersects with (wilful) ignorance, an unwillingness to critically name and interrogate whiteness, and the economic, social, cultural, intellectual, and religious power held by missional theologians – power that many are reluctant to relinquish (Cone 2004). Additionally, issues may have arisen when missional theology was first introduced in South Africa, possibly due to the country's contextual complexities or an uncritical adoption of Northern hemisphere missional contours. Put differently, did South African missional theology become disconnected from, or maybe misunderstood, the essential elements at the root of the missional movement?

To clarify, we must revisit the roots of the missional movement. Karl Barth, during his early ministry in Safenwil (1911–1921), recognised the exploitation of industrial workers and the failure of liberal theology, closely tied to the German state, to address political and economic challenges. Barth concluded that the church prioritised its own interests and those of the powerful, sidelining God (Bentley 2007: 158–159; Kritzinger 2007: 1664–1668). In essence, Barth saw that theology and the church had become domesticated by cultural and social values, losing their critical, countercultural voice.

Similarly, Leslie Newbigin and the GOCN identified that the church had been domesticated by the reigning culture. Returning to the UK from India, Newbigin found a church integrated into Western culture, failing to adhere to its own message. He emphasised the church's danger of being shaped by prevailing cultural, political, or social narratives. Newbigin therefore advocated for the church to return to its missionary roots and identity, in order to adhere to its missionary calling in a post-Christendom environment (Goheen 2018). He warned that the church must balance engaging *in* and *with* culture without being domesticated *by* it to avoid either becoming guardians of the culture or ghettoising itself (Newbigin 1978: 163–164).

The GOCN noted that the North American church, too comfortable with Christendom values like consumerism, tamed the gospel and lost its distinctiveness in a post-Christendom context. Within the shift from a

Christendom to a post-Christendom society, the church lost its dominance and influence in society mainly because of this cosy connection with the prevailing cultural values (Guder et al. 1998; Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996). The GOCN thus stressed the gospel's role in urging the church to self-critique amidst cultural assimilation and to act as an alternative community living contrary to the prevailing culture.

In sum, Barth, Newbigin, and the GOCN highlighted that the church lost its ability to critique and transform the reigning culture because it was domesticated by it. They echoed David Bosch's (1982) cautionary remarks that culture and context are *servants* of the gospel. When culture shifts from being the gospel's servant to its partner or rival, it is on its way to being the gospel's undoing. Gospel plus cultural identity will eventually lead to the gospel being usurped by such cultural identity.

So, yes, the church is a product of the Triune God, sustained by the power of Jesus Christ to transform the prevailing culture, but it also needs the grace of God to free itself from the control of the reigning cultural imagination. David Bosch's (1991a: 511) remarks ring true. He reminds us that mission is a double-edged sword – it's both an activity transforming reality and in need of transformation itself. Contextual and cultural powers work internally and externally, making it the task of the missional church to discern, unmask, and transform powers in its surrounding context and within itself.

Missional theology in South Africa may have missed this point, thus becoming disconnected from its missional roots. While the church embraced missional theology to address its loss of power and privilege post-1994, it failed to critically examine the dominant contextual and cultural powers, especially whiteness, within predominantly white churches. This oversight shows that the messengers do not adhere to their own message.

The absence of whiteness and its protection of white privilege from the missional endeavour indicates a lack of self-critique. In a church where whiteness reigns as the main cultural imagination or "internal institutional hermeneutic" (Marais 2021: 272), self-critique motivated by the gospel is crucial. Newbigin (1989) emphasised the congregation as the first hermeneutic of the gospel, a point echoed by Hunsberger (1996), who stated that the gospel meets the culture inside us before we become its

hermeneutic in the surrounding culture. Witnesses must let go before they can speak out (Bevans & Schroeder 2004). Missing this point raises the question of whether it can still be called missional.

Why did missional theology in South Africa miss this point? Why are reflections on whiteness and its protection of white privilege absent? There is no simple answer, but the following matters probably play a role:

A provincialized theological framework

A significant matter that might be both a *cause* of whiteness being ignored and a *consequence* of ignoring whiteness is the originating position from which missional theology conducts research. Missional discourse in post-1994 South Africa, influenced by Western, post-Christendom, and postmodern transitions, often ignores the unique complexities of the local context. Unlike Western, Northern-hemisphere churches, South African churches also face unique post-apartheid and postcolonial transitions. Treating these transitions as similar (e.g. Niemandt 2007) renders South African contextual intricacies invisible and may lead to a reductionist view of mission. This approach protects whiteness from scrutiny and might again function as the embodiment of the West and its ecclesiastical tradition, bringing the theme of a *white ecclesiology* to the fore (Pretorius 1981: 19). It furthermore allows white missional theologians to claim objectivity in their theological discourse, which can marginalise other perspectives and experiences (Cone 2010: 16).

Echoing white interests

The South African missional theological space is predominantly influenced by white, middle-class male scholars, leading to potential "distorted pedagogical practices of insulation and exclusion" (Vosloo 2021: 1029) or a "diseased institutional unconscious" (Jennings 2020: 99). In such homogenous spaces, whiteness informs all translation, interpretation, and contributions, rendering it invisible. Theology is not neutral or objective, especially regarding whiteness (Vellem 2017: 4). A supposedly neutral or universal theology, i.e., without a marked context, often reflects white, male, European, or North American perspectives (Van Wyngaard 2016: 5). Anderson (2021) refers to this as a "mythical norm", i.e., the "white, male, heterosexual and affluent" perspective that becomes systemic

and is equated with Biblical interpretation and theology. Thus, in such predominantly white spaces, the illusion of neutrality prevails, making it difficult for a mainly white missional church to reflect on its identity (Rossouw 2016: 384).

Protecting the status quo

After 1994, white South Africans lost political power, but their economic status remained largely unchanged. Their income, schools, and churches stayed the same, with only implicit fears arising. The peaceful transition mostly preserved their way of life, with whiteness hiding behind economic security and safety. Protecting the status quo is therefore paramount. In the church, whiteness maintains the status quo by hiding behind concepts like reconciliation, diversity, inclusivity, crossing borders and equality. While agreeing on these values is easy, implementing them is challenging. Efforts stemming from a white centre, without recognising power differences and privilege or being open to transformation, keep whiteness intact (Mouton 2023: 290).

Entrenching privilege through locality

Missional ecclesiology focuses on local congregations and communities (Niemandt 2015: 96). While well-intentioned, this emphasis on "locality" may lead congregations to overlook their historical and current situatedness, as well as poverty, inequality, and privilege in the wider community, thus entrenching privilege. It might also influence the theology of these churches. Wallis (2016: 109) warns that theology should change sociology, but in many white churches, the opposite occurs, with their theology shaped by the sociology of white communities, making them "sociologically predictable, based on their race and geography."

During apartheid, white suburbs were spatially shielded from people of colour and poverty. Consequently, local congregations in such suburbs were legitimised by white supremacy. These contested origins are often viewed as a divine blessing, creating a space where meaning is dictated by whiteness. Marius Nel (2023: 17) writes, "even if a congregation is an ideal bridge to a particular community, but it does not also address the human condition and sin that caused it, it will be unable to participate faithfully in

the *missio Dei*." Thus, acknowledging and reframing the sinful, racialised history of a place is crucial.

Today, historically white spaces face interruptions by diverse bodies, often causing anxiety among white people. Instead of embracing diversity, many white South Africans rather retreat or semi-retreat into enclaves, maintaining the illusion of a white world. These enclaves, supported by schools, medical centres, shopping centres and churches (Benade 2019: 104), allow disengagement from issues like poverty and inequality, masking privilege behind physical, economic and emotional safety and possibly contextualisation, inculturation and incarnation.

The missional church must therefore embrace its countercultural roots. As a foretaste of the Kingdom, it should represent that which is to come (Newbigin 1977, 1978). This requires a radical presence that unravels the effects of sin and embodies the gospel's cruciform nature in a specific place (Nel 2023: 165). A radical presence that might entail the congregation being at odds with place. One must be conscious of the story of a place, its history and the contested stories that shaped it. Understanding the interplay between the "place of story" and the "story of place" is essential (Conradie 2023: 8).

Embedding whiteness through culture and language

In South Africa, language is a key cultural and racial marker. Afrikaans, while not exclusively a white language, was appropriated by white Afrikaners as a cultural identifier and, along with English, given special protection before 1994. Post-1994, Afrikaans lost its privileged status, and institutions were pressured to be more inclusive, leading many white Afrikaans speakers to feel the language was under threat. Efforts to "protect" Afrikaans thus increased. The danger, however, is that whiteness is often maintained through language because language is regarded as ideology-less. White supremacy in South Africa frequently hides behind so-called Afrikaans commercial interests, culture, music, and institutions. Inevitably, this affects churches' ability to cross cultural and racial boundaries, keeping predominantly white Afrikaans churches monocultural and serving white interests.

In a multicultural society like South Africa, it constitutes a failure if a missional church remains monocultural. Whiteness hides behind cultural and linguistic sameness, creating a blind spot for issues like whiteness where it is the norm. This can lead to an ecclesial reduction of mission, with congregations becoming guardians of culture rather than countercultural forces. Hence, the question: can a church positioning itself as an Afrikaans church in a multicultural and multilingual society be regarded as a truly missional church?

Unacknowledged privilege

Unacknowledged institutional whiteness and white privilege remain significant issues in South Africa. Despite progress since 1994, white South Africans still benefit from privileges entrenched during more than 300 years of history, systemically favouring whites (Chalklen 2015). While challenging conversations about this occur in various sectors, predominantly white churches often avoid them. There is a lack of critical engagement with the historical and theological impacts of colonialism and apartheid, and the ongoing effects of systemic whiteness and inherited privilege. In some cases, these privileges are even framed as blessings from God, masking them behind God's providence. Consequently, to protect, restore or "reinstate white racial equilibrium", it is in the interest of whiteness and privilege to deflect such discussions (DiAngelo: loc 1628).

This dynamic also affects how congregations interact with marginalised communities. Mostly motivated by altruism, they often still perceive marginalised individuals as objects of mission rather than agents of mission. This perspective fails to challenge the economic, social, cultural, and political systems that perpetuate privilege for some while marginalising others (World Council of Churches 2013). Missional congregations frequently "reach out" to adjacent black townships, thereby "othering" these communities and reinforcing a missional framework that operates from the privileged to the marginalised (Schoeman & Wessels 2021), thereby also validating the borders delineating whiteness. Moreover, the white church retains control over these interactions, deciding whom to engage, when, and for how long. This control extends to selectively addressing certain issues; for instance, the DRC invests significant effort in gender and LGBTQIA+ concerns, which, while important and threatening to

patriarchal authority, may be less threatening to white privilege. As Major (2005: 73) notes, "white privilege allows one to pick and choose issues."

Addressing systemic whiteness might require systemic interventions. This begins with acknowledging the "messiness of history" (Vosloo 2015: 5) in the light of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Such a challenging but meaningful encounter with history can lead to a new understanding of the present and creative possibilities for the future (Vosloo 2008). Marius Nel (2023) suggests a *cruciform ethic*, where believers, following Christ's example of self-emptying and humility, use their privilege to benefit others rather than hold on to or deny it for personal gain.

A reductionist view of the Missio Dei

At the 1986 conference on mission at the University of the Western Cape, David Bosch highlighted the holistic, Kingdom perspective of the *Missio Dei* (Van der Watt 2010: 167). Indeed, God's mission is multifaceted and multidimensional and should not be too narrowly defined (Bosch 1991a: 512) or limited by "western missional understandings" through the undervaluing of local contexts (Poitras 1999: 42). Given the complex South African history and context, the missional church needs such a comprehensive understanding of the *Missio Dei.*

However, South African missional theology has yet to fully embrace this broad understanding of God's mission. Or maybe it is a case of prioritising some aspects over others. We know this because whiteness and its continuing influence lack sufficient attention, leading to a reductionist view of the *Missio Dei.* Maybe the focus on the "sent-ness" of the church allows the white church to evade the critical aspects of the *Missio Dei,* perpetuating whiteness and privilege. This could explain why liberation from Christendom issues like heteronormativity, paternalism, patriarchy, or consumerism receives more attention than inequality, systemic whiteness, and privilege. Such a narrow understanding allows the church to structure its own agenda in God's name. It is therefore crucial to ask whether the missional church operates with a missional consciousness (informed by the *Missio Dei*) that transcends white interests.

Upholding white identity

Marais (2017: 378) emphasises that followers of Christ are influenced and shaped by the desires of a dominant culture. This "conceptual framework" (Nel 2023: 9) shapes knowledge, actions, practices, and dispositions, impacting both individual and congregational identities.

Therefore, given that a missional ecclesiology is more about the *being* (its identity) than the *doing* of the church (Niemandt 2014: 5), the intentional addressing of white identity and culture in many congregations becomes necessary. Institutions are shaped by the bodies inhabiting such institutional spaces. White identity influences all aspects of white congregations, from liturgical spaces that are racialised by language, songs, and rituals to discipleship programs and decisions about building use, financial allocations, and staff appointments. These biases persist unless intentionally confronted and deconstructed. Transforming this "conceptual framework" under the Holy Spirit's guidance is crucial; otherwise, believers remain captives to a white mindset. This transformation requires new thinking supported by programs, habits, liturgies, and practices that foster both inner and communal change (Nel 2023: 116, 121, 168). Addressing the underlying white identity is unfinished ecclesiological business for predominantly white missional churches in South Africa. These churches cannot be fully missional without facing and deconstructing their white identity.

Conclusion

It appears that reflections on whiteness are absent from South African missional theological discourse. It seems white missional theologians have mostly succeeded in answering Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am?" (Mk 8:29) but neglected to properly examine "who am I?" or "who are we?" in the case of predominantly white churches (Kritzinger 1991: 109). If these questions were taken seriously, the influence of whiteness would likely be more scrutinised in their reflections.

Overall, it seems the main question for mainline churches in post-1994 South Africa was: How do we keep going as churches in the context of post-Christendom? Yes, some energy was then found in being missional,

but what kind of theology does that yield? Especially in South Africa with its contextual complexities? There appear to be two main issues in South African missional discourse: firstly, it lacks contextual and cultural self-criticism, resulting in compromises favouring white middle-class privilege, and secondly, despite emphasising missional as something dynamic and a way to resist a purely church-centred approach, it ends up being a form of maintenance theology. By inadvertently protecting white interests and not confronting whiteness and its ongoing privilege, missional theology is in fact moving from mission to maintenance. Consequently, given these compromises that South African missional theology makes with white middle-class privilege, one must wonder: Can it even be called missional?

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