

Dutch Reformed Church in inner city Pretoria: forming a new church space in South Africa: 1856–2020

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Abstract

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, over time, became a state church and aligned with the Apartheid regime and in some corners supported separate development. Moreover, the church would, working with colonial and apartheid cultural powers granted to it, gain numerous landholdings across South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Church property ownership, revealed in a 1998 inventory (which was said to be incomplete), sat at 600 properties and covering over fourteen thousand hectares. This article will discuss the church's rise in the colony and in South Africa's northern areas. It will also explain its historical landholding in South Africa in general as well as in the capital, Pretoria. Moreover, it will detail interviews with church leaders in a presbytery in Pretoria and explain learnings from history and spatial changes and what these may mean for the church at large.

Keywords

Dutch Reformed Church; space; spatial justice; church history

Introduction

In the formation of South African settler society, many of the initial settlers in the Cape colony were Dutch (Elphick & Giliomee 1979:525). Like many other colonisers, the Dutch had developed a racial superiority (Elphick & Giliomee 1979:525). Numerous comparative race relations scholars have stated that the Dutch and English colonies were the most racially unequal in the world (Elphick & Giliomee 1979:525). This was due to the movement of the Dutch and English societies away from unified Catholicism to individualised and capitalist society, moving them from nuanced social

strata to two parts of society: free burghers and the despised poor (Elphick & Giliomee 1979:525). Divisions were done in racially based ways in the Cape colony as skin-based prejudice was a force from early on (Muller 2022:4). Furthermore, the high capitalist potential of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) created opportunities for those who moved with it (Elphick & Giliomee 1979:525).

Over time, the Dutch Reformed Church would become a state church and aligned with Apartheid regime and in some corners supported separate development. Moreover, the church working with colonial and Apartheid cultural powers granted to it, would gain numerous land-holdings across South Africa (Philpott & Zondi 1999). The Dutch Reformed Church property ownership, revealed in a 1998 inventory (which was said to be incomplete), sat at 600 properties and covering over fourteen thousand hectares (Philpott & Zondi 1999). This inventory is not complete and the calculation for any church's full church ownership is difficult due to information that can only be found through qualitative measures (like the interviews below). However, it reveals a historically landowning institution.

This article will discuss the church's rise in the colony and in South Africa's northern areas. It will also explain its historical landholding in South Africa in general as well as in the Pretoria, the capital of the country. Moreover, it will detail interviews with church leaders in a Presbytery in Pretoria and explain learnings from history and spatial changes and what these may mean for the church at large.

***Afrikaner* and DRC history**

The *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company arrived in the Western Cape in 1652 with a Dutch Reformed chaplain that serviced the Company's employees (Muller 2022:2). The Dutch settlement in the Cape colony was founded after the Netherlands got freedom from Spain and the Roman Catholic Church at the end of the Eighty Year's War (Brown 1972:3). While this war was happening, the Reformed Church was growing and being established in the Netherlands (Brown 1972:3). In 1618–1619 the Synod of Dort, an assembly of the reformed from Europe, was completed and it confessed Calvinism (Brown 1972:3). After the war, the

Reformed Church in Netherlands was recognised as a national institution (Brown 1972:3). The communities of Netherlands were known to live a monolithic culture in a Calvinistic sense (Brown 1972:3). The synod of Dort was a national event with governmental representation and affirmation (Brown 1972:3). The Dutch East India Company was a trading company owned by the Dutch (Brown 1972:4).

The Dutch, the Dutch East India Company, and the Dutch Reformed Church (as an enterprise founded on identity in one monolithic community) arrived in the Cape colony. This enterprise, monolithic in nature and connected completely, speaks to a nuanced Reformed church that got its strength and identity from being state-affirmed and Dutch. This identity would later develop into the *Afrikaner* identity.

A fort in Cape Town was the first venue for the services for the Company (Muller 2022:2). However, the first official clergy, Ds Johannes van Arckel, arrived in 1665 (Muller 2022:2). For the first century in South Africa the church operated under Amsterdam until its first synod in 1824 (Muller 2022:2). The DEIC recognised the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*, DRC, NG Kerk, or NGK) (Teppo 2022:32) as a state church (Muller 2022:2). In the 18th century, a missionary movement reached South Africa (Elphick 2012). The Moravian Georg Schmidt arrived as a missionary and was welcomed by the DRC (Elphick 2012). However, the church struggled with allowing separate ministries within its reformed order (Elphick 2012).

In the year 1859, after some theological differences the Reformed Church split into 3: the Dutch Reformed Church, of which is the oldest part, *Gereformeerde Kerk* (GKSA or RCSA), and *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk* (NHK) (Teppo 2022:33). Muller states that the DRC, for much of the 17th century, operated primarily as a cultural and societal ‘gatekeeper’ for the DEIC (2022:2–3). In similar fashion to the VOC’s claim of land space despite the existence of indigenous people in the Cape colony, it is clear that the DRC claimed religious and land space as a state church.

In the two centuries after the 1652 arrival, there was the arrival of settlers from other nations like France, Britain, and Germany (Abulof 2015:228). The settlers who did not return to their original home, began to create a new one and sought a new identity outside Europe (Abulof 2015:228). Over

the years, the gatekeeper nature of the Dutch and DRC began to wane. Despite the consolidation of power in the earlier years of the Cape colony, the Afrikaner people had an ontological dissonance and identity void (Abulof 2015:227). From the start of the 18th century, the developing settled Dutch community began to claim a new identity in the word *Afrikaner* (*Afrikaander* in Dutch) (Abulof 2015:228). The word was initially used to differentiate between European born settlers and native South Africans (Abulof 2015:228). However, it ended up being a differentiator between European-born and African-born White people (Abulof 2015:228).

This identity created identity security for Dutch reformed descendants (Abulof 2015:228). As *Afrikaner* identity was solidified and Reformed faith prevailed even through the loss of power at the Cape, a new identifier came to be the *Boer* (Dutch farmer) (Abulof 2015:229). While *Afrikaner* and *Boer* have been used interchangeably, it must be said that *Afrikaner* is an ontological identifier linking European descendants to the soil of Africa and *Boer* is an occupation (Abulof 2015:229). Abulof states that, “Boer” referred exclusively to the farmer descendants of the immigrants, while “Afrikaner,” ... stress on land and language” (2015:229). This stress on land is one that informed ownership not just by general *Afrikaner* people but the Dutch Reformed Church in general.

In 1795 and then again in 1806, the English took over the Cape colony (Brown 1972:9). This meant that the British establishment also governed the Dutch Reformed Church as a civil establishment (Brown 1972:9). The English sought to maintain the privileges that the DRC had before its reign (Brown 1972:9). However, the DRC was then viewed as a local and particular institution, albeit recognised by law (Brown 1972:9). The beginning of the British colonial rule opened up the Cape colony to additional churches and allowed missionary societies to enter a new field of labour (Elphick 2012). This seemed to be the beginning of the end of the “one state church” ontology that existed until the British rule (Brown 1972:9). The DRC struggled for ministers and only a few from the London Mission Society agreed to help serve congregations in the DRC (Brown 1972:13).

During the fight for colonial headship, some Dutch settlers began to move north in the early 19th century in search for land and freedom (Muller 2022:3). This move was called the Great Trek. This move, alongside their

Calvinism, developed an Old Testament hermeneutics that identified these nomads as the chosen people (Muller 2022:3). Muller states that the Dutch moving north linked themselves heavily to a “biblical Israel existing in a covenantal relationship with a possessive and vengeful God who gave them licence to smite the encountered heathens along the way.” (2022:3). Furthermore, *Afrikaner* identity was formed alongside nationalist undertones throughout the 19th century (Muller 2022:4). There was some acceptance of mixed marriages in the early Cape Colony days, but this was quickly outlawed in 1685 (Teppo 2022:27). Furthermore, DRC leaders leaned into separatist ideas in not pushing for missionary work as other traditions and ended up forming separate churches for people of colour (Abulof 2015:231).

The separatist religious ideology, formed in the move to the north of South Africa, developed into neo-Calvinism within these nationalist ideas (Muller 2022:4). The ethno-biological formation of South African Calvinism (based in this *Afrikaner* identity mentioned above) created a Christian tradition based on birth rather than conversion (Abulof 2015:230). The Cape DRC disapproved of the Trek, and there was an intra schism (Abulof 2015:235). Despite the schism, a cultural-lingual unity formed in the 1870s and 1880s closed this schism (Abulof 2015:235).

Therefore, the *Afrikaner* identity, language and cultural formation was formed alongside their religious faith in the Dutch Reformed Church (Teppo 2022:32). Despite this shared formation in South Africa, racial separation was not unanimously accepted in the DRC until the 20th century (Teppo 2022:32). With the hardening of *Afrikaner* identity and rise to political strength, the DRC hardened its own policies in this regard (Teppo 2022:33). While it cannot be said that all in *Afrikaner* identity and DRC agreed on everything, what was agreed on was the rejection of *gelykstelling* (racial levelling or equality) (Teppo 2022:33).

Apartheid in its systematic state began in 1948. Apartheid in its foundation was a politics of space, creating systematic exclusion based on race (Teppo 2022:37). The DRC was a great political tool during this time, aiding in *Afrikaner* identity and unity (Teppo 2022:37). In its 1857 synod the church allowed racially separated churches for practical reasons and mitigating friction (Van Donk 1994). Having opted for separatism for practical

reasons, the church maintained that this was not scriptural (Van Donk 1994). However, a nuanced view of the separatist ideology must be applied. Varying DRC ministers advocated for separation to preserve white domination (Elphick 2012). So, despite the clarity of the separatist ideology being unscriptural, it was done based on a supremacist ontology and thus effected Christian practice in colonial and Apartheid eras.

Can Themba, a journalist at Drum magazine, began a series of visits to DRC churches to see what would happen if someone Black visited the churches (Teppo 2022:39). He recalled the visits in a collection in 1972 saying:

At the Kensington DRC (Dutch Reformed Church), an aged church official was just about to close the doors when he saw me. He bellowed in Afrikaans: “Wat soek jy?” (What do you want?). “I’ve come to church,” I said. He shoved me violently, shouting for me to get away. I walked off dejected. A few doors away was the Baptist Church, and as I walked towards it I began to think that people didn’t want me to share their church. As I walked through the Baptist door I was tense, waiting for that tap on the shoulder ... but instead I was given a hymn book and welcomed into the church. I sat through the service ... This up and down treatment wasn’t doing my nerves much good. (Themba in Teppo 2022:39–40).

It is clear then that the DRC and *Afrikaner* identity was linked, and the separatist ideals formed lingered in culture, land, language, and identity. One can also see that historically DRC spatial dynamics were grounded in separation, keeping those outside of the identity out. The DRC in Pretoria followed in this historical politics of expansion and space.

DRC in Pretoria: history and current presbytery

In 1834, the Great Trek had started toward what is now known as the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West, and Gauteng (Beets 1909:23). Numerous Trekkers crossed into Gauteng and North West and settled in areas like Pretoria and Rustenburg (Beets 1909:23). The group that settled in the Transvaal (northern areas covering Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, and Gauteng) did not have much spiritual leadership (Beets 1909:23). Dr Daniel Lindley from the American Board provided some care as well

as Dr Andrew Murray (Beets 1909:23). In addition to this lack, the British authorities in the Cape Colony forbade DRC ministers to administer communion to Trekkers as they were seen as rebels (Beets 1909:24). Over time, a Rustenburg Dutch Reformed Church was formed, followed by congregations in Pretoria and Potchefstroom (Beets 1909:24).

The first church building in Pretoria was initiated in 1856 and opened in 1857 (Hardijzer 2022). The building was initiated by Reverend Dirk van der Hoff of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1854, before the city of Pretoria was proclaimed (Hardijzer 2022). In 1866 the original mud building was updated and expanded to fit 700 people (Hardijzer 2022).

In 1882, the building was hit by lightning and burnt down, leading to the building of a third structure (Hardijzer 2022). The building was in Church Square (Hardijzer 2022). This church stood for 20 years until the tower was found unsafe and it was demolished in 1904 (Hardijzer 2022). The then government bought the land and 8 other stands from the congregation for 50 000 pounds (Hardijzer 2022). This shows an initial enrichment of the church through the colonial paradigm. The bible in this church was moved to a new church in Kock Street (Hardijzer 2022). Moreover, Bosman Church or Groote Kerk, was inaugurated in 1903 and is part of the current presbytery ownership.

The Pretoria Presbytery originally comprised of 6 congregations: Pretoria, Bronberg, Arcadia, Harmonie, Meintjieskop and Burgerspark (Respondent 2b 2021). The Presbytery had numerous buildings in the city: three youth hostels, two apartment buildings and an office building (Respondent 2b 2021). Over time, a lot of buildings were sold from these congregations and now only Bosman Street/Groote Kerk and 2 other church buildings are used for church (Respondent 2b 2021). Also, it still has 1 apartment building with 44 units (Respondent 2b 2021). Moreover, in 1981, the Presbytery had 27 fulltime ministers each living in church housing, however, now there are only 3 church houses or *manse* left (Respondent 2b 2021).

Overall, the Dutch Reformed Church was imported into South Africa as other mainline churches. It has had its own nuanced history within expansion and missions. It expanded through the fight for power from the Cape colony to the rest of the country. Also, it partnered historically with the formation of the exclusive *Afrikaner* identity and separatist Apartheid

ideology. In this partnership, presbyteries like the Pretoria presbytery gained political access and land ownership. The Pretoria presbytery held the funeral of Paul Kruger (Hardijzer 2022). Also, it gained property and land for income over time during its existence. One can call it a “property rich” group of churches. In the following section, I will detail interviews done at the presbytery and what these interviews reveal about spatial dynamics in the presbytery currently.

Methodology, interviews and learnings

The overall PhD study that this article is taken from uses methods that include qualitative and quantitative research. Alongside academic articles, books, and archival documents, it makes use of interviews done with leaders in each stated congregation or denomination. These semi-structured interviews were completed with leaders who had spatial history with the church. This was needed in order to gain some insight of spatial history for each church case study.

There are three case studies in the PhD study. They each have their own number of interviews. This case study has two interviewees. These two interviewees have the most knowledge of the spatial history as leaders and workers of the church. While they are only two, they provide wide historical knowledge and contextual impact for the case study. Semi-structured interviews are done for collection of data but also for meaning-making and gaining contextual perspectives on particular issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006:314–315). Interviews are meant to collect enough data (alongside other methods) in order to create credible and impactful conclusions that answer research questions in depth (Marshall, Cordon *et al* 2013:11). This article has two interviews. The interviews, with the information found and other resources, create a credible response to the research question.

The interviews included in this article were conducted with leaders within the DRC Pretoria and its social justice programmes. These were completed on site of one of the churches in the presbytery.

A journey toward radical love

When conducting the interviews, I found that the interviewees work well together and yet are from vastly different backgrounds. The first interviewee is originally from the Free State with a certain racially exclusive upbringing (Respondent 1 2021). The interviewee states that:

I was born by a domestic worker who used to work in Welkom and I used to go to her at her flat and I, when we were working with her you know Apartheid time it was tough, and it was the time when, I always here this story that when it was lunch time there was a cabinet outside the house that kept our cutlery that we used, the very same cutlery that was used by a dog [sic] (Respondent 1 2021).

The interviewee grew into the Christian faith (particularly the Charismatic Pentecostal tradition) as a result of a White woman who mentored them (Respondent 1 2021). From this time, ministry was their vocation and they moved around the country until they made it to Pretoria (Respondent 1 2021). It is here where the interviewee joined Participate, Envision, Navigate (PEN) as an outreach coordinator (Respondent 1 2021). They were in charge of taking care of the vulnerable including street-based people¹ (Respondent 1 2021). PEN is a faith-based organisation in social action which as born out of the Dutch Reformed Church. During this time, the interviewee found street-based people bathing in streams and needing spaces of dignity to bathe. They were in charge of taking care of the vulnerable including street-based people (Respondent 1 2021). It is then that they had the idea to re-format some urinals in one of the churches into showers so street-based people can shower with dignity (Respondent 1 2021).

The second interviewee is from a white *Afrikaner* background (Respondent 2a 2021). They were raised in Johannesburg and said the following about their upbringing: "...so I grew up in Johannesburg got my schooling there, Apartheid times so the only black people that I connected with was domestic worker at home [sic]" (Respondent 2a 2021). The interviewee studied Theology in Pretoria and ended up studying a Masters in the world of religions (Respondent 2a 2021).

1 This term is used for people previously known as homeless. This recognises that they may have a home but are street-based.

They say this opened them up to the “world order” and brought them in conflict with their church, the DRC (Respondent 2a 2021). After working for the church for some time, they resigned and worked for other FBOs like Tshwane Leadership Foundation and PEN (Respondent 2a 2021). Soon, they became a tent-making or part-time minister, bringing them back to the church (Respondent 2a 2021). It is here that they worked with others like the first interviewee (Respondent 2a 2021). One project is the shower one mentioned above. Another act of inclusivity, which came from engaging with people from different races and classes was conducting a funeral for a Black man who was street-based (Respondent 2a 2021). This was the first funeral held for a Black person in the history of the church (which is in Arcadia) (Respondent 2a 2021).

These two interviewees display joy in changing the DRC structure in what they do. They are aware of its exclusive history and aim to change it (Respondent 1& 2a 2021). Restructuring the spatial dynamics of the church is one of the ways they want to do this. For example, one of the interviewees is from a charismatic background, and is not allowed to conduct communion or pastoral care within the DRC church but provides this for the street-based people who attend the church (Respondent 2a 2021). Furthermore, the church includes sex workers and street-based people and baptised a sex worker right before I visited (Respondent 2a 2021).

The restructuring in this Presbytery reveals people and communities who have moved away from DRC’s original monolithic community based in *Afrikaner* identity and language. Also, it shows people, who despite at war with their church’s history, are reclaiming the spaces they own for inclusive living and radical daily love of ‘the other’. Therefore, there are some lessons that can be learnt here.

Lessons for justice in space

In looking at spaces that we inhabit, the first choice might be to look at them in the abstract, simply as land we stand on or buildings we do work or worship in. However, Edward Soja states that there needs to be critical thinking on space in the world today (Soja 2009:2). This critical thinking is based on three foundations:

- The ontological spatiality of being (we as humans are social, temporal and spatial beings);
- The social production of spatiality (space is socially created and can therefore be socially altered) and;
- The socio-spatial interaction (the spatial forms the social as much as the social forms the spatial) (Soja 2009:2).

If we take the socio-spatial interaction seriously, then we can see that the spaces we live, work and worship in have positive and/or negative effects on everything we do (Soja 2009:2). Therefore, space and spatial dynamics have a connection with justice and injustice (Soja 2009:2). The spatiality of (in) justice is understanding that there are unequal and unjust geographies as well as more equitable spaces that serve all in them (Soja 2009:2–5).

The interviewees revealed a lot about their history with the DRC, contestations, and the attempt at inclusive living within the Pretoria Presbytery. These revelations show some lessons for spatialised justice.

Contestation and white experience

The first lesson is that there must be an engagement with spaces that are contested. The DRC story is one that is historically exclusive. The DRC actively excluded those unlike them in their spaces before 1994. In some spaces, the use of Afrikaans as a primary language in the Church is still a point of exclusivity. The interviewees revealed points of contestation in this exclusivity and how they have made efforts to actively create inclusive space in the Pretoria Presbytery. Therefore, justice in space must include an active knowledge of exclusivity, an understanding of the context (in this case the DRC was created for White *Afrikaner* experience) and act to create equitable inclusive space.

Rough hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is read as a theory around the perception of text and its meanings (Kruger 2022:65). Reformed hermeneutics in South Africa has been read as having the following presuppositions:

- God exists;
- God makes himself known to man;

- Scripture is inspired;
- Divinely inspired Scripture is unique, consisting of sixty-six biblical books;
- Divinely inspired Scripture is authoritative;
- Divinely inspired Scripture is sufficient (Coetsee & Goede 2022:15–20)

However, there are other hermeneutics that have arisen. The hermeneutics of suspicion, explored by Paul Ricoeur (Kruger 2022:65). Ricoeur explains that there are multiple layers of meaning in texts given by varying ontologies (Kruger 2022:65–67). A hermeneutics of suspicion deals with the different meanings and the question of if there are meanings not given in good faith but designed to deceive and dehumanise (Kruger 2022:70).

West writes on hermeneutics that have epistemological privilege (2014). These need hermeneutical challenge under suspicion. Liberatory hermeneutics is the foundations of liberation theologies (West 2014). These have principles which include the preferential privilege for the poor and marginalised (West 2014) and Christ as a liberator of the oppressed (Cone 2020) in the midst of pain.

The journey that the second interviewee explained within his own church and the daily actions needed to keep opening up the space led to another lesson. The funeral for the street-based man was held within a church that excluded that man for centuries. Also, it was held with his street-based community, a coffin purchased by the church on a table used traditionally for holy communion. The whole structure of the event was messy and yet represented entry and welcoming of the previously excluded.

The second interviewee states that:

Yes, so like that guy said bring in the tables so it was a beautiful moment for us because it was coffin being put on the holy communion table, this mix of theological things of holy communion and lords last supper and death and black and white, I was thinking of that, it was a beautiful moment holding onto hope for the future [sic] (Respondent 2a 2021).

This reflection reveals hermeneutics that deeply connects to the rough points of the Gospels and how these led to hope. The Lord's last supper

happened in the midst of a plan to kill Jesus Christ and scatter his disciples. And yet it is where the Messiah solidified the plan of salvation in death. This “rough” hermeneutic allows one to see hope in the darkness of street-based people in the city of Pretoria and across the country pairing well with liberation hermeneutics. It provides resource for a continued journey of hope toward spatial justice for the spatially marginalised.

Conclusion

The DRC in South Africa has had an interesting history that is founded on *Afrikaner* identity and language. This created a separatist identity operating on an exclusive spatial ontology. The interviewees joined a church community with this ontology. Over time, they formed an inclusive community that serves the street-based people within Pretoria. The experience from the Pretoria Presbytery shows that spaces can be and must be contested to push for more inclusivity in churches and that a “rough hermeneutic” is essential for hope along the road to spatial justice in historically exclusive spaces. Overall, the interviewees show continued acts toward a (re)newed DRC space that is messy but welcoming to all.

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