

**“Het zijn *onze* armen”<sup>1</sup>:  
An overview of the Cape Synod of the Dutch  
Reformed Church’s welfare efforts, 1824–2024**

Esté Kotzé<sup>2</sup>  
Stellenbosch University, South Africa  
[estekotze@sun.ac.za](mailto:estekotze@sun.ac.za)

**Abstract**

Since its inception in 1824, the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) has played a key socio-economic role as provider of a range of poor relief strategies. However, the purpose of these charitable efforts was not solely rooted in theological principles. In the nineteenth and twentieth century South African context, poor relief work carried distinct political undertones, particularly surrounding the so-called “poor white problem”. A substantial body of literature has emerged surrounding “poor whites” and the political efforts employed to “save” them in the decades before the implementation of apartheid. While the Church’s poor relief schemes are often mentioned as significant in these studies, the Church’s poor relief systems and their development over time remain understudied. This article identifies and discusses five distinct phases of development of DRC poor relief strategies over the past two centuries (1824-1860s; c. 1860-1900s; 1910-1940; c. 1940-1980s; and 1990-present) and argues that these stages and the practical implementation of the Church’s poor relief efforts have been notably shaped by the contemporary socio-economic and socio-political zeitgeist in which it was embedded.

- 
- 1 [They are *our* poor] Emphasis in original. NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1909, Agenda, 102. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1909.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1909.pdf). Note: unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author’s own.
  - 2 Esté Kotzé (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7418-6707>) Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University & Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa Archives.

## Introduction

Poor relief has been central in the theology of the reformed church since its origins during the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> Poverty was something that “would always be with us” and charity was held as a Christian duty.<sup>4</sup> From the inception of the Cape Synod in 1824, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (or the Cape Church)<sup>5</sup> has endeavoured to satisfy this calling to help the poor and needy. Indeed, the practical implementation of the Church’s poor relief and welfare strategies has never been static. As this article will argue, these strategies have always been directly shaped by the contemporary socio-economic and socio-political zeitgeist of the broader society in which the church is embedded.

Despite the key role played by the Dutch Reformed Church as provider of poor relief throughout its 200-year existence, the Cape Church’s poor relief systems are relatively understudied. P.F. Greyling’s 1939 *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk en Armesorg* and Botha’s 1956 *Die Maatskaplike sorg van die N.G. Kerk in Suid-Afrika* both provide broad, but detailed, overviews of the growth of the Church’s poor relief schemes.<sup>6</sup> Despite their indisputable value as reference works on this topic, both texts reflect the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century context in which they were written. More recent scholars

- 
- 3 Carter Lindberg, “‘There Should Be No Beggars among Christians’: Karlstadt, Luther, and the Origins of Protestant Poor Relief”, *Church History* 46, no. 3 (September 1977), 313; Brian Pullan, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 441–456.
  - 4 David Stevens, “The Social Thinking of the Protestant Churches”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly* 80, no. 319 (Autumn 1991), 260.
  - 5 The official name of the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church is The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA). For the sake of simplicity, the DRCSA will hereafter be referred to as “the Cape Church”. This will also help avoid ambiguity with the other regional synods. The Dutch Reformed Church was initially divided into four synods: the Cape Synod (1824); Orange Free State Synod (1864); the Natal Synod (1864); and the Transvaal Synod (1866). Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cape and Transvaal would further split into regional synods. For a more detailed discussion of the name of the Dutch Reformed Church, see: P.J. Strauss, “Die naam ‘Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk’”, *Acta Theologica* 36, no. 1 (2016): 213–228; “Oorsig van die Geskiedenis van die NG Kerk”, Gemeentegeschiedenis, accessed 27 May 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.gemeentegeschiedenis.co.za/oorsig-van-die-geskiednis-van-die-ng-kerk/>.
  - 6 P.F. Greyling, *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk en Armesorg* (Cape Town: S.A. Bybel-Vereniging, 1939); L.L.N Botha, *Die Maatskaplike Sorg van die N.G. Kerk in Suid-Afrika* (Paarl: Algemene Armesorg Kommissie van die N.G. Kerk in Suid-Afrika, 1956)

from the field of church history have, in the past two decades, produced work on a wide range of topics relating to the intersection of church, welfare and socio-economic shifts.<sup>7</sup> An important theme that emerges – particularly from the work of Robert Vosloo – is the changing conceptualisations of the socio-economic underclass of so-called “poor whites” within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

The term “poor white” is, according to Robert Morell, elusive and socially constructed.<sup>9</sup> A large corpus of literature has developed surrounding this socio-economic issue that became such a significant political issue in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa.<sup>10</sup> Scholars have investigated numerous aspects of the phenomenon from its initial emergence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>11</sup> its intersection with the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism,<sup>12</sup>

- 
- 7 See: Johan van der Merwe, “The local church as a non-governmental organisation in the fight against poverty: A historical overview of Bethulie 1933–1935”, *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1–7; Johan van der Merwe, “Armoede: h Uitdaging aan die Afrikaanse gereformeerde kerke (1994–2019)”, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 3 (2020): 301–324; Willie van der Merwe, “Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat – hoe belangrik is h naam?”, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (2023).
  - 8 Robert Vosloo, “The Dutch Reformed Church and the poor white problem in the wake of the first Carnegie Report (1932): some church-historical and theological observations”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37, no. 2 (September 2011); Robert Vosloo, “From a farm road to a public highway: The Dutch Reformed Church and its changing views regarding the city and urbanisation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1916–1947)”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39, no. 2 (December 2013), n.p.
  - 9 Robert Morell, “The poor whites of Middelburg, Transvaal, 1900–1930: resistance, accommodation and class struggle”, in *White but poor: essays on the history of poor whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940*, ed. Robert Morell (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992), 1–2.
  - 10 Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2003), 315.
  - 11 Colin Bundy, “Vagabond Hollanders and runaway Englishmen: white poverty in the Cape before poor whiteism”, Paper presented at Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, 13–19 April 1984; Hermann Giliomee, “Wretched folk, ready for any mischief: The South African state’s battle to incorporate poor whites and militant workers, 1890–1939”, *Historia* 47, no. 2 (November 2002): 601–653.
  - 12 David Welsh, “Urbanisation and the Solidarity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 1969): 265–276.

aspects of morality,<sup>13</sup> and the impact of the Carnegie Commission’s 1932 Report on the Poor White Problem in South Africa.<sup>14</sup>

In keeping with the commemorative theme of this special edition, this paper traces the historical development of the poor relief and welfare efforts of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa over the past 200 years since its inception in 1824. The aim is not only to identify the broad trends in Church-based welfare, but, more specifically, to provide a historical overview of these shifts in the particular context of the Cape Synod. Using the agenda and minutes of the Cape Synod meetings, this paper asks two questions: Who did the Cape Church see as “our poor”? How did broader socio-economic and socio-political trends shape the Cape Church’s poor relief efforts? To answer these questions five distinct welfare phases (1824–1860s; 1870s–1900s; 1910s–1930s; 1940s–1980s; and 1990s–present) are identified.

### “Gemeentelike Alimentasie”: 1820s–1860s

During the first decades of British rule “new social forces generated in a rapidly industrialising Great Britain engulfed the colony, sweeping aside [...] the entrenched power of the local oligarchy and the established rhythms of the local economy”.<sup>15</sup> In the face of a wave of Anglicisation and modernisation, the Cape Church clung to the systems that it had established for poor relief during the rule of the Dutch East India Company (VOC).

Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the settler population grew, so too did a “sizable ‘poor white’ population” emerge at the Cape.<sup>16</sup>

- 
- 13 Susanne Klausen, “‘Poor Whiteism’, White Maternal Mortality, and the Promotion of Public Health in South Africa: The Department of Public Health’s Endorsement of Contraceptive Services, 1930–1938”, *South African Historical Journal* 45, no. 1 (November 2001): 53–78.
  - 14 Jeremy Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission and the Backlash against Welfare State-Building in South Africa, 1931–1937”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34, no. 3 (September 2008): 515–537.
  - 15 J.B. Peires, “The British and the Cape”, in *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, ed. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 472.
  - 16 Robert C-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

However, the VOC government took no responsibility for the maintenance of the destitute. Instead, a resolution was passed in December 1687 that appointed the deaconry of the Dutch Reformed Cape Town church council as the caretakers of all “needy persons” in the burgeoning city.<sup>17</sup> As the number of congregations grew,<sup>18</sup> the same strategy was applied in the rural districts: the local deaconry was responsible for the maintenance of a poor fund from which alms could be distributed to the poor of the area.

The localised diaconate system of poor relief that had emerged under VOC rule was driven by two contemporary philosophies. First, to 18<sup>th</sup> century Calvinists in the Dutch colonial network, a world without poverty would have been “unthinkable”.<sup>19</sup> In this socio-theological context, the goal of alms distribution by the local deaconries was not to get rid of poverty but simply to alleviate the suffering of the poor; hence poor *relief*. Second, contemporary thinking maintained a clear distinction between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor”. In other words, between those who had fallen into poverty through no fault of their own and those whose hardships were seen as being of their own making.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the purpose of alms distribution was to give support to members of the congregation who had fallen on hard times.

Localised diaconate poor relief systems were well-established by the advent of the Cape Synod in 1824. Article 24 of the 1824 Church Order states that “the Deacons [will] continue to care for the poor of the Congregations”,<sup>21</sup> indicating that the first synod saw no need to adapt existing poor relief systems, even in the face of the rapid socio-economic change that was

---

17 A.J. Böeseken, ed. *Resolusies van die Politieke Raad, Deel III 1681–1701* (Cape Town: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery, 1961), 183.

18 By the end of the 18th century, the Cape boasted seven Dutch Reformed congregations: Cape Town (1665); Stellenbosch (1686); Drakenstein (1691); Tulbagh (1743); Swartland (1745); Graaff-Reinet (1792); and Swellendam (1798).

19 Janny Venema, *Beverwijk: A Dutch Village on the American Frontier, 1652–1664* (Albany, New York: State of New York University Press, 2003), 154.

20 Brian Pullan, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35, no. 3 (Winter 2005), 445.

21 Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika Argief (hereafter NGKSAA), Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1824, ‘Algemeen Reglement voor het Bestuur der Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika’, Kerkorde, 7. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_KO\\_1824.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_KO_1824.pdf).

sweeping the Colony. In rural areas – where most of the population would have been adherents to the Reformed faith – the deaconry remained the main (if not only) source of welfare. Even the poorer, far-flung rural congregations, it seems, were able to adequately provide alms for the indigent.<sup>22</sup> In urban areas – Cape Town in particular – the Dutch Reformed Church faced greater competition both from other religious institutions,<sup>23</sup> and the flood of charitable societies that emerged during the 1820s.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the local deaconry remained at the core of poor relief efforts with minimal change and received very little attention in Synod discussions before the 1870s.

The absence of any drastic change in the Cape Church’s welfare strategies in its first four decades is, perhaps, not surprising. According to Hermann Giliomee, “the status distinctions of the Company period [were] reinforced by the Victorian emphasis on rank and class differences” within Church structures.<sup>25</sup> Even as the number of new congregations rapidly expanded during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it appears that the Synod felt no urgent pressure to alter the system from either within Church structures or from external socio-economic concerns.

### **The internal mission and the “discovery” of poor whites: 1867s–1900s**

The philanthropic *status quo* of the VOC period that had been inherited and adopted by the Cape Church could not be maintained in perpetuity. Over the course of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Cape Colony saw the emergence of a visible economic underclass “denigrated for their idleness,

---

22 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 141–143.

23 The 1804 Church Order of De Mist opened the door for religious freedom at the Cape. This meant that, for the first time, other Christian denominations and other faiths could worship openly and open their own houses of worships. See: David Johnson, “De Mist, Race and Nation”, *Alternation* 5, no. 1 (1998): 85–97; Johan van der Merwe “The Church Order of De Mist and the advent of religious freedom in South Africa”, *IJRF* 7, no.1 (2014): 113–125.

24 Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen and Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), 121–122.

25 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 204.

licentiousness, drunkenness, and other vices”.<sup>26</sup> The growing gulf between the Cape’s “haves” and “have nots” became a social concern in the face of a rising number of rural landless poor whites engaged in unskilled, low-wage labour.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Hermann Giliomee, “[f]or a ruling class to regard poverty as a political problem, it first had to ‘discover’ the poor”.<sup>28</sup> It was within the turbulent socio-economic milieu of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – that saw a series of depressions at the Cape and other economic changes<sup>29</sup> – that ministers of the Cape Synod began to “discover” poverty.

Between 1860 and 1890, the number of landless bywoners and “unskilled people eking out an existence” in Cape towns and villages was growing.<sup>30</sup> By the 1870s, the “first signs of anxiety about poverty and the lack of literacy of a growing part of the white population” emerged in the Cape Colony.<sup>31</sup> Only 43 percent of children in the Cape Colony could read and write, according to the 1875 government census – a figure that was likely significantly lower amongst the children of Afrikaner subsistence farmers.<sup>32</sup> As pointed out by S.E. Duff, “nearly all efforts to solve the ‘problem’ of white poverty in the second half of the nineteenth century involved education in some way”.<sup>33</sup> During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the issue of poverty gradually became “ethnicised” according to Colin Bundy.<sup>34</sup> Poverty was ideologically (re)defined as a social problem based on “assumptions of (white) ethnic solidarity”.<sup>35</sup> From the point of view of colonial commentators, such as politicians, education would enable poor (white) children to engage with the colony’s economic development and,

---

26 Bundy, “Vagabond Hollanders”, 10.

27 Bundy, “Vagabond Hollanders”, 4.

28 Giliomee, “Wretched folk”, 602.

29 Worden, van Heyningen and Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*, 182; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 213.

30 John Richard Cowlin, “Pathways to Understanding White Poverty in South Africa” (MA Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2018), 22.

31 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 211.

32 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 211.

33 S.E. Duff, “Saving the Child to Save the Nation: Poverty, Whiteness and Childhood in the Cape Colony, c.1870–1895”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, no.2 (2011), 230.

34 Bundy, “Vagabond Hollanders”, 4.

35 Bundy, “Vagabond Hollanders”, 4.

thus, avoid the racial “degradation” faced by their parents as poor whites.<sup>36</sup> Education was thus regarded as diminishing the threat posed by poor white children to the “social, moral, and even economic order”.<sup>37</sup> In other words, poor whitism threatened the social order.

At the 1870 sitting of the Cape Synod, the ministers of both Graaff-Reinet and Montague raised concerns about the large number of children who were not receiving adequate education.<sup>38</sup> For these ministers, the threat posed by material poverty was not solely rooted in the potential of racial degradation. For the ministers, the lack of education available to poor, white, rural children also meant that these children could not read the word of God, nor complete their catechisms which enabled them to become members of the church. Thus, the ministers’ unease was also rooted in the moral degradation caused by *spiritual* poverty.

The minister at Simon’s Town alerted the 1876 Synod to the need for a “more focused” approach to the “*inwendige zending*”.<sup>39</sup> The *inwendige zending* was the “internal mission” to “save” poor, rural Dutch-Afrikaners from the moral and spiritual degradation caused by poverty. A decade later, in 1886, Rev. B.P. Marchand called for the Synod to recognise the “large need for Evangelical ministry and education that existed under the poor whites”.<sup>40</sup> Over the course of this 10-year period, the ministers’ concerns surrounding poverty became more racialised; with the focus of their pleas gradually shifting from poor children “*zoowel blanken als gekleurden*” [both white and coloured] to the children of poor white parents.<sup>41</sup>

---

36 Duff, “Saving the Child”, 230.

37 Duff, “Saving the Child”, 230.

38 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1870, Notule, ii, v, 29. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1870.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1870.pdf).

39 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1876, Notule, viii. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1876.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1876.pdf).

40 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1886, Agenda, 17. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1886.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1886.pdf).

41 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1870, Notule, v. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1870.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1870.pdf). It is also telling that this racial shift corresponds with the establishment by the Cape Synod of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Sendingkerk van Suid-Afrika in 1881. This domestic mission “daughter” church of the DRC not only evangelised the coloured population in



It was in this context of rising unease about the potential racial and moral degradation caused by poverty, that the Church's first welfare institutions emerged. Through their work with the “neglected coloured children” of Cape Town's poorer neighbourhoods, two social workers, Elizabeth de Wet and Elizabeth White, came to notice “here and there a white child lost amongst the Mohammedans”.<sup>42</sup> Working with the “philanthropist of the Church”, Rev. A.D. Lückhoff (Snr.),<sup>43</sup> the *Kindersendinghuis* in Cape Town was established in 1883 to “save” these poor white (Afrikaner) children and remove them from non-Christian influences.<sup>44</sup> Over the course of the 1890s, individual ministers would establish children's homes and industrial schools in rural towns, including Graaff-Reinet, Kimberley, and Wellington. These all had a similar goal: to educate poor white children and, in keeping with the colonial concerns regarding impoverished white children pointed out by Duff,<sup>45</sup> draw them back into the (white) colonial economy.

Gradually, calls to expand the scope and reach of the “internal mission” increased. In 1894, the Synod established a commission to manage the needs of “the children of poor whites” and “do everything necessary to provide for these needy [children]”.<sup>46</sup> This was one of the first commissions for poor relief initiated at the synodal level. It marked the slow beginning of a more co-ordinated approach to poor relief; moving gradually away from the deaconry towards the development of Church committees dedicated to addressing different aspects of poverty, and more specifically white poverty.

---

the Cape Colony, but also attended to poor relief. In 1873, a foreign mission wing of the SRC (the Buitelandsche Zending Commissie) was established to tend to the spiritual and material needs of black Africans outside the borders of the Cape Colony. Both mission entities have their own, complex histories and attitudes towards poor relief, unfortunately these fall outside the scope of the current research. See: David Botha: *Eenheidstrewer en Sendingbeleid van die NG kerk sedert 1857 (met spesiale verwysing na die verhouding tot die N G Sendingkerk)* (Stellenbosch University, 2024). [Online]. Available: [https://academic.sun.ac.za/history/news/botha\\_%20dp.pdf](https://academic.sun.ac.za/history/news/botha_%20dp.pdf)

- 42 A. Dreyer, *Historisch Album van de Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika* (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1912), 128.
- 43 W.E. van Wyk, “Die Bediening van Dr A.D. Lückhoff as Areasorgsekretaris van die Ned. Geref. Kerk, met Spesiale verwysing na die Noordweste, 1916–1643”, (MTh Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 1986), 7–9.
- 44 Greyling, *Die Ned. Geref. Kerk en Armesorg*, 160.
- 45 Duff, “Saving the Child”, 230.
- 46 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1894, Agenda, 4. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1894.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1894.pdf).

In the same year, synodal attention turned to poor white adults, particularly the plight of poor white subsistence farmers (known as *bywoners*). A *Commissie over Arbeids-kolonien* [Commission of Labour Colonies] was established to investigate the feasibility of church-sponsored agricultural settlements to rescue “our countrymen [who] have sunk into a state of poverty and misery”.<sup>47</sup> According to the Commission of Labour Colonies’ 1897 report to the Synod, labour colonies would “provide poor white persons who have families to care for, and who cannot obtain a decent work and wages” the opportunity to work themselves out of poverty, and “by influence and labour [...] save both them and their families from the dangers of deterioration”.<sup>48</sup>

Described as “the largest and most important undertaking by the Church in the upliftment of the poor”,<sup>49</sup> the Kakamas Labour colony was established in 1898. The Church – with the aid of the Cape government – acquired land on the Orange River where poor *bywoner* families could farm and, in so doing, uplift themselves. The labour colony was “a second start, providing conditions for [the] economic, spiritual and moral rehabilitation” of poor whites.<sup>50</sup>

Embedded in the Church’s internal mission of charity, potential colonists had to be members of the so-called “deserving poor”. Only married white men who were “physically and mentally capable of working, and who could provide adequate proof of good behaviour and poverty” would be accepted.<sup>51</sup> These men had “partially or completely lost their independence

---

47 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1894, Notule, 35. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1894.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1894.pdf). The Commission consisted of Revs. B. Marchand, W. Murray, C. Leipoldt, D. S. Botha, H. Müller, and P. McLachlan.

48 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1897, Agenda, Bijlage 17. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1897.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1897.pdf).

49 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 145. See: Niel Roos, “Work colonies and South African historiography”, *Social History* 36, no. 1 (February 2011) for a detailed historical overview of the expansion of both church- and government-run labour colonies.

50 Niel Roos, “Work colonies and South African historiography”, *Social History* 36, no. 1 (February 2011), 56.

51 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Agenda, 161. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1915.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1915.pdf).

and strength of character”, but through the Church’s support and hard work they could “be built up again”.<sup>52</sup> These deserving poor were identified in contrast to so-called “*leeglopers*” [idlers] who simply did not want to work.

The colonists’ behaviour was strictly monitored. Celebrating the Christian Sabbath was mandatory and regular church attendance was expected; the consumption or sale of alcohol was strictly banned, as were “drunkenness, fornication, profanity, foul language or slander” and un-Christian entertainments were not allowed.<sup>53</sup> If these rules were not followed the colonist could either be fined or, potentially, expelled from the colony.<sup>54</sup>

The growing calls to address the potential moral and racial degradation of poor whites show that, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Cape Synod had evidently “discovered” the problem of poverty. Individual, philanthropic ministers were among the first to act to “save” indigent members the Church through the establishment of an assemblage of institutions and commissions that could help guide the “deserving” out of poverty. Gradually, poor relief strategies shifted away from the congregation centred approach of the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards synodal institutions as a remedy for the mounting socio-political “poor white problem”.

### A scientific approach: 1910s–1930s

While the Church had “discovered” the problem of white poverty at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that discussions surrounding the “onoplosbare” [unsolvable] problem of the “floundering part of our *volk*” became more fervent in Synodal discussions.<sup>55</sup> The terms “poor white” or “our poor” are used with growing

---

52 A.D. Lückhoff, “Dwangmaatreeëls vir Volwassenes”, in *Report of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem held at Kimberley, 2nd to 5th Oct. 1934*, ed. P. du Toit (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1934), 187.

53 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Agenda, 162–163.

54 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Agenda, 163.

55 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Agenda, 157.

regularity, evidenced by its frequent appearance in the minutes of the Synod. The *Herderlijke Brief* of the 1909 sitting, for example, places clear emphasis on the importance of solving the question of the poor whites because “[h]et zijn *onze armen*” [they are *our* poor].<sup>56</sup>

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Church-supported poor relief institutions and committees – including children’s homes, industrial schools, old age homes, and labour colonies – had grown exponentially.<sup>57</sup> With the acceleration of white poverty in the years that followed the South African War (1899–1902),<sup>58</sup> the need to organise the Church’s haphazard welfare schemes more thoroughly became apparent. The 1915 Synod appointed a commission to which would be

entrusted the better care of the interests of our deprived fellow believers, adults as well as children, outside as well as inside the areas of established congregations, with the right to take all measures for the proper organisation, expansion and execution of their activities [...].<sup>59</sup>

The *Inwendige Zending Kommissie* (Internal Mission Commission) – rechristened the *Algemene Armesorg Kommissie* (General Poor Relief Commission, AAK) in 1919<sup>60</sup> – brought the Cape Church’s multiple, uncoordinated poor relief efforts under one umbrella to find solutions to the “onoplosbare” [unsolvable] poor white problem.<sup>61</sup>

---

56 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1909, Agenda, 102. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1909.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1909.pdf). Emphasis in original. [het zijn onze armen]

57 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1906, Agenda, Bylage 43. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1906.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1906.pdf).

58 Roos, “Work Colonies”, 59.

59 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Notule, 78. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1915.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1915.pdf)

60 For a detailed discussion of the significance of the name of the Church’s welfare branch, see: Willie van der Merwe, “Diens van barmhartigheid of diakonaat – Hoe belangrik is h naam?”, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no.1 (2023).

61 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1915, Agenda, 157.

The AAK organised a series of conferences to bring the issue of the poor white problem to wider attention. The first of these – the Cradock Conference – was held in November 1916 to discuss the “poor white question”.<sup>62</sup> Five key issues were discussed and defined during the Conference: the concept “Poor White”; the scope of the problem; the causes of the problem; policy or remedies; and principles of social care within the Church.<sup>63</sup> The papers presented at the conference highlight the Synod’s new and more co-ordinated approach to poor relief,<sup>64</sup> one that was focused more on addressing the underlying causes of white poverty, rather than simply alleviating the symptoms.

The Commission’s report to the 1919 Synod boasts that the conference had “strengthened public consciousness [*volksbewussyn*]”.<sup>65</sup> The value of the Cape Synod’s more strategic approach was quickly recognised as both the Free State and Transvaal synods initiated their own poor relief commissions in the same year.<sup>66</sup>

In conjunction with the Cape Synod’s Commissions for Education and for Labour Colonies, the AAK organised a second conference at Stellenbosch in June 1922. Harking back to the issues raised by the ministers of Graaff-Reinet and Montague about the lack of available education for poor children some 50 years earlier,<sup>67</sup> the point of departure for the Education Congress was “[h]ow to save the poor child and make him a useful citizen”.<sup>68</sup> In other words, how to (re)create poor white children as active participants in the economy through education.

---

62 *Het Arme Blanken Vraagstuk: Verslag van Het Kerkelik Kongress gehouden te Cradock op 22 en 23 November 1916* (Cape Town: De Nationale Pers, 1917) [PAM 3866].

63 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 155.

64 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 155.

65 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1919, Agenda, 41. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1919.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1919.pdf).

66 *Opvoedingskongress bijeen geroepen door de Synodale Kommissies voor de Algemene Armezorg, de Opvoeding en de Arbeidskolonies* (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1922) [NGKSAA, PAM 3870].

67 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1870, ii, v.

68 *Opvoedingskongress* (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1922) [NGKSAA, PAM 3870]

The following year, in conjunction with the poor relief commissions of the Transvaal and Free State Synods of the Dutch Reformed Church, a joint congress was held in Bloemfontein.<sup>69</sup> The 1923 congress took a broader view of the “poor white question” than its predecessors. Attendees included representatives of the three Reformed sister churches,<sup>70</sup> women’s organisations like the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging* (ACVV), and government representatives. The papers presented covered a range of topics: the urbanisation of the Afrikaner, competition between white and coloured, the use of (compulsory) labour colonies in combatting unemployment, and spiritual work for poor whites.<sup>71</sup>

These three conferences, in the words of Vosloo, “provide a good window onto the discourse on the poor white problem and the Dutch Reformed Church’s response to it”.<sup>72</sup> The Cape Church and its sister synods within the Union had to adapt: poor relief strategies became increasingly co-ordinated and adopted a more scientific approach. These changes within the Cape Synod and at national level did not occur in a socio-political vacuum. The poor white problem, as observed by Giliomee, became “the most pressing social issue in Afrikaner politics early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>73</sup>

With contemporary estimates placing one fifth of the Afrikaner population in the category of “poor”, politicians were “forced to confront this new and ominous threat to white hegemony”.<sup>74</sup> In the lead-up to the 1924 election,

---

69 *Gesamentlike Kongres oor die Arme Blanke vraagstuk* (Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers, 1923) [NGKSAA, PAM 1338].

70 The Dutch Reformed Church is one of three sister churches within the Reformed tradition in South Africa. Both the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika (colloquially known as the Doppers) (founded in approximately 1842) were founded in the Transvaal Republic in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. See: P.J. Strauss. “Die Naam ’nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk”, *Acta Theologica*, 36, 1 (2016), 213-228; “Oorsig van die Geskiedenis van die NG Kerk”, Gemeentegeschiedenis, accessed 27 May 2024, <https://www.gemeentegeschiedenis.co.za/oorsig-van-die-geskiedenis-van-die-ng-kerk/>.

71 “Gesamentlike Kongres”.

72 Vosloo, “The Dutch Reformed Church and the poor white problem”, 4.

73 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 315.

74 Cowlin, “Pathways to Understanding White Poverty in South Africa”, 23. The threat that poor whites posed to the racial order and white hegemony over South Africa was, of course, not new – as evidenced by the efforts of preventing the racial (and moral) degradation of poor whites undertaken by Cape government and religious ministers in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

both the National and Labour parties had employed the “poor white problem” as part of their campaign platforms.<sup>75</sup> With the election of the Pact Government in 1924,<sup>76</sup> welfare reforms accelerated as programmes were introduced “based on the novel idea that the state had a major responsibility for raising white people out of poverty”.<sup>77</sup> This political shift, as Jeremy Seekings points out, marked the beginning of South Africa’s welfare state,<sup>78</sup> and “wrought an enormous shift in the landscape of welfare provision in South Africa”.<sup>79</sup> The eradication of white poverty across the Union became a central social, economic and political objective. By the early 1930s, state-based responses gradually began to shift the onus of responsibility for providing welfare away from the Church towards the government.<sup>80</sup>

With the support of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Carnegie Corporation of New York investigated the poor white question in South Africa. The Carnegie Commission’s 1932 report reflects the increasingly scientific understanding of poor relief that was emerging within church welfare structures. The five volumes each focus on a different aspect of the poor white problem: economic, psychological, educational, medical, and sociological.

While it is no exaggeration to state that the publication of the Carnegie Report in 1932 galvanised the DRC in its scientific approach towards welfare, the Report also “gave voice to a clear and emphatic backlash against the existing programmatic, state-based responses to poverty among

---

75 Jeremy Seekings, “The Social Question in Pre-apartheid South Africa: Race, Religion and the State” in *One Hundred Years of Social Protection*, ed. Lutz Leisering (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 198.

76 The Pact Government of 1924 to 1929 was a coalition between J.B.M. Hertzog’s National Party and the Labour Party. In the economic turbulence of the 1920s, both parties sought to protect white labour and further economic nationalism. See Giliomee. *The Afrikaners*, 336–340.

77 Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, 518.

78 Jeremy Seekings, “‘not a single white person should be allowed to go under’: Swart gevaar and the origins of South Africa’s welfare state, 1924–1929”, *Journal of African History* 48, no. 3 (2007), 377.

79 Seekings “The Carnegie Commission”, 518.

80 Johan Fourie, “The South African poor White problem in the early twentieth century: Lessons for poverty today”, *Management Decision* 48, no. 8 (2007), 1270.

white South Africans”<sup>81</sup> implemented by the Pact Government’s nascent welfare state. The critique against exclusively state-run welfare policies was arguably most pronounced in the Sociological Report.<sup>82</sup>

Written by Rev J.R. Albertyn (Secretary of the Education Commission of the Cape Church) in collaboration with Rev A.D. Lückhoff (Secretary of the Cape AAK), Rev T.F. Cronje (member of the Transvaal synod’s poor care commission) and M.E. Rothman (Secretary of the ACVV), the Sociological Report criticizes the “extreme spirit of dependence and expectation of the government that exists amongst many of the poor” that had been fostered by state-based welfare schemes.<sup>83</sup> Mention is made that dependency on state welfare had “weakened” the poor Afrikaner’s sense of responsibility for “himself” and his family causing him to lose any desire for honest employment.<sup>84</sup> The Report comes to the conclusion that “[t]he Church lacks the scientific knowledge, the business knowledge, the financial and legislative power that the State has. The latter again needs the love, the sympathy, the humanity of the Church, which are so indispensable in all rehabilitation work”.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the report purports that co-operation between church and state is the only way to properly solve this “unsolvable” problem.

To this end, study committees were convened to make concrete proposals on three different but related fronts: Psychological-educational (D. R.W. Wilcocks), Social-Religious (Rev J.R. Albertyn), and Sociological-economic (Dr H.F. Verwoerd).<sup>86</sup> From 2 to 5 October 1934, the three committees’ 99 resolutions were presented at a national *Volkskongress* in Kimberley,

---

81 Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, 519.

82 Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, 522.

83 J.R. Albertyn & M.E. Rothman, *Die Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika, Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Deel V. Sosiologiese Verslag* (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932), 81.

84 Albertyn & Rothman, *Sosiologiese Verslag*, 85. The Afrikaner is gendered as masculine in the original report reflecting a gendered as well as racialised nuance within the larger poor white problem that deserves further investigation.

85 Albertyn & Rothman, *Sosiologiese Verslag*, 75.

86 The list of heads of the Study Committees in the official conference report says “H.L.”. As H.F. Verwoerd is in photo of organisers a few pages later and presented paper at the conference on the reorganisation of welfare work “H.L.” is likely a typo. (See: *Report of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem*),



organised by the welfare commissions of the regional DRC synods.<sup>87</sup> The resolutions recognised the importance of state-supported welfare. The very first resolution calls for the “institution of a definite State department for Social Welfare as soon as possible”.<sup>88</sup> This resolution was not deemed to represent a shirking of the church’s duty towards the poor. Rather, as Rev D.P. van Heerden took pains to highlight in his opening address,<sup>89</sup> the DRC (in general) and the Cape Church (specifically) had played a “huge” role in helping to “rescue the sinking part of our *volk*”, but he also recognised that the

time has come for all (without distinction) in our beloved country, who want the best for the white population of South Africa to stand together in order to feel together, think together and make a united front, now or never, to be the saving hand to reach out to the sinking part of our countrymen.<sup>90</sup>

The proposed church-state welfare partnership was further cemented during the Church Poor Relief Conference that directly followed the Kimberley conference. Between 6 and 7 October 1934, church delegates heeded the call to act “now or never”.<sup>91</sup> While the *Volkskongress* broadly dealt with the causes of, and potential solutions to, the poor white problem as envisaged by church, state, and social actors, the *Kerklike Armesorg Konferensie* specifically focused on remedying the problem through dedicated Christian social work.<sup>92</sup>

---

87 More specifically, the conference was convened by the *Algemene Armesorg-Kommissies van die Gefedereerde Ned. Geref. Kerke* (General Commission for Poor Relief of the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches). This overarching church poor relief body, established by J.R. Albertyn in 1933, brought the disparate poor relief commissions of the Cape, Orange Free State and Transvaal regional synods under one umbrella.

88 *Report of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem*, 292.

89 Chairman of the Cape AAK.

90 *Report of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem*, 24–25.

91 *Verslag van die Kerklike Armesorg-Konferensie, Kimberley, 6 en 7 Oktober 1934* (Bloemfontein: Nas. Pers. Bpk, 1934), 2.

92 The Church’s emphasis on Christian social work in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century meant that dedicated Christian social workers had to be trained. This, in turn, led to the establishment of training centres, such as the Huguenot College in Wellington. Unfortunately, this crucial element of the Church’s welfare structures – which deserves historical investigation in its own right – falls outside the scope of this study.

Through the various Church conferences organised in the 1920s, a focused, scientific outlook developed to tackle the mounting poor white problem. This came to its zenith after the publication of the Carnegie Report, with the *Volkskongress* and Church Conference in Kimberley in 1934. During the 1930s the disparate poor relief committees of the regional synods were also united under one federated council. At the same time an expanded state-welfare system was developing; providing aid to the elderly, children, single mothers and the disabled.<sup>93</sup> In this changing milieu, the Church's traditional position as inalienable source of poor relief shifted as it entered a welfare partnership with the State.<sup>94</sup>

### **“Nuwe fase van ons volksbestaan”: 1940s–1980s**

By the 1940s, the South African economy was rapidly expanding. The growth of state welfare ensured a level of general prosperity for white South Africans, and the huge demand for labour during World War II had largely solved the “unsolvable” poor white problem.<sup>95</sup> However, the rapid industrialisation of the South African economy (particularly in the Transvaal) posed a new threat to the moral stability of the volk.<sup>96</sup> Between 1920 and 1945 the number of Afrikaners living in urban areas quadrupled.<sup>97</sup> The rapid urbanisation of the Afrikaner became the Church's *cause du jour* for poor relief during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Concerns within the DRC about the Afrikaner's rural exodus had already been raised decades earlier. The influx of poor whites into the cities was discussed during the 1916 Cradock conference as well as the 1923

---

93 Jeremy Seekings, “The Social Question”, 204; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 315.

94 Willie van der Merwe, “The Dutch Reformed Church and social welfare in post-apartheid South Africa” in *Welfare, Religion and Gender in Post-apartheid South Africa: Constructing a South-North Dialogue*, ed. Ignatius Swart et al. (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2012), 148–149.

95 Welsh, “Urbanisation and the Solidarity”, 266; Giliomee, “Wretched folk”, 652; Jeremy Seekings, “The National Party and the Ideology of Welfare in South Africa under Apartheid”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46, no. 4 (November 2020), 1146.

96 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 324.

97 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 202. Growing from 100 000 in 1920 to 400 000 in 1945.

Bloemfontein congress.<sup>98</sup> The Carnegie report described the flight from the *platteland* as “a serious indication of social and economic evils in the South African farming and farming-life”.<sup>99</sup> Rural conditions had to be improved to lure Afrikaners “back to the land” where they “ideologically” belonged. Cities, in the folklore of the *volk*, says David Welsh, were “evil places [...] the seats of 'English-Jewish' capitalism [...] bent on ploughing the Afrikaner under, and as hotbeds of vice and crime”.<sup>100</sup> However, by the 1940s it had become clear that it was no longer possible to turn back the tide of Afrikaner urbanisation.<sup>101</sup> Instead the church needed to adapt to this “new phase of our national existence [*volksbestaan*]”.<sup>102</sup>

This new *volksbestaan* was perhaps most keenly felt in the Transvaal as this region had undergone a much more drastic process of industrialisation than the Cape Province.<sup>103</sup> In his 1942 pamphlet “*Die Boerekerk word Stadskerk*”, Ds J.R. Albertyn, Secretary of the Transvaal Synod’s poor relief commission, highlighted the “serious implications” of urban migration for the Afrikaner; calling for a commission into the “religious conditions in the nine cities of the Union of South Africa”.<sup>104</sup> According to Vosloo, the commission report published in 1947 highlights the socio-economic opportunities that the city offers, but counters this positivity by “reference to negative influences, such as materialism, secularisation, the disruption of family life and class differences”.<sup>105</sup>

This does not, however, mean that the AAK of the Cape Church ignored the threat of urbanisation. In 1944, the AAK established *Christelike*

---

98 “Het Arme Blanken Vraagstuk”, 69; “Gesamentlike Kongres oor die Arme Blanke vraagstuk”, 6–11.

99 Albertyn & Rothman, *Sosiologiese Verslag*, xxii.

100 Welsh “Urbanisation and Solidarity”, 265.

101 Edward-John Bottomley, *Poor White* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 67.

102 “Volkskongres te Johannesburg 1–4 Julie 1947 Referate en Besluite”, p. i. [NGKSAA, PAM 5316]

103 Wayne Dirk, “The Western Cape as a Place on the Margin: Post-War Industrialisation and the Spatial Politics of Regional Economic Decline, 1930–1950”, *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* 25, no. 1 (1998), 209.

104 J.R. Albertyn, *Die Boerekerk word Stadskerk* (Cape Town: SA Bybelvereniging, 1942), 36. [NGKSAA, PAM 2452]

105 Vosloo, “From a farm road to a public highway”, n.p.

*Maatskaplike Rade* (Christian Social Work Councils, CMR).<sup>106</sup> The goal of the CMR was to efficiently combat the supposed social ills festering in the cities, in conjunction with the Church's growing focus on social work that had emerged during the 1934 Kimberley conferences. Much of the CMR's focus was on the preservation of the urban Afrikaner family,<sup>107</sup> in the face of "alcoholism, fornication, crime, gambling, family dissolution, and child neglect".<sup>108</sup> While Botha argues that this focus was needed after the devastating effects of the two world wars on social life,<sup>109</sup> caring for the family unit was also crucial in the context of the city. According to Welsh, the individualistic nature of the city had "greatly affected the traditional Afrikaner family structure, which was hierarchic and patriarchal in character".<sup>110</sup> These fears are further highlighted in the 1949 AAK report to the Synod noting the dangers of the city "especially in the spiritual and moral sphere, and many come to a soul-killing disillusionment".<sup>111</sup>

The Cape Church had, thus, been "called to a different and more important type of poor relief".<sup>112</sup> The focus of the Church's welfare work was no longer solely focused on material impoverishment, but instead shifted to combatting the causes of "social maladjustment" through (Christian) social work.<sup>113</sup> The 1957 AAK report asks: "It is increasingly realized that social problems are, in their essence, spiritual problems, and who can tackle them better than the Church?"<sup>114</sup> This shift regarding approaches to poor relief

---

106 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 106.

107 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 109.

108 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1949, 115.

109 Botha, *Maatskaplike Sorg*, 203.

110 Welsh, "Urbanisation and Solidarity", 269.

111 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1949, Agenda, 104. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1949.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1949.pdf).

112 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1957, Agenda, 257. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1957.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1957.pdf).

113 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, Notule, 398. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Notule\\_1957.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Notule_1957.pdf). See also Van der Merwe, "Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat", 6–7.

114 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1957, Notule, 399.

and welfare work led the Synod to consider a “more suitable name”<sup>115</sup> for the AAK to better express the “pure motive and purpose of the ecclesiastical vocation and task in respect of the care and salvation of the poor, neglected and needy fellow man”.<sup>116</sup> So, in 1960, the AAK was rebaptised as the *Diens van Barmhartigheid* (Service of Compassion, SKDB) to adequately reflect the broadened scope of their social care.

By the 1960s, white South Africa had entered its “Fabulous Years”.<sup>117</sup> Despite the economic boom, the threats of “materialism, secularisation, the disruption of family life and class differences” that Albertyn had raised in 1947 had not dissipated.<sup>118</sup> Afrikaners were emerging as individuals and becoming increasingly secularised.<sup>119</sup> Class differentiations emerged within the urban *volk*, as J.S. Gericke, Moderator of the Cape Synod, noted with dismay in 1972.<sup>120</sup> Modernising trends led to a re-imagining of the Afrikaner identity.<sup>121</sup> The SKDB had to “make space for active service provision if [they were] to exercise power in the complicated structure of industrialised society”.<sup>122</sup>

By the late 1960s, the “changing world of industrialisation with its urban mass society”<sup>123</sup> presented new understandings of old threats to the moral well-being of the *volk*. Particularly the “human erosion” experienced by city-dwellers: the “mental and personality problems [that] are growing at

---

115 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1961, Agenda, 210. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1961.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1961.pdf).

116 *Die Kerkbode*, 15 Junie 1960, 861.

117 Gilliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 540.

118 “Volkskongress te Johannesburg”, 38.

119 Albert Grundlingh, “‘Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?’ Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s”, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 2–3 (June 2008), 151–152.

120 Cited in Grundlingh “Cornucopia and Change”, 148–149.

121 Grundlingh, “Cornucopia and Change”, 158.

122 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969, Agenda, 281. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1969.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1969.pdf).

123 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969, Agenda, 282.

an increasing rate in our time”.<sup>124</sup> These problems were particularly acute in the dissolution of the traditional Afrikaner family unit.<sup>125</sup> Divorce rates increased,<sup>126</sup> and the youth had become “untethered from the old traditions and anchors”.<sup>127</sup> At the centre of this moral decay stood alcoholism and – increasingly by the 1980s – drug use.<sup>128</sup>

## Poverty in the new South Africa: 1990s–present

As the country’s understanding of the “New South Africa” developed in the 1990s, so too did the Church’s outlook towards welfare shift. In July 1993, a new mission for the SKDB was formulated “to help in the attitude of Christ and according to the command to his Church, our fellow man and communities in need”.<sup>129</sup>

Post-1994, the church began a process of re-evaluating its role in the new South African context.<sup>130</sup> As Willie van der Merwe points out, under apartheid:

[a] ... sharp distinction was made between ministry to, and caring for, members of the church in need, mainly the white Afrikaner community and caring for, and ministry to, the other peoples of the country[...], who were mainly black.<sup>131</sup>

---

124 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969, Agenda, 283.

125 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969, Agenda, 283; Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1975, Agenda, 393. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1975s.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1975s.pdf).

126 Grundlingh, “Cornucopia and Change”, 152.

127 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969, Agenda, 283.

128 NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1961 Agenda, 431; Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1969; Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa 1987, Agenda, 150. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1987.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1987.pdf).

129 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 12. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1995.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1995.pdf).

130 Van der Merwe, “Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat”, 4.

131 Van der Merwe, “The Dutch Reformed Church and social welfare in post-apartheid South Africa”, 153.

In other words, social welfare and mission work have always been embedded in the DRC, but a distinction was made between welfare work and mission work based on race.<sup>132</sup> The post-apartheid church, in its attempts to “for once and always” throw the albatross of apartheid from its neck,<sup>133</sup> sought a new paradigm for its social welfare work. This not only led to a redefinition of “missionary work” but also to a more holistic approach towards its welfare work.<sup>134</sup>

In this new, inclusive attitude towards its role as welfare provider, the problem of material poverty re-emerged as “one of the biggest issues in the country and, because of its complex nature, also one of the most difficult to deal with”.<sup>135</sup> This is not to say that any concern for the spiritual wellbeing of those in need disappeared, rather that there was a renewed focus on the significant impact that poverty had on the lives of South Africans; not only the (predominantly white Afrikaans) members of the DRC. Other issues that negatively impacted the lives of all South Africans also garnered increased attention, such as the AIDS epidemic.<sup>136</sup>

Post-apartheid change affected not only the objectives of social welfare activities, but also the management of the SKDB’s service programs. As early as 1995 – as part of strategic planning for the future – the SKDB noted that closer co-operation with the state would be “indispensable”, particularly as part of its goal to “remain part of the transformation process

---

132 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (founded in 1881 as a separate church for coloured people) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (formed in 1951 for blacks) ministered to and provided for the material needs of people of colour – separate from the white Dutch Reformed Church.

133 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 4. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1997.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1997.pdf).

134 Van der Merwe, “Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat”, 4. This shift in thinking was predicated on a broader theological shift within the larger DRC, particularly in terms of reflections on ecclesiology. This has previously been discussed by Willie van der Merwe. See: Van der Merwe, “The Dutch Reformed Church and social welfare in post-apartheid South Africa” and Van der Merwe, “Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat”.

135 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 14.

136 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 15; Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1999, Agenda, 20. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1999.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1999.pdf); Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2003, Agenda, 6. [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_2003.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_2003.pdf).

of social service delivery in the broad societal context”.<sup>137</sup> Thus, the SKDB began to work more closely with a variety of state institutions and became involved in programmes for the reconstruction and development of South Africa.<sup>138</sup>

By 2003, due to the major shifts taking place in South African society, the Church could no longer carry out its service of compassion in isolation but would have to “do so together with other churches and other role players in society at large”.<sup>139</sup> It would be more effective in general, as well as cost-effective to carry out social welfare programmes with other churches. The organisation of the social work programmes of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) were merged.<sup>140</sup> In April 2003 BADISA was constituted as a joint social work organisation for the Cape Synod and its former “daughter” mission church.<sup>141</sup>

In March 2005, BADISA – now a task team under the SKDB – held a three-day conference in Kraaifontein to identify the challenges that the two churches needed to fight to overcome poverty.<sup>142</sup> A statement in the *Kerkbode* by Willie van der Merwe, head of BADISA, reflects the Church’s prevailing attitude toward poverty that had emerged since the 1990s:

Poverty is a complete denial of people’s human dignity by those with economic and political power. Poverty is not nameless or faceless. It is, first of all, about people who are created in the image of God and are in a condition of deep need.<sup>143</sup>

---

137 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 13.

138 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1999, Agenda, 17.

139 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, 4.

140 URCSA was formed in 1994 as a union between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. See: “History”, URCSA Network, accessed 27 May 2024. [Online]. Available: [Online]. Available: <https://urcsa.net/history/>.

141 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2003, Agenda, 6. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_2003.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_2003.pdf). The acronym takes the first two letters of the words Barmhartigheid Diens Saam.

142 Die Kerkbode, 25 March 2005, 1.

143 Die Kerkbode, 25 March 2005, 1.



While the issue of material poverty had re-emerged in the 1990s, the SKDB was careful not to forget that their focus was on alleviating the suffering of those living in poverty, not on poverty as a phenomenon.<sup>144</sup> Poverty alleviation would be addressed by focusing on emergency aid; empowerment and justice, according to the 2007 synodal report.<sup>145</sup> With this approach also came a renewed focus in synodal discussions on returning the focus of poor relief efforts to the community.<sup>146</sup> According to the 2023 Western Cape synod (the most recent at time of writing), it is the task of the SKDB, in conjunction with their URCSA counterparts, to “advise the synod, presbyteries and congregations regarding policy and practical execution of the diaconate”.<sup>147</sup> In other words, the 21st century has seen a “new paradigm that harks back to the way the early church dealt with poverty”;<sup>148</sup> the care of those in need as part of the daily activities of the congregation.

## Conclusion

From its earliest inception in South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch Reformed Church played a key socio-economic role as a charitable institution. Each congregation’s diaconate poor fund was the primary source of poor relief for the local populace until well into the nineteenth century. By the establishment of the Cape Synod in 1824, these diaconate funds were well-established and continued, with very little change, as the dominant model for the Dutch Reformed Church’s poor relief efforts until the 1880s.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, calls for an “internal mission” amongst poor, rural Afrikaners became ever more prevalent in the synodal minutes as the ministers of the Cape Church began to “discover” poverty. The

---

144 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2007, Agenda, 31. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_2007.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_2007.pdf).

145 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2007, 31. 1

146 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2011, Agenda, 24. [Online]. Available: [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_2011.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_2011.pdf).

147 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 2023, Agenda, 98. [Online]. Available: [https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_2023.pdf](https://kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_2023.pdf).

148 Van der Merwe, “Armoede”, 305.

threat of poverty, in the eyes of the ministers, caused both racial and moral degradation. It was during this second phase that the first church-run charitable institutions were founded by individual philanthropic ministers to combat the growing “poor white problem”.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the poor white problem had grown into a significant socio-political question.<sup>149</sup> In this political and economic milieu, the Cape Church’s poor relief efforts took on a more structured approach, particularly after the 1915 establishment of the AAK. The poor relief conferences – run both by the Cape Church, and by its sister synods – highlight the new scientific approach that the DRC had begun to take towards poor relief in this third phase. These reached their apex with the 1934 dual *Volks*- and Church conferences in the wake of the publication of the Carnegie Report.

The problem of poor whites increasingly took a political backseat in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. New socio-political problems emerged that required attention during the fourth poor relief phase. Concerns for the moral degradation of the Afrikaner re-emerged; now caused by the rapid urbanization of the *volk*.

The end of the apartheid regime saw the emergence of a fifth and final phase. Having “for once and always” thrown albatross of apartheid from its neck,<sup>150</sup> the SKDB turned its attention to material poverty as it impacted all South Africans. Poor relief efforts shifted away from only the white (Afrikaner) poor, towards the South African poor. And a movement back to the deaconries and community-based efforts of the early Cape Church.

At the beginning of this article, two questions were posed: who did the Cape Church see as “our poor”; and how did broader socio-economic and socio-political trends shape the Cape Church’s poor relief efforts? In answer, over the course of 200 years, the Cape Church’s definition of “our poor” was not static. It shifted from the needy of the local congregation, to a mounting concern for the moral degradation of the “poor white”, to the urban Afrikaner, and, most recently, to the well-being of all South Africans.

---

149 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 315.

150 NGKSAA, Acta, Sinode van Wes- en Suid-Kaapland 1995, Agenda, 4. [https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK\\_Agenda\\_1997.pdf](https://www.kerkargief.co.za/doks/acta/WK_Agenda_1997.pdf).

These shifts, seen through the five phases of the Church's welfare efforts identified here, were shaped by the same socio-economic and political trends that impacted South African society in general.

## Bibliography

- Gesamentlike Kongres oor die Arme Blanke vraagstuk*. Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers, 1923.
- Opvoedingskongress bijeen geroepen door de Synodale Kommissies voor de Algemene Armezorg, de Opvoeding en de Arbeidskolonies*. Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1922.
- Het Arme Blanken Vraagstuk: Verslag van Het Kerkelik Kongress gehouden te Cradock op 22 en 23 November 1916*. Cape Town: De Nasionale Pers, 1917.
- Report of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem held at Kimberley, 2nd to 5th Oct. 1934*. Edited by P. Du Toit. Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1934.
- Albertyn J.R. and M.E. Rothman 1931. *Die Armblanke-vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika, Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Deel V. Sosiologiese Verslag*. Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia.
- Albertyn J.R. 1942. *Die Boerekerk word Stadskerk*. Cape Town: SA Bybelvereniging.
- Böeseken, A.J. (ed.) 1961. *Resolusies van die Politieke Raad, Deel III 1681–1701*. Cape Town: Nasionale Handeldrukkery.
- Botha, L.L.N. 1956. *Die Maatskaplike Sorg van die N.G. Kerk in Suid-Afrika*. Paarl: Algemene Armesorg Kommissie van die N.G. Kerk in Suid-Afrika.
- Bottomley, Edward-John 2012. *Poor White*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Bundy, Colin. "Vagabond Hollanders and runaway Englishmen: white poverty in the Cape before poor whiteism". Paper presented at Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, 13–19 April 1984.

- Cowlin, John Richard 2018. “Pathways to Understanding White Poverty in South Africa”. MA Thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Dirk, Wayne 1998. “The Western Cape as a Place on the Margin: Post-War Industrialisation and the Spatial Politics of Regional Economic Decline, 1930–1950”. *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 25(1):207–226.
- Dreyer, A. 1912. *Historisch Album van de Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika*. Cape Town: Cape Tomes.
- Duff, S.E. 2011. “Saving the Child to Save the Nation: Poverty, Whiteness and Childhood in the Cape Colony, c.1870–1895”. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37(2):229–245.
- Fourie, Johan 2007. “The South African poor White problem in the early twentieth century: Lessons for poverty today”. *Management Decision*, 48(8):1270–1296.
- Giliomee, Hermann 2002. “‘Wretched folk, ready for any mischief’: The South African state’s battle to incorporate poor whites and militant workers, 1890–1939”. *Historia*, 47(2):601–653.
- Giliomee, Hermann 2003. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Greyling, P.F. 1939. *Die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk en Armesorg*. Cape Town: S.A. Bybel-Vereniging.
- Grundlingh, Albert 2008. “‘Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich? Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s”. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21(2–3):143–165.
- Johnson, David. “De Mist, Race and Nation”. *Alternation*, 5(1):85–97.
- Klausen, Susanne 2001. “‘Poor Whiteism’, White Maternal Mortality, and the Promotion of Public Health in South Africa: The Department of Public Health’s Endorsement of Contraceptive Services, 1930–1938”. *South African Historical Journal*, 45(1):53–78.
- Lindberg, Carter 1977. “‘There Should Be No Beggars among Christians’: Karlstadt, Luther, and the Origins of Protestant Poor Relief”. *Church History*, 46(3):313–334.

- Morell, Robert 1992. "The poor whites of Middelburg, Transvaal, 1900–1930: resistance, accommodation and class struggle". In *White but poor: essays on the history of poor whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940*, edited by Robert Morell. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- NGKSAA, Acta, Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. [Online]. Available: <https://www.kerkargief.co.za/acta/#WK>.
- Peires, J.B 1979. "The British and the Cape". In *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, edited by Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. 472–520.
- Pullan, Brian 2005. "Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe". *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35(3):441–456.
- Roos, Niel 2011. "Work colonies and South African historiography." *Social History*, 36(1):54–76.
- Sales, William 1984. "A Black Scholar Interview: Making South Africa Ungovernable ANC Strategy for the '80s". *The Black Scholar*, 15(6):2–14.
- Schwartzman Kathleen C. and Kristie A. Taylor 1999. "What Caused the Collapse of Apartheid?". *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 27(1):109–139.
- Shell, Robert C-H 1994. *Children of Bondage*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press.
- Seekings, Jeremy 2007. "not a single white person should be allowed to go under': Swart gevaar and the origins of South Africa's welfare state, 1924–1929". *Journal of African History*, 48(3):375–394.
- Seekings, Jeremy 2008. "The Carnegie Commission and the Backlash against Welfare State-Building in South Africa, 1931–1937". *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34(3):515–537.
- Seekings, Jeremy 2020. "The Social Question in Pre-apartheid South Africa: Race, Religion and the State". In *One Hundred Years of Social Protection*, edited by Lutz Leisering. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 191–220.

- Seekings, Jeremy 2020. “The National Party and the Ideology of Welfare in South Africa under Apartheid”. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46(4):1145–1162.
- Stevens, David 1991. “The Social Thinking of the Protestant Churches”. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*, 80(319):259–267.
- Strauss, P.J. 2026 “Die naam ’nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk”. *Acta Theologica*, 36(1):213-228.
- Van der Merwe, Johan 2014. “The Church Order of De Mist and the advent of religious freedom in South Africa”. *IJRF*, 7(1):113–125.
- Van der Merwe, Johan 2014. “The local church as a non-governmental organisation in the fight against poverty: A historical overview of Bethulie 1933–1935”. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 70(1):1–7.
- Van der Merwe, Johan 2020. “Armoede: ’n Uitdaging aan die Afrikaanse gereformeerde kerke (1994–2019)”. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 6(3):301–324.
- Van der Merwe, Willie 2023. “Diens van Barmhartigheid of diakonaat – hoe belangrik is ’n naam?”. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 44(1).
- Van Wyk, W.E. 1986. “Die Bediening van Dr. A.D. Lückhoff as Aresorgsekretaris van die Ned. Geref. Kerk, mer Spesiale verwysing na die Noordweste, 1916–1643”. MTh Thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Venema, Janny 2003. *Beverwijk: A Dutch Village on the American Frontier, 1652–1664*. Albany, New York: State of New York University Press.
- Vosloo, Robert 2011. “The Dutch Reformed Church and the poor white problem in the wake of the first Carnegie Report (1932): some church-historical and theological observations”. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37(2):37–85.
- Vosloo, Robert 2013. “From a farm road to a public highway: The Dutch Reformed Church and its changing views regarding the city and urbanisation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1916–1947)”. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 39(2):19–32.

- Welsh, David. “Urbanisation and the Solidarity of Afrikaner Nationalism”. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 7(2):265–276.
- Worden, Nigel, Elizabeth van Heyningen and Vivian Bickford-Smith 1998. *Cape Town: The Making of a City*. Cape Town: David Philip.