

The Dutch Reformed Church and the poor white problem in the wake of the first Carnegie Report (1932): Some church historical observations

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Abstract

This paper focuses on some of the events leading to the first Carnegie Report and the way the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) responded in its wake to the so-called “poor white problem”. Special attention will be given to a Congress of the People or National Congress (“*Volkskongres*”) that was held in Kimberley in October 1934, and that was immediately followed by a church conference. The article also refers to some earlier conferences that became precursors to the Carnegie report and the subsequent Kimberley conferences. The paper seeks to show how the poor white problem (“*armblanke-vraagstuk*”) was not viewed in isolation from what was perceived as the “native problem” (“*die naturelle-vraagstuk*”) and that these two “problems” should be understood as inextricably interwoven. This paper will draw mostly on archival material (mainly from the Dutch Reformed Archives in Stellenbosch).

Introduction

In 1989 *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge* by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele was published, a book that won public acclaim and evoked much discussion. This book, which had its genesis during a time of great social upheaval, presented the report for the second Carnegie inquiry into poverty and development in Southern Africa. *Uprooting Poverty* drew on a process that had already started in January 1980 and that included the work of a feasibility commission, several years of active research, a large conference at the University of Cape Town in 1984 (attended by some 450 people, with over 300 papers presented), and many other post-conference projects, papers and publications. The authors used this material to provide an overview and analysis of poverty in South Africa. The *Preface* to this book notes that its origins go back more than fifty years to the time of the Great Depression, when “the rulers of South Africa were troubled by the fact that a large

numbers of whites, uprooted from the land during the previous generation of war, drought, pestilence, populations growth, and the capitalisation of agriculture, were pouring into the cities to live, ill-equipped for modern industrial society, in dire poverty” (Wilson & Ramphela 1989:ix). In the context of these challenges posed by white poverty, a group of people from the church and the academy set up, with support from the Carnegie Corporation in New York, the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem in South Africa, resulting in 1932 in the publication of an extensive five-volume report.

In this paper I do not want to discuss the second Carnegie report and its reception (albeit that this report and its reception – also in church circles – deserve continuing academic attention) or provide a comparison between the work of the first and the second Carnegie inquiry. Rather, I want to focus on some of the events leading to the first Carnegie Report and the way the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) responded in its wake to the so-called “poor white problem”. Special attention will be given to a Congress of the People or National Congress (“*Volkskongres*”) that was held in Kimberley in October 1934, and that was immediately followed by a church conference. The article also refers to some earlier conferences that became precursors to the Carnegie report and the subsequent Kimberley conferences.

In *Uprooting Poverty* Wilson and Ramphela rightly observe that although the first Carnegie Commission noted that the problems of black poverty were no less acute than those of white poverty, the focus remained primarily on the whites. As the economy grew with the industrial developments of the Second World War and post-war years, poverty among whites receded dramatically. Although blacks too were drawn into the economy in increasing numbers, black poverty “remained acute, although largely unexamined” (1989:x). It is indeed the case that the first Carnegie report and the conferences and projects preceding and following it had an exclusive focus on white poverty; however, even a cursory glance at the material from this period also reveals that the poor white problem (“*armblanke-vraagstuk*”) was not viewed in isolation from what was perceived as the “native problem” (“*die naturelle-vraagstuk*”) and that these two “problems” should be understood as inextricably interwoven.

The “poor white problem” and the response of the DRC before the Carnegie Report

The significance of the “poor white problem” is often highlighted in Afrikaner political historiography. As Herman Giliomee observes in his book *The Afrikaners: Biography of a*

People: “The so-called poor white problem became the most pressing social issue in Afrikaner politics early in the 20th century and retained that status until the early 1940s, when the search for a new approach to the racial problem replaced it” (Giliomee 2003:315).

In the literature on the poor white problem, and the church’s response, attention is further drawn to the way in which the discovery of diamonds and gold created a new complex and competitive economic situation that also disrupted Afrikaner society.¹ How did the Dutch Reformed Church respond to this new reality? In Dutch Reformed Church historiography it is often noted that from the 1880s onwards the Dutch Reformed Church increasingly extended its synodical work regarding the care of the poor (“*armesorg*”) through the founding of several church institutions, such as agricultural settlements for poor families, houses for orphaned and poor children, as well as other institutions for people with special needs (cf. Hanekom 1952:274; Van der Watt 1987:287; Lindeque 1985:56; Botha 1957: 141, 142). Given the new industrial situation in South Africa after the discovery of diamonds and gold, and the growing migration of people from the rural areas to the cities, a growing concern for the poor became noticeable. A series of eight articles, for instance, were published by Rev. BPJ Marchand in 1893 in *De Volksbode* on “*Onze armen, wat kan er voor hen gedaan worden?*” [“Our poor, what can be done for them?”] (cf. Niewoudt in De Klerk 1990:87). Following a conversation with the Cape Minister of Agriculture John X Merriman, Rev. Andrew Murray (then the moderator of the synod) took the lead in convening a church conference at Stellenbosch in 1893 on “*De Arme Blanken*” (“The Poor Whites”) (cf. Van der Watt 1980:91, 92). The focus of this conference was mainly on the need for better education and the establishment of working communities to provide employment. The poor white problem increasingly became part of the national agenda as well, and after the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) the deteriorating situation became, as could be expected, even more of a reason for concern and action.

After the first decade of the 20th century the church’s response to white poverty became more deliberate and organised in the wake of growing urbanisation. In 1915 the Cape Synod

¹ Niewoudt puts it as follows: “the once uncomplicated Afrikaner society [*“boeresamelewing”*] suddenly had to house cosmopolitan communities with a variety of norms and cultures ... A complicated economic world unfolded with severe competition for the wealth of the land. But the Afrikaner found himself in a traumatic, unenviable situation: his origin from an uncomplicated, isolated rural farmer’s existence [*“boeregemeenskap”*] with its limited educational opportunities placed him in a highly unequal struggle” (Niewoudt in De Klerk 1990:85, my translation). It is debatable how uncomplicated the isolated existence of the Afrikaner was in the rural areas; nevertheless, the new situation could indeed be described as traumatic and had a huge impact on Afrikaner identity, as is seen in the traces of the consciousness of the poor white problem in Afrikaner historiography, political discourse and literature.

called into being a synodical commission for “*inwendige Zending*” (“Internal Mission”) (which in 1919 became “*Die Algemene Armesorg-kommissie*”) and in 1916 Rev. AD Luckhoff was appointed as the organising secretary. The church’s more organised response to white poverty is also reflected in several important conferences that were held on the “poor white problem” prior to the 1934 Congress. These conferences provide a good window onto the discourse on the poor white problem and the Dutch Reformed Church’s response to it.

The first important conference took place in Cradock on 22 and 23 December 1916 and was organised by the Cape church; its theme was “*Die landelike nood en trek na die stede*” (“The needs of the rural areas and the trek to the cities”). Among the 225 delegates were also important government officials, professors from the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch, the editor of *Die Burger* (Dr. DF Malan), representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church in Transvaal, the Free State and Natal, as well as from the other Afrikaner Reformed churches. At the conference the term “poor whites” was defined as those whites who are poor in material possessions and personal development. Reference is also made to the fact that the “poor whites” come from strong European descent, implying that the condition of white poverty is unnatural. Dr. DF Malan put it this way in his presentation: “The poor whiteism of the Afrikaner ... does not derive from the land, because others live on it and become rich ... It is even less in our blood, because we are children of the resilient and, on the economic terrain, the most enterprising and prosperous peoples of Europe” (Botha 1957:158, my translation). The conference also devoted attention to the scope and the reasons for the poor white problem, as well as to possible remedies for the situation. The conference closed with a paper by Rev. HP van der Merwe on the church as a moral factor in uplifting the poor (“*die kerk as sedelike faktor in die opheffing van die arme*”). In his dissertation on the social work of the Dutch Reformed Church, published in 1957, LLN Botha noted how one is immediately struck by the thoroughness, scientific character and clear insights shining through the papers presented at the conference (Botha 1957:155). This remark is quite significant, since it indeed seems to be the case that what was viewed as a more scientific approach would become more and more prevalent in addressing the poor white problem. The Carnegie report represents a high point in this development. It is important to note that this more scientific approach did not entail the type of critical hermeneutics that could challenge an unhealthy coupling of the church alliance with the *volk* and the growing Afrikaner nationalism.

The Cradock conference became a precursor to similar conferences. From 15-18 June 1922 a conference was held in Stellenbosch that became known as the Education conference

(“*Opvoedingskongres*”). The conference was attended by 100 delegates, led by Rev. D Wilcocks, who was also the chair of the Synodical Education Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church. The main theme is already announced on the title page of the conference proceedings: “How to save a poor child and make him [sic!] a useful citizen”

(“*Hoofgedachte: Hoe het arm kind te redden en van hem een nuttig burger te maken*”).

Whereas the Stellenbosch conference focused mainly on poverty and education, the conference held the following year in Bloemfontein (4-5 July 1923) had a broader focus. This conference, also known as the “joint conference” (“*die gesamentlike kongres*”), was attended by delegates from the three Afrikaner Reformed Churches, women’s organisations and representatives of the state. In his opening speech the chairperson and moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Free State, Rev. P van Heerden, affirmed the need for action, saying that in order to make the conference a success, one needs to see, feel and act. He emphasised that the poor white person is a brake on the wagon of the people’s prosperity (“*volksvoorspoed*”). They need to be saved for the sake of their families and for the people (*volk*) (*Gesamentlike Kongres* 1923:3). Also present at the conference was General JBM Hertzog, who spoke to the question of what the state could do to address the poor white problem. In the process he made a plea for dropping the term “poor whites”, since the problem was not poor whites but unemployment. Hertzog also mentioned the important issues of the competition between white and coloured (“*kleurling*”) workers, but did not go into more detail. What should be noted as well is that Hertzog concluded his speech by saying that the problem is not merely an issue for whites, but for the whole of South Africa. In providing employment, justice would be done to the Europeans (whites) and the black population (“*die naturel*”). Hertzog acknowledged, however, that it would be difficult to solve the problem in such a way that justice is done to both races (cf. *Gesamentlike Kongres* 1923:5). Another prominent figure who spoke at the conference was Dr. DF Malan. In his speech he focused on the migration of the rural (white) population to the cities and towns, emphasising that this is not a passing phase and that something positive might come out of this Second Trek. After the conference Dr. Malan wrote a series of editorials in *Die Burger* (between 10 and 24 July 1923) that were subsequently published in an influential brochure entitled “*Die Groot Vlug: ‘n Nabetraging van die Arm-blanke-Kongres, 1923, en van die Offisiële Sensusopgawe*” (“The Great Flight: A Reflection on the Poor White Congress, 1923, and on the Official Census”). The impact of the ideas expressed in these editorials and the brochure can hardly be over-estimated, since their influence was felt in many of the

discussions on the so-called poor white problem in the years to come. It is not surprising that the first Carnegie report contains several citations from this pamphlet.

Although it is clear that the dominant view in 1923 was still that urbanisation should be controlled, the view that the church should adapt to the new situation became more and more prevalent. The title of a brochure by JR Albertyn captures this new reality: “Die boerekerk word stadskerk” (“The church of the rural Afrikaner becomes a city church”).² Another aspect that came to the fore during the 1923 conference (for instance, in the speech by HP van der Merwe and in DF Malan’s speech and later reflections) is the way in which the poor white problem was viewed as intertwined with the so-called native problem³, an aspect that would also come to the fore in the Carnegie Report of 1932.

The Carnegie Report (1932)

At the conferences at Cradock, Stellenbosch and Bloemfontein the voices pleading for a more scientific approach to the poor white problem became increasingly stronger. In 1927 the president and the secretary of the Carnegie Corporation of New York visited South Africa. From different sides it was suggested that the Corporation should fund an investigation into the poor white problem in South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Churches also requested such an investigation, to which the Corporation responded positively. In addition to carrying the major share of the costs, the Carnegie Corporation also arranged for two prominent American sociologists, Dr. KL Butterfield and Dr. CW Coulter, to assist with the inquiry (cf. Grosskopf 1932:i). A Management Council (“*Raad van Beheer*”) was established in 1928, which included representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Council for Research Grants and some additional members (Grosskopf 1932:i-ii). The Dutch Reformed Church also paid the salary of Dr JR Albertyn during the time of his active participation in the process as representative of the Dutch Reformed Church and report writer, and the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town, as well as several other government and non-governmental organisations, provided the necessary funding that enabled some of their members to participate in the inquiry as well.

² The conclusion of this booklet testifies to this movement: “God’s Word begins with a garden – Paradise – but ends with a city – the new Jerusalem. In the Old Testament one finds mainly the depiction of the agricultural period, but in the New Testament it is the era of the city. This will also be the direction for our church” (no date:36).

³ At the Cradock and the Bloemfontein conferences the aspect of the competition between white and black workers was discussed, and the notion of industrial segregation was proposed. See Greyling 1939:294; 301.

In 1932 the commission published its findings in an extensive five-volume report. The first volume, by JFW Grosskopf, presented an economic report that focused on poverty in the rural areas and the migration from farms. The second report was a psychological report on the poor white person, with RW Wilcocks as editor. Part 3 of the report was written by EG Malherbe and focused on education and the poor white person, while part 4 presented a medical report by WA Murray on the physical condition of poor whites. The fifth volume of the report was a two-part sociological report. The first part by JR Albertyn looked at the poor white person and society, while the second part by the well-known writer ME Rothmann concentrated on the role of the mothers and daughters in the poor white family. It is not the purpose of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the five volumes of the Carnegie report, although such an analysis from different perspectives (including studies informed by gender and post-colonial theory) would certainly still be worthwhile. I do, however, want to refer briefly to some of the joint findings and recommendations of the report, as well as to a section on the role of the church (in the report by JR Albertyn).

Each volume of the Carnegie report is introduced by the 124 joint findings and recommendation of the commission, with the recommendations printed in italics. These findings and recommendations starts with remarks on the nature and scope of the poor white problem, as well as possible reasons for the problem (which included, according to the report, insufficient adaptation to new economic realities and the inability of the education system to prepare people for these changes). The report further indicates some of the psychological traits of the poor white person, highlighting an isolation mentality in the psyche of the poor white person. Given this diagnosis, the report recommended some steps towards improving education and reducing social isolation. Specific committees should be established and social workers trained to address the problem. The findings and recommendations also comment on the physical situation and diet of poor whites, as well as the role of the mother and daughter within family life. In addition to these aspects, the report comments on the social and moral life of poor whites, concluding with the recommendation that increased state subsidy and control of housing projects in the cities and especially the rural areas be urgently implemented. This is followed by a section on the relationship between the poor whites and black people; it states that the unlimited competition between unschooled black workers and poor whites on the labour market, with the consequent low income that the poor white person then receives, has a demoralising effect on the latter. Regulations that limit this competition should aim to counter this (see Grosskopf 1932:xix), although it is suggested that the

reservation of jobs for the white person should only be a temporary measure during a learning period. The findings and recommendations section of the report also comments on the (white) migration from the rural areas to the cities and the adaptation that is needed in this regard, emphasising in the process the need for help through social work (“*maatskaplike werk*”). Regarding the intelligence of the poor white person, the report states that “the greatest part of the poor white population, as far as intelligence is concerned, falls within the borders of normalcy” (Grosskopf 1932:xxiv, my translation). This was an important finding that was intended to emphasise the potential of better education. This aspect of the report received much publicity.⁴

The Carnegie report further makes the point that sustainable change cannot only be implemented on the level of the improvement of external economic conditions, since psychological change within the poor persons themselves is needed as well. Hence the emphasis on the need for deliberate social upliftment in which the state, voluntary organisations and the church should play a role. The more wealthy citizens need to be educated regarding their responsibilities towards the less fortunate, and the poor in turn should be educated in “thrift, self-sufficiency, temperance, health, a sense of togetherness, and racial pride” (Grosskopf 1932:xxix, my translation). The church’s social preaching can play an important role in this regard and the report refers to the church’s care of the poor in positive terms (see Grosskopf 1932:xxix). But the report also points to certain limitations. Despite all the activities of the church, it is still the case that the church with its natural conservatism and slow processes (given the long time between meetings, etc.) is not totally informed about the extensive and far-reaching recent social changes.⁵

Other important findings of the report included the emphasis on the need for continual systematic and detailed scientific inquiry into the poor white problem in all its facets and its phases of development. The report also recommends the founding of a department of social studies at one of the South African universities, where social workers can be trained, as well

⁴ See, for instance, the article in two instalments by the Afrikaner poet NP van Wyk Louw in *Die Huisgenoot*, 19 May and 15 September 1933. Cf. Giliomee 2003:348.

⁵ In Volume 5 of the report (in the section that focuses on the role of the church) one finds, for instance, the following quotation from the brochure by DF Malan mentioned above, *Die Groot Vlug*: “Can it be that there are not enough people within the church with the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge of the principles of taking care of the poor to organize effectively? ... Can it be that it never occurred to the church to train experts in this regard? Can it be that the church does not have its hands, and cannot keep its hands, on the serious and rapidly changing situation because its synods, which are supposed to give direction, meet so seldom that they have actually become a non-entity in the life of the *volk*?” (Albertyn & Rothmann 1932:66, my translation; cf. Malan 1923:10).

as the establishment of a state department for “social welfare” (“*maatskaplike welvaart*”) (Grosskopf 1932:xxxii, xxxiii).

The Dutch Reformed Church’s response to the Carnegie Report

After the Carnegie report was published in 1932, the DRC appointed three study commissions to look carefully at the report and its finding with a national congress (“*volkskongres*”) on the issue in mind (cf. Botha 1957:191). As heads of these commissions were appointed RW Wilcocks, JR Albertyn and HF (some sources say HL) Verwoerd. At a large meeting convened in Cape Town in January 1934 (attended by about 70 men and women) about 40 smaller sub-commissions were appointed to study aspects of the report. The proposals from these sub-commissions were then sent back to the three main study commissions, who evaluated them and consolidated the suggestions into 99 recommendations (see Du Toit 1934:3). Some proposals were also received from the public (cf. Botha 1957:192). The stage was now set for the national congress, organised by the “*Armesorghaad*” (“The Poor Relief Council”) of the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa, to be held in Kimberley from 2-5 October 1934. The executive organising committee consisted of Rev. JR Albertyn (chair), Rev. AD Luckhoff (Cape), Rev. PJ Pienaar (Free State), Rev. P du Toit (Transvaal), with as co-organisers the three heads of the study commissions (Dr. Wilcocks, Dr. Albertyn and Dr. Verwoerd). The built-up to the conference, and the conference itself, received much attention in the media, with editorials making the plea that the church and government should take hands in joint action to address the poor white problem. *Die Vaderland* even published a full-length sermon by Rev. P. du Toit.

After the conference a 314-page report on the proceedings was published that opens an important window onto the debates at the conference and the prevalent mood at the time. It is worthwhile quoting Rev. Albertyn’s remark in his introduction to the report: “It is well to remember that no magic charm exists by which the evil can be exorcised. Poverty and its consequences – like sickness – we will always have with us. For neither is there an unfailling panacea. But even as the united medical profession is continually evolving new and more efficient methods of fighting disease and death, so also must Christian philanthropy constantly and patiently devise ever better means of alleviating social distress. What may well be expected of this conference is that all the great social institutions of the country: the

state, education, the Churches, other philanthropic bodies, indeed that all citizens, each in his own sphere of labour, but acting in co-ordination with the rest, will in future present a united front to the common enemies of pauperism, misery and degradation” (Du Toit 1934: 5). If one reads through the report, which includes speeches delivered at the conference, the emphasis on the urgency of the matter and the need for decisive action is clearly present. This is reflected in the *Preface* to the report written by the chair at the conference, Dr William Nicol, who states that inquiry (by which he refers to the Carnegie Commission report and the decisions taken at the “*Volkskongres*”) should be followed by action: “It is clear that inquiry is useless and our decisions vain if they are not followed now by forceful action ... Nobody can be indifferent regarding this call to the people” (Du Toit 1934, *Preface*, my translation). The dedication page of the report reads: “Dedicated to you, kind reader, if you assist”.

After Rev. PGJ Meiring opened the conference with a prayer, Rev. Nicol welcomed the delegates and called attention to the urgency of the situation. Whereas the statistic that indicated poor whites numbered around 80 000 people shocked the audience at the 1916 Cradock congress, the recent figure of 250 000 might have suggested that no end was in sight. Nicol made a strong appeal to turn the situation around – a situation, he stated, that affects everybody and that is everybody’s business, adding that it is no wonder that people from all walks of life showed an interest in the congress. It is quite telling that Rev. Nicol remarks in welcoming address that the church would like to look beyond its own people (*volk*), since the Christian faith is in its essence unselfish and seeks to extend a hand beyond its own family and *volk*. He continues: “With us in South Africa this is the case to an extraordinary degree. Our great calling is after all to the native races? But today we are actually forced to limit our attention to the needs of our own people. It will in any case be impossible to reach out a helping hand to others if we are sinking ourselves” (Du Toit 1934:12, my translation). Nicol expressed the view that it would have been difficult at that stage to find a solution for the native problem before the poor white problem had been address sufficiently. He suggested four points as a framework for the deliberations at the conference. The first concerns the need for a great awakening among our people regarding the poor white problem. Everybody (parents, state, church) must work together. The soul of the people should be gripped the idea: “We must save our people” (“*Ons moet ons mense red*”) (Du Toit 1934: 13). The second point affirms the need for intensive and continuous study of the problem, involving in the process the best brains in the country. A third point

relates to the need for the large-scale training of social workers, with universities and the church playing an important role. And, fourthly, since funds were sorely needed, a new spirit of sacrificial charity (“*offervaardigheid*”) should take hold of the *volk*.

The report of the conference testifies to the fact that these points indeed formed the framework for the discourse, as they are reflected in the various speeches and resolutions taken at the conference. It is beyond the scope of this article to comment on all the speeches addressed to the congress (included speeches by the likes of HF Verwoerd and DF Malan as well as Dutch Reformed pastors such as Rev. DP Van Huyssteen, Rev. AD Luckhoff and Rev. P du Toit), but one can note that the various speeches at the conference, as well as the resolutions taken for the most part reflected the framework set out by Rev. Nicol in his words of welcome. The conference report also reflected the view that the poor white problem is closely intertwined with the so-called native problem. Rev. DP van Huyssteen puts it as follows in his opening address: “The poor white problem and the native problem stand before us and begs for a solution and relief. Nobody can look at these two giant mountains without feeling a chill running down their spine” (Du Toit 1934:26, my translation).

The “*Volkskongres*” approved 109 far-reaching resolutions. These resolutions are introduced, echoing Van Huyssteen’s speech, by the “deep realization that the workmen labour in vain unless the Lord builds the house” (Du Toit 1934:292).⁶ The report concluded with a few general recommendations that included the instruction to the Continuation Committee (“*Voortsettingskomitee*”) to bring the resolutions more prominently before the people, the plea to citizens for financial contributions, as well as a reference to the supreme influence of religion as elevating factor in life (cf. Du Toit 1934:316-317).

The “*Volkskongres*” was followed immediately by a church conference, also in Kimberley (6-7 October 1934). It has been argued that this conference represents the first attempt to prioritise and re-organise the church’s principles regarding its care of the poor (“*armesorg*”)

⁶ The rubrics under which the report divides the resolutions already give one a sense of the issues addressed at the conference: the reorganisation of welfare work, housing, health services in rural areas, recreation and amusement, the subsidising of social work, indoor relief (“*binnemuurse liefdadigheid*”), care for the aged, child welfare and juvenile delinquency, measures for increasing male employment in existing urban occupations, the creation of greater opportunities for work, employment and care of female employees, the provision of temporary employment, temporary care of the unemployed by means of unemployment and health insurances, increase of employment in rural areas through the general improvement of agriculture, special provision of employment in rural areas for the European poor, compulsory measures for adults, church settlement and labour colonies, general measures of a psycho-educational nature, organisation of the school system, enhanced standard of general education, the curriculum, centralisation of schools, backward and retarded children, and inculcation of desirable habits and attitudes. See Du Toit 1934:292-316.

(Botha 1957:216). This church congress had as its theme “*Christelike armesorg en die hulpmiddels daartoe*” (“Christian care of the poor and the means to do so”). According to the Preface to the report on the conference written by Rev. PJ Pienaar, and published by the General Commission for Poor Relief of the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches (“*Algemene Armesorg-Kommissies van die Gefedereerde Ned. Geref. Kerke*”), several thousand copies of the report were distributed to church councils. On the first morning of the conference Rev. PJ van Vuuren spoke on the biblical foundation for the church’s care of the poor; this was followed by Rev. P du Toit’s speech on principles of constructive care of the poor. The rest of the day focused on the role of the church and its societies and institutions, the role of women in Christian care of the poor, and the training of Christian social workers. On Sunday 7 October Rev. Nicol was the preacher at a worship service in the Dutch Reformed Church in Kimberley. The conference concluded the Sunday evening with speeches on the education of more and less fortunate church members.

The “*Volkskongres*” and the church conference that followed it are rightly viewed as important events in the attempt to turn the tide of the poor white problem. The Kimberley conference of 1934 can indeed be seen as a significant historical marker. In his autobiography, significantly entitled *Met Toga en Troffel*, William Nicol remarks that the 1934 conference “will go down in history as the turning point in the treatment of the poor in our country” (Nicol 1958:316, my translation). And MM Niewoudt has commented: “Today it can be said with confidence that the entire welfare system in South Africa can trace its roots to the Poor White Congress of 1934” (Niewoudt in De Klerk 1990:96, my translation).

What was the significance of the Kimberley conference of 1934 as a response to the Carnegie report of 1932 and the cumulative experience of the poor white problem in the previous decades? I want to make five remarks in this regard.

First, in the decades leading up to the Carnegie report pleas for a more scientific approach to the poor white problem became stronger, a move that found specific concretisation in the Carnegie report of 1932. In the DRC’s response to the poor white problem it is clear that they affirmed the value of a more scientific approach. In addition, a more professional approach was propagated that not only put an emphasis on an unscientific process of alimention, but incorporated the expertise of well-trained social workers (cf. Nicol 1958: 316). A closer link between church and university was established in the process. It is therefore not surprising that several of the influential pastors in the Dutch Reformed Church’s work in care of the

poor received honorary doctorates from universities (Dr. AD Luckhoff, Dr. DP van Huyssteen, Dr. JR Albertyn and Dr. P du Toit; cf. Niewoudt in De Klerk 1990:92). One should also note that the industrialisation that contributed to poverty in South Africa, among whites as much as among blacks, is linked to complex processes within modernity, with the responses to the problems also reflecting the influence of the presuppositions of modernity.

Second, the Kimberley conference points to the close co-operation between church and state. A report by H Veen on the Kimberley conference published in *Die Kerkbode* of 24 October 1934, for instance, mentions how the co-operation between church and state has led to a great movement forward (Veen 1934:771).

Third, the Kimberley conferences affirmed the need for urgent action. In the *Preface* to the published report on the church conference, Rev. PJ Pienaar mentioned that the words “now or never” were often heard at the conference. He adds that “it will be fatal if this conference turns out to be a failure. Every attempt must be made to convince *volk*, church and state to add actions to words in order to address the poor white problem with might” (*Alg. Armesorg-Kommissies van die Gefedereerde Ned. Geref. Kerke* 1934:*Preface*, my translation).

Fourth, the Kimberley conference affirmed many of the recommendations of the Carnegie report regarding institutional arrangements to address the poor white problem. The church also made a successful plea for an independent department of national welfare (“*Volkswelsyn*”), which was finally established in 1937. In 1939 a national congress was held in Bloemfontein (cf. Nicol 1958: 316), resulting in the founding of the Rescue Action Society (“*Reddingsdaadbond*”), just months before the outbreak of World War II. Nicol comments: “These two things worked together so that a few years after that conference the term ‘poor white’ virtually disappeared from our vocabulary” (Nicol 1958:317, my translation). Urbanisation, however, remained a problem, as is seen in another national congress held in 1947 on “The urbanisation of the Afrikaner nation” [“*Die verstedeliking van die Afrikanervolk*”]. This conference, which was attended by 700 people, followed an inquiry into the problem of urbanisation that had already started in 1944. This resulted in the report *Kerk en Stad* [*Church and City*] (cf. Albertyn 1947). From this conference also developed the well-known *Kerk en Volk* [*Church and volk*] series consisting of 12 publications.⁷

⁷ The books in this series (published by *N.G. Kerkgewers van Suid Afrika*) is: *Die trouring* (W Nicol); *Die jeug se lekkergoed* (JJ Müller); *Verdwaalde vroomheid* (CR Kotzé), *My aardse paradys* (PJ Viljoen); *Reguit koers gehou* (GBA Gerdener); *Die twee volkspilare* (JR Albertyn), *Aanskou die rots* (P du Toit); *Die kerklike*

Fifth, the church's response to the Carnegie Report showed that many of the church leaders in the Dutch Reformed Church shared the view that the poor white problem is intertwined with what was seen as the native problem – a point that I have already emphasised earlier in this article. It can indeed be argued that the Carnegie report (and its reception) “sanctioned a particular social construction of poverty – as a white, Afrikaner problem which warranted state intervention and positive discrimination for whites against competing blacks. The invisibility and, at times, denial of black poverty went hand in hand with the mobilization of ethnic Afrikaner nationalism around the discourse of racial privilege which was to take fuller expression in the ideology and policies of apartheid” (Christie and Gordon 1992:404).

Conclusion

An article in the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* had as its headline “White poverty rises by more than 150% since 1994” (*Die Burger* Tuesday 21 June 2011). The article refers to a DVD on white poverty made by Cloete Breytenbach (the brother of the South African writer Breyten Breytenbach) and includes comments that recall the discourse on the poor white problem in the earlier decades of the 20th century. This is but one example of the fact that the so-called poor white problem is very much alive as a “site of memory” in Afrikaner collective memory.⁸ This emphasizes, among other things, the need for a responsible historiography (including church and theological historiography) of the poor white problem. In the process one should take note of some critical voices. Sampie Terreblanche, for instance, has noted in his book *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652-2002* that, while the poor white problem is often attributed to colonial exploitation and factors beyond the control of the Afrikaner, the intense class struggle between wealthier farmers and smaller landowners is often not acknowledged in Afrikaner historiography (2002:266).⁹ And any consideration of the poor white problem today should also engage critically with the way in which the poor white problem in the first part of the 20th century became intertwined with the co-called native problem in a way that led to a reductive response to poverty in South Africa.

byekorrf (HS Theron); *'n Stad bo-op 'n berg* (AJV Burger); *Kerk en volk* (TN Hanekom); *Olie op die wonde* (HDA du Toit) and *Die kerk se skatte* (HJ Piek). Cf. Van der Watt 1987:291.

⁸ On the notion of “site of memory”, see, for instance, Nora, P. “Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire*” (1989).

⁹ Terreblanche also writes: “Part of the rising Afrikaner consciousness about the ‘poor white’ Afrikaner upliftment was stimulated by a desire to protect them against impoverished coloureds. Unfortunately, no steps were taken to similarly uplift ‘poor brown’ people who were already exhibiting the syndrome of chronic community poverty” (2002:267).

The challenges remain for churches, including the Dutch Reformed Church, to address poverty in South Africa today in an inclusive and comprehensive manner. In this regard much can still be learned from the strong and weak points that come to the fore as one revisits the (church's) response to the so-called poor white problem in the first decades of the 20th century.

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