



Diagnosing and dismantling South African whiteness: 'white work' in the Dutch Reformed Church



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Dates:

Received: 08 Feb. 2022

Accepted: 31 Mar. 2022

Published: 21 June 2022

How to cite this article

Van der Riet, L.R. & Verwoerd, W., 2022, 'Diagnosing and dismantling South African whiteness: "white work" in the Dutch Reformed Church', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7402. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7402>

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In this article, we reflect on our lived experience as co-facilitators of a promising intragroup anti-racism process within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa. Firstly, we describe how this emergent process, referred to as 'white work', has developed since 2018 to include three focal areas: facilitation and training, research and the development of resources for faith leaders. Secondly, in the interest of localised, embodied diagnostic work, we mention relatively neglected strands of South African whiteness that have arisen through this process of 'white work'. We argue that this DRC 'white work' contributes to a more intersectional approach to dismantling whiteness. Finally, we propose that the dismantling potential of this 'white work' rests on three dimensions – raising consciousness, cultivating capacity and forming community – while stressing some of the challenges and limitations we have encountered in our process thus far.

Contribution: This article contributes to both the diagnosis and dismantling of South African whiteness by presenting a narrative reflection on an emergent process among members of the DRC in South Africa.

Keywords: whiteness; Dutch Reformed Church; white work; race; South Africa.

Introduction

In this article, we reflect on our lived experience as co-facilitators of a promising intragroup anti-racism process within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa.

The DRC is, on the one hand, a highly implicated institution given its well-documented role in the formation and consolidation of legislated apartheid, including its theological justification and the sanctification of 'separate development' (eds. De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005; Elphick & Davenport 1997; ed. Kinghorn 1986). Furthermore, as a (largely) white, Afrikaner 'enclave', the DRC, arguably, continues to epitomise and entrench South African whiteness (Van der Westhuizen 2016; Van Wyngaard 2011). On the other hand, the potential of contributing to the dismantling of South African whiteness through anti-racism work within the DRC remains promising. Empirical research conducted in 2019 among DRC ministers younger than 40 reflects a recognition of the DRC's historical and continuing implication, at least as (individual and institutional) beneficiaries of pre-1994 systemic racial privileging (Van Wyngaard 2020). In addition, despite a decline in numbers, the DRC still maintains a strong institutional capacity, with roughly 1097 congregations across South Africa and 871 244 members, according to statistics from 2018 (Algemene Sinode 2019:409). The legacy of the DRC's role in social development is also far-reaching (Van der Merwe & Swart 2015) and is embedded in its history of mission (Niemandt 2010, 2014; Van der Merwe 2014). Its extensive diaconal reach across South Africa (Algemene Sinode 2019:220–229) signifies its institutional capacity, despite analyses that assess its missional ecclesiology as maintaining power imbalances by displaying a limited proximity between the broader church and the communities it seeks to serve and be involved in (Botha & Forster 2017). This diaconal reach and institutional capacity are particularly relevant given the post-1994 South African context of crumbling local government capacity, widespread disillusionment with central government, and growing inequality, poverty and unemployment (Potgieter 2019).

Both authors were raised in the DRC, and Van der Riet is an ordained DRC minister. Given the DRC's location within South African whiteness and our own positionalities, we reflect in this article on our participation in a growing process aimed at dislodging and 're-forming' the racialised formation of DRC leaders. We have come to understand this process as a contribution to the cultivation of restitutive responsibility for both personal and systemic injustice tied to (South African) whiteness.

Firstly, we describe how this emergent process, referred to as 'white work', has developed since 2018 to include three focal areas: facilitation and training, research and the development of resources for faith leaders. Secondly, in the interest of localised, embodied diagnostic work, we mention relatively neglected strands of South African whiteness that have arisen through this process of white work. We argue that this DRC 'white work' contributes to a more intersectional approach to dismantling whiteness. Finally, we propose that the dismantling potential of this 'white work' rests on three dimensions – raising consciousness, cultivating capacity and forming community – while stressing some of the challenges and limitations we have encountered in our process thus far.

Emerging 'white work'

In 2015, student protests erupted on university campuses across South Africa, now referred to as the Fallist movements. These black-led student protests were not merely about single issues such as the statue of a colonial figure or the financial constraints of students but rather signalled a generational cry advocating for a decolonised, just and fair society. It was the first nationally coordinated attempt by students to resuscitate the national discourse on the state of racialised injustices and to disrupt the status quo of the social reality, after legislated apartheid. These movements served as a profound wake-up call to many white South Africans. Both authors were confronted with black colleagues, such as Tumi Jonas and Theo Mayekiso, expressing their tiredness and frustration that – more than 20 years after so-called liberation – they still have to do the painful, exhausting work of convincing (young and old) white South Africans to wake up to the need for dismantling whiteness.

In the wake of these catalysing events, we crossed paths as researchers at the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at Stellenbosch University (SU). From different generational vantage points, we felt challenged to respond to the racialised, historic injustices.¹ Van der Riet was part of a group of senior theology students and younger clergy who, though formally engaged in the study of reconciliation and justice, were somewhat disillusioned at how churches and, especially, the DRC were (not) responding.²

Conversations with Verwoerd and other colleagues with extensive experience in guiding responses to issues of social justice (Alan Storey and Theresa Edlmann) led to the insight that dismantling whiteness had to begin with personal narratives and a self-reflective observation of one's own formation. In the process, the following four aims were agreed upon. Firstly, 'white work', understood as the deepening of (inherited) consciousness of being white in South Africa,

1. At the time Verwoerd had recently returned to South Africa after 12 years of working as an international dialogue facilitator, mostly regarding the conflict in and about Northern Ireland (Verwoerd 2013). For his participation in the Fallist movement and a memoir of his own dismantling whiteness journey, see Verwoerd (2019).

2. The response by the DRC and of other faith communities to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is another way of understanding the ecclesial landscape in terms of the recent history of racial segregation and conflict in South Africa (eds. Cochrane, De Gruchy & Martin 1999; eds. Thesnaar & Hansen 2020).

as part of a historically sensitive commitment to real reconciliation in and outside the DRC. Secondly, training, including processes, activities and skills that will improve participants' capacities to provide leadership in their congregations regarding (racial) reconciliation. Thirdly, support in the form of the cultivation of relationships among participants given a sense of feeling isolated or alone and unsupported in the work of cross-cultural reconciliation. Fourthly, embodied, contemplative spirituality, as an experiential exposure to spiritual practices with the potential to inspire and sustain (racial) reconciliation.

These objectives guided the first four-day intragroup residential workshop for young white DRC clergy, held in February 2018 and have continued to guide the subsequent growth of DRC white work. The formation of a learning community within the DRC, the *Versoen Leergemeenskap* [Reconciliation Learning Community], has grown to support this impulse of doing 'white work' as a means towards diagnosing and dismantling whiteness in the DRC. This virtual community is further strengthened by institutional support through the formation of two official working groups ('Race and Reconciliation' within the DRC's Western Cape Synod and 'Reconciliation and Identity' within the DRC's General Synod).

The *Versoen Leergemeenskap* has at least three focal areas – facilitation and training, research, and resource development. A brief outline of what this work has entailed provides context for the discussion that follows.

Facilitation and training

The primary activity of 'white work' has been residential workshops that focus on personal storytelling and sharing of narratives of the construction of a white identity, drawing on previous work by Little and Verwoerd (2013). Five of these workshops were held before the COVID-19 pandemic. Three were held for DRC clergy in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (mostly members of the Western Cape Synod; roughly 12 participants each), one for a group of undergraduate theological students (2020; 6 participants) and another for a diverse group of DRC members in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape province (2018; 12 participants). The participants in the first two groups were all DRC ministers younger than 40 years of age, whereas both the third Western Cape group and the Eastern Cape group had multiple generations represented.

In these 'life histories' workshops, each participant had the opportunity to reflect on their personal narratives, paying attention to the people, places and events that formed their experience of being white. Through in-depth, embodied and reflective storytelling exercises, participants were able to hold up mirrors for one another, exposing with deep honesty their emotionally and spiritually discomfiting truths tied to being white. These narratives of socialisation, of 'becoming' white South Africans, included painful memories and often presented accounts of how previous generations, especially parents, formed their racial and social imagination.

Multiple in-person and virtual gatherings were held as follow-up sessions to these initial workshops. As the topic of intergenerational conflict arose in the personal narratives that were shared of racial formation through parents and older colleagues, it became clear that an intergenerational intragroup workshop could address a vital component of 'white work' and present opportunities for addressing continuities of whiteness. In 2018, an intergenerational gathering was held with older DRC colleagues. Other follow-up sessions began to address the challenge of doing 'white work' with family and (older) congregants who come from more conservative backgrounds.

In 2019, an intergroup session was held with black facilitators who shared their perspectives on doing racial reconciliation work with white participants. In 2020, virtual discussions included a discussion on the Black Lives Matter movement and its reception in South Africa. Another focus in follow-up initiatives has been the cultivation of supportive spiritual practices. Over the last two years, three groups (around 10 participants each) from within the virtual *Versoen Leergemeenskap* practised with the 'Welcoming Prayer', drawing on the work of Contemplative Outreach (eds. Begeman et al. 2008).

A Facilitation Learning Community has been established within the *Versoen Leergemeenskap* to develop a strategy for the training of leaders in faith communities who want to facilitate programmes on racial reconciliation and to design such programmes.

Research

At the time of writing, several members of the *Versoen Leergemeenskap* are currently pursuing individual postgraduate research related to mission and racial reconciliation and have formed a Research Learning Community within this larger group. This network hopes to stimulate new research and to build on previous work on racial reconciliation in the South African context. This hopes to impact the theological training of future DRC ministers.

Resource development

Because of stringent COVID-19 pandemic regulations that were implemented in 2021, a 40-week Pilgrimage of Racial Reconciliation that had been conceptualised could no longer take place; an in-depth journey of doing reconciliation work and dismantling whiteness that would combine both facilitated workshops and reading material. Therefore, we developed the content for facilitated virtual gatherings during the seven weeks of Lent. We have used the metaphor of a pilgrimage to describe this journey, naming it '*n Konteksuele Pelgrimstog van Rasversoening* [A Contextual Pilgrimage of Racial Reconciliation]. The material sought to group the contextual realities of whiteness into several themes, categorised largely by geographical and/or personal proximity, to both the theological contours of Lent (e.g. suffering, metanoia, and kenosis) and theological movements

of reconciliation (including, but not limited to, acknowledgement, lament, repentance, forgiveness and restitution). This material drew upon contextual South African engagement with the crucifixion of Christ (Verwoerd 2020). The 80 participants were all white, Afrikaans and from a Reformed background, the majority of whom serve as ordained clergy in the DRC. Individual groups were comprised geographically, as far as possible, and met online once a week for a facilitated discussion.

The *Versoen Leergemeenskap* has also recorded video presentations on the theme of race and reconciliation, which serve to initiate conversation among DRC members. We hope to continue to develop material for Bible studies and liturgies that could invite new theological imagination concerning the contextual, theological and historic realities regarding how whiteness and race function.

A working group has further sought to translate the Welcoming Practice into the context of Reformed spirituality by reworking this material in Afrikaans. A pilot project took place in September 2021.

These three focal areas, including the institutional support in terms of working groups, promise to make this work sustainable.

Although we can attest to the potential of these promising developments that have arisen, the work of dismantling whiteness still faces many theological and contextual manifestations of resistance to any significant change. This is in part because of the following contours of South African whiteness that have surfaced in this process of 'white work' and that we present as a contribution to existing diagnostic efforts.

Towards an intersectional diagnosis of South African whiteness

As explained above, our DRC 'white work' process starts with intrapersonal explorations of each participant's journey of becoming racialised as a white South African. While each person's journey contains unique features, it has been striking to see common themes emerging from the storytelling part of our white work. Despite important generational differences in terms of racialisation, as facilitators we have noted at least the following three continuities.

Childhood encounters with domestic workers

One of the guiding questions we pose to 'white work' participants is: 'What are your earliest childhood memories of encounters with black South Africans?' It is disturbing to note how similar responses have been. The primary early exposure to South Africans of colour for our 'white work' participants was with domestic workers and childminders.

Despite more than 25 years of a democratic, 'non-racial', political system being in place, very little seems to have

changed on the domestic labour front (Cock 1980, 2011). In her analysis of around 200 narratives submitted to the Apartheid Archive Project, Shefer (2012) emphasised that the 'foundational nature of the institution of domestic work' in the 'construction of normative white privilege and authority through the power and control the white child is granted in relation to Black adults', which 'may persist in contemporary South Africa' (p. 7) (emphasis added). The narratives of post-1994 generation participants in DRC 'white work' can be seen as a disturbing, strong confirmation of this underestimated, foundational continuity.

The institution of domestic work, in our personal and 'white work' facilitation experience, does not only continue to function as a highly influential 'training school for white superiority' but also weave a 'fraught tenderness' – an 'enmeshment of care/intimacy and humiliation/denigration' – into racialised relationships (Shefer 2012). In her extensive recent analysis of urban houseworkers in South African literary texts, Ena Jansen basically echoed the complex relational picture painted by Shefer (2012) and conveyed by DRC 'white work' participants. The ironic title for Jansen's book speaks volumes: 'Like family' (2019).

The 'fraught tenderness' of paternalistic 'like family' relations makes this strand of South African whiteness particularly difficult to uproot. Paternalistic (or maternalistic) socialisation contributes to typical self-righteous defensiveness among 'good' white South Africans (Biko 2012). Instead of thoroughly examining the falseness of an inculcated sense of superiority and uprooting ingrained tendencies to control and prescribe, there is a widespread tendency to become indignant when faced with criticisms of racism.

The Dutch Reformed Church's implication in racial formation through mission

The next stage of these participants' (and facilitators') journeys of becoming white South Africans typically included repeated, enthusiastic participation in mission. These narratives described experiences of 'outreach' to communities of colour or more local diaconal activities to (temporarily) alleviate poverty or food insecurity. These engagements with black South Africans further enforced and consolidated the unequal relations of power cultivated in household settings with domestic workers.

Participants acknowledged how these experiences of crossing borders into other communities did not necessarily require the dismantling of whiteness. Moreover, such practices have even contributed to actively maintaining systems of power and moral authority, upholding the privileged position of white communities, all the while reinforcing a sense of faithful discipleship, alleviating white guilt and soothing the wounds of privilege (Botha & Forster 2017; Van Wyngaard 2014). Part of this racial dynamic linked to diaconia and missions stems from the reality of the ongoing, highly racialised nature of socio-economic inequalities in South Africa. Part of the ongoing complexity of engaging issues of

race in the DRC is making sense of how pervasive whiteness functions (Steyn & Foster 2008) and yet how implicit it is in many discourses on themes such as church unity, reconciliation, economic justice and many others. Participants' narratives unveiled their understanding that because of its historical ties to colonialism, apartheid and ethnicity, the DRC arguably remains at the centre of whiteness in the South African context. These clergy confessed that, after 35 years of rejecting overtly racist policy (Kerk en Samelewing 1986), the membership of their congregations remains predominantly white and far from multi-ethnic, multi-racial, anti-racist, equitable, just, restorative, healing, reconciliatory spaces for a racially wounded past and present. Recent research on the developments in the DRC's General Synod concerning race, racism and racial reconciliation from 1986 until 2019 suggests that despite many policy changes, the DRC 'perpetuates the afterlife of apartheid' and that 'it too remains a site of struggle' (Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard 2021).

Militarised white masculinity

Some participants from pre-1994 generations talked about the extensive anti-Communist indoctrination they went through at school and referred briefly to the impact of compulsory military conscription for all white men (Verwoerd 2020). The DRC played a big role for white, Afrikaans-speaking Christians in sanctifying the war against what was perceived as a 'Total Onslaught'. A number of the post-1994 generation participants in DRC 'white work' referred to the conflictual nature of their relationships with their fathers, given a typical unwillingness to talk about or to question what they literally fought for. This intergenerational dynamic included difficult and potentially destructive moral emotions of guilt and shame.

Many families of parents who believed in the DRC's religious rationale for *diensplig* ('duty to serve', the Afrikaans term used for conscription) are faced, however, with more than unhealed psychological damage. At stake is the profound spiritual challenge of recovering from 'moral injury' – a wounding of the soul through involvement in something that (in retrospect) went against one's deepest values (Meagher 2014).

White work, therefore, needs to include an explicit grappling with the gendered and intergenerational impacts of militarised white masculinity, with the 'lingering unspoken pain of white youth who fought for apartheid' (Edlmann 2012, 2015). The DRC 'white work' process highlighted the fact that demilitarising 'white work' will, however, have to take into account the different, culturally specific journeys of change of white South Africans from liberal, English-speaking and those from more conservative, Afrikaner, DRC backgrounds.

Each one of the above themes highlighted by the DRC 'white work' participants requires much more diagnostic refinement. Fruitful further diagnostic work waits to be done with female and queer participants who explained

their understanding of racial marginalisation and discrimination through their own lived experience in a heteronormative, male-dominated institution plagued by patriarchy (see Van der Westhuizen 2017). They highlighted the challenge of accepting collective, 'metaphysical' guilt by virtue of being white (see Swart 2017) while also personally experiencing other forms of systemic injustice. Other participants highlighted the role of class within the DRC by contrasting their ministry in relatively poor, mostly working-class congregations with those growing up in middle-class congregations. Some participants spoke about the specific challenges of racial reconciliation in rural settings, with farmers as influential congregants.

Although these strands of localised whiteness have been identified before, what we believe is unusual and significant in terms of a diagnostic contribution to dismantling South African whiteness is the underlining of the need for an intersectional diagnosis. Furthermore, within such an intersectional approach, the DRC 'white work' brings attention to relatively neglected strands of South African whiteness, namely ongoing religiously motivated paternalism and the afterlife of pre-1994 militarisation. DRC 'white work' confronts us with the potent/toxic entanglement of race, gender, class, (domestic) labour relations, ethnicity, militarisation and religion within a group that also tends to have a strong sense of being a minority.

This rather daunting diagnostic journey helps to raise awareness why South African whiteness – exemplified by the DRC – is still so pervasive and so difficult to dismantle. This part of our 'white work' journey also underlines why consciousness-raising approaches to uprooting whiteness are unlikely to succeed by themselves, and why the interwoven, multidimensional approach that has emerged in our DRC 'white work' holds more promise.

Dimensions of dismantling (South African) whiteness

The true dismantling potential of this multidimensional approach and developing the theory of change is grounded on three fundamental components, namely raising consciousness, forming community and building capacity.

Raising consciousness

While it would be amiss to assume that all the participants entering the 'white work' workshops had been conscientised in the same manner or extent before signing up for this workshop, participants have all shared the same context as faith leaders in the white, Afrikaans DRC. For the group that initiated this work in early 2018, the Fallist movements served as conscientising catalyst and since then the global Black Lives Matter movement has continued to add impetus (Hain & Odendaal 2020).

Van der Riet and his younger DRC colleagues became aware that they did not have adequate consciousness to address the

problem of systemic racism and to be actively anti-racist in their ecclesial contexts, individually and collectively, despite a willingness to be more faithful in their calling as faith leaders in the DRC. There was thus an existing or initial degree of consciousness about their own identity and position as being white, and about the reality of black South Africans, catalysed to some extent by public incidents of racialised protest and conflict.³ These workshops thus draw on two separate, though connected, foundational dimensions of consciousness – firstly, white participants own self-understanding of being white, and secondly, the lived reality of those racialised as black. Both distinguishing between and relating these two aspects of consciousness form an important part of this process.

As an intragroup process, 'white work' has an intentional focus on white participant's self-awareness of whiteness and white identity. The facilitated space of shared listening and storytelling has offered participants the opportunity to practice truth-telling and confession before one another. Participants could welcome the sense of being collectively burdened by the severe injustices of their past and a shared awareness of the deep reconciliation still required to heal the divisions and legacy of their country's past still evident today. It was a joint effort in finding the language to talk about shame, covered-over truths and to voice a sense of relative loss regarding their own humanity that had been restricted by race. Strong emotions such as anger, a sense of betrayal and disappointment surfaced (Botha, Jurgens & Pretorius 2018; 'White work' and engaging the violence of racism 2020).

Other attempts at cultivating anti-racist action by white people also tend to emphasise *consciousness* (Steyn 2012, 2018). This can be related to one of the most prominent attempts of doing 'white work' during the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s that arose from the Black Consciousness Movement (Kleinschmidt 1972). Therefore, while we have been conscious of the *new* dimensions that aspects of intragroup work can bring to racial reconciliation and justice, we continue to engage the fact that a focus on the historical awareness of whiteness and racism in South Africa cannot avoid previous attempts at dismantling whiteness. This work of establishing consciousness, therefore, seeks to build on previous contributions to critical and anti-racist theologies, especially in the South African context (Kritzinger 2008; Van Wyngaard 2016a, 2019).

Therefore, the term *consciousness* is in one respect reminiscent of its use in Black Consciousness, as the invitation to become aware, to learn to see (Beyers 2019; Biko 2012; Mbembe 2008). If Black Consciousness starts with the self-initiated uprooting of a false, disempowering, deeply internalised sense of *inferiority* among those at the receiving end of slavery, colonialism and apartheid (and its afterlife), then 'white

3.A pastoral letter sent to DRC members by the DRC General Synod leadership in 2016 identifies an upsurge in public discourse on racism although its diagnosis of whiteness lacks self-critical perspectives (Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk 2019:141).

consciousness' is the other side of this (imperialist) 'whiteness' coin: the dismantling of a misguided, powerful, dehumanising sense of *superiority* among and by those responsible for systemic racialised oppression. Given the fact that being white in South Africa today has various social and political implications that make this consciousness work different from these past efforts, there remains significant continuity in this task. It is an attempt to mobilise ourselves, as white Christians in South Africa, for our own liberation, in order that the effects of racism on people of colour can be transformed (see Botha et al. 2018; De Gruchy 1991; Kritzinger 2008).

This consciousness not only functions personally, or on an interior level, but also brings awareness and knowledge about how whiteness has been embedded systemically and institutionally, especially in theological doctrine and Christian spiritual formation through implicit hermeneutical lenses. This work of raising consciousness presents a challenge to existing forms of cross-cultural, intergroup Christian ministry and mission. This is particularly acute in addressing issues such as racialised inequality and poverty through social welfare, without any restitutive awareness or sensitivity for systemic racial injustice (Bowers Du Toit & Nkomo 2014; Maluleke 2008). Our process has been enriched by doctoral research currently being conducted among white theological students by one of the leading figures in our process, Jaco Botha. His study aims to measure how changes to mission can contribute to an emerging post-colonial social imaginary as it relates to race relations.

Cultivating capacity

The first group of DRC 'white work' participants identified a further 'training' need: learning processes, activities and skills that will improve everyone's capacities to provide leadership in their congregations. This aim points to the second dimension of DRC 'white work' – cultivating capacity.

Over time, it became clear that conventional skills training, such as facilitation skills, will be more appropriate at a later stage of the process. Emotional and embodied responses of white individuals to issues of race and racism are well documented and explained in the work of DiAngelo (2011, 2018), including the anger and resistance (at worst) or defensiveness and certitude (at best), and how these sensibilities continue to hold racism in place. To address some of the roots of this resistance, we have prioritised the cultivation of the foundational capacity to deal with the discomfort and the strong emotions (e.g. shame, guilt, anger and sadness) evoked by facing one's implication in the past and present systemic racialised injustices. In our experience, an accessible contemplative practice such as the Welcoming Prayer is particularly appropriate.

One of the advantages of this practice is that one does not have to refer explicitly to 'white work' or racial reconciliation. Capacity-oriented interventions can be employed to draw resistant people into a consciousness-raising process. For example, our September 2021 'Verwelkomingspraktyk' pilot is a four-week Welcoming Practice group journey, including

individual daily exercises and six two-hour group sessions on zoom. We are using the anxiety evoked by the COVID-19 pandemic as the point of entry. The hope is that some of the 15 registered participants will be willing and more able to become involved in DRC white work.

The need to combine capacity cultivation with DRC 'white work' is clearly demonstrated by the current approach to 'bridge-building' (intergroup) capacities in the official training documentation of the DRC. In its *Raamwerk vir Missionale Bedieningsontwikkeling in die NG Kerk* [Framework for the Development of Missional Ministry in the DRC] (Algemene Sinode van die NG Kerk 2021), the listed capacities include the following: 'introspective ability to identify own boundaries, prejudices and attitudes'; 'listening ability to hear different voices'; 'ability to cultivate relationships with strangers, also in public' and 'ability to facilitate a process leading the congregation to the formation of community, reconciliation and reparative justice'. There is a clear understanding in this document that these capacities for bridge-building require 'formation' over a period. However, no specific attention is given to the complex roles of race or whiteness (see also Botha & Foster 2017).

The emergence of DRC 'white work' highlighted this gap in the training of future ministers and the professional development of current ministers.⁴ Extensive discussions led to the DRC Western Cape accepting problem ownership and formally commissioning AVReQ (Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest) to do qualitative research on how to weave greater racial awareness into DRC bridge-building capacity cultivation. Both authors will be involved in this praxis-oriented research, to commence in early 2023.

While we recognise that raising consciousness must be combined with the cultivation of capacities, we have learnt over the last three years that both of these require careful attention to the formation of community.

Forming community

Each group that took part in a storytelling workshop underscored that ongoing group support (the third initial aim formulated in 2018) was essential for sustaining 'white work' as a means towards participating in real racial reconciliation. The majority of past participants have formed part of the growing *Versoen Leergemeenskap* with the intention and readiness to learn and be formed in their consciousness and capacities.

The *Versoen Leergemeenskap* has expanded geographically across synodical and provincial borders; however, localised 'white work' support groups have started to form in the Western Cape. These hold the potential to engage locally and contextually in initiatives and networks aimed at racial

4. Previous qualitative empirical research in the context of the DRC has explored how the liturgy can formatively promote reconciliation (Van der Merwe, Wepener & Barnard 2019; Wepener 2009), although without engaging explicitly with whiteness.

reconciliation and justice. Smaller, local groups also allow for relational accountability and support.

Van Wyngaard (2016b) highlighted an important tension in the community within which one reflects on consciousness and capacity. That is, reflecting on whiteness 'requires some distance from the white community and being embedded in a different conversation', and this must be kept in tension with not becoming disconnected from the language of that community. The newly formed *Versoen Leergemeenskap* is unique in this sense, as it consists mainly of ordained clergy of the DRC, thereby ensuring that individuals retain a deep relational connection and accountability, yet have the unique chance to cultivate a temporary, intragroup community of practice.

The major challenge facing DRC 'white work' is most probably the pitfall of recentring whiteness through intragroup work. Verwoerd's international work has highlighted the risk of 'single identity' intragroup work becoming a goal in itself, rather than serving as preparation for and ongoing support of intergroup work (see Church, Visser & Johnson 2004). While this intragroup 'white work' has been cathartic and transformative for most white participants, it remains a journey towards the deepening of mutual and just relationships across race lines and confronting the violence of institutional racism. The integrity of the work depends on the quality of reconciliation and the measure of justice achieved through becoming more racially self-aware and therefore actively anti-racist.

Considering the history of church unity in the DRC family of churches, historically divided by race, the expansion of this learning community across racial divides will have to take into account not only interpersonal relationships but also institutional reconciliation. Church unity within the DRC 'family' of churches (this includes the DRC, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the DRC in Africa and the Reformed Church in Africa) has been considered as one of the most pressing issues to demonstrate the capacity for reconciliation and justice and the 'acid test' of whether the DRC has broken with the racism of apartheid (Boesak 2008; Mahokoto 2019).

The obvious challenge of integrating this intragroup *Versoen Leergemeenskap* with others to form community across racial divides therefore remains. While we have invited colleagues of colour to engage with us virtually and during workshops in the spirit of 'white work', we have been conscious not to invite others into spaces that remain 'white' by virtue of being set up through white participants. We also concur with other white scholars who have attempted to dismantle whiteness that anti-racism work by white people should take the form of *response*. It is a response to the invitation and challenge by the (former) victims of racism. This is to give epistemological privilege to victims of oppression in understanding and responding to oppression and developing strategies to overcome it (Kritzinger 2008). We continue to seek opportunities, both individually and collectively, and to

respond to invitations into spaces and conversations led by people of colour.

Beyond (Dutch Reformed Church) whiteness?

We remain acutely aware of the limitations of the DRC 'white work' we have become heavily involved in since early 2018. However, we are encouraged by the recent appreciation shown by Melissa Steyn, a leading South African scholar in the study of whiteness (2001, 2012, 2018): 'The [DRC white work] is actually sorely needed and there is not nearly enough of it' ('White work' and engaging the violence of racism 2020). As the main respondent during this webinar, Steyn went on to remark:

[W]e are making this path as we walk it. It's not as if we have models of how people have changed the racial order, anywhere. This order is half a millennium old and global in its reach, and we've never had a globally interconnected world that has not been shaped by racism and through the ignorance contract. We can therefore recognize that we do not have formulas. ... We are creating it as we go along. ('White work' and engaging the violence of racism 2020)

While we agree with her helpful reminder regarding the depth and reach of the racial order we are trying to dismantle and share her sense of humility regarding 'formulas', we want to suggest that some useful guidelines might well be emerging from this DRC white work. We started with four aims, listed in no particular order. After almost four years of intense involvement, we have come to appreciate the three main dimensions, namely raising consciousness, cultivating capacity and forming community. Over time, we have started to see how interwoven and complementary these dimensions of 'white work' are.

In the process, the diagnostic contribution of this 'white work' has potentially been expanded. Our DRC 'white work' can be understood as a contributor to make some of the relatively neglected roots of South African whiteness more visible. This three-dimensional 'white work' process can be used as an emerging theory of change to diagnose efforts at dismantling whiteness. For, as suggested by our experience thus far, unless dismantling processes include and carefully combine consciousness, capacity and community dimensions, the efforts – whether in the DRC, South Africa and perhaps even beyond – are rather unlikely to make sustainable progress.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution of everyone in the *Versoen Leergemeenskap* (Reconciliation Learning Community) for contributing to our understanding of the emerging process.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

As co-facilitators, both authors contributed to conceptualisation and writing.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The authors are reflecting as facilitators on a process they are involved in, and details on the process are publicly available on www.versoen.com

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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