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# The future of empirical research in and through the Dutch Reformed Church

## ABSTRACT

*This article is my contribution to a Festschrift for Kobus Schoeman. It focuses attention on Schoeman's relationship with the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) empirical research work. It situates Schoeman within the DRC and provides an overview of the empirical research projects from within the DRC and to which Schoeman contributed during his career. The article outlines Schoeman's analysis of the state of the DRC. The article then discusses three foci that will require more attention in the coming years within the empirical research agenda of the DRC. These foci include situating the DRC within a broader ecumenical environment through empirical research; attending to more critical analyses in the interpretation of empirical data, and revisiting historic empirical research data to examine longitudinal attitudinal shifts in the DRC.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My contribution to this *Festschrift* inevitably stems from a very specific location and relationship. Although I was vaguely aware of Kobus Schoeman, our paths only crossed more extensively late in his career through the work of the task team for research of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Schoeman's work is thoroughly interwoven with this task team (and work by committees that preceded it). The vast majority of those who engaged with his academic research inevitably would know his work through research intertwined with this task



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team. Over decades, Schoeman has become synonymous with an emphasis on empirical research in the DRC. Through a series of circumstances, I form part of a group that is taking over this legacy from Schoeman after his nearly four decades of involvement with empirical research in the DRC. From this position, I reflect back on Schoeman's work in this article and look towards a future research agenda that builds on his work.

The article provides an overview of Schoeman's<sup>1</sup> research relating to the DRC, illustrates the claim of the way in which his research was interwoven with the projects of the task team for research, and critically evaluates this contribution. The second section of the article outlines key limitations and future possibilities for research that seeks to build on this particular aspect of his legacy. The article touches on parts of an agenda for congregational and ecclesial empirical research in the DRC, and possibly beyond.

## 2. KOBUS SCHOEMAN AND THE DRC

Schoeman is an ordained minister of the DRC and has been involved with the official empirical research in the DRC since 1988 (Schoeman 2011:476). Since 2002, official reports from the research done through the various empirical research projects have been presented at the General Synod meetings. For most of this period, Schoeman was the voice that had to deliver these reports. Over the past decades, his name has become synonymous within the DRC with attempts at a more responsible description and analysis of what is happening within the church.

Over the past 15 years, numerous academic publications appeared under his name, demonstrating his relationship with the research within the DRC. Some of these publications are explicitly focused on the DRC research projects, but often the arguments focus on broader questions facing the church, while presenting the DRC as one particular example. For example in 2012, an exploration of the DRC's involvement in society starts by describing the broader church involvement and then indicates that the "focus of this article will now shift from the broader perspective to a specific perspective, namely, on one of the South African churches, the DRC" (Schoeman 2012:2). This kind of approach to work with a broader question and then use data from the DRC as the particular "example" (Schoeman 2019:130) or "case study" (Schoeman 2020a:328) is repeated in a number of his publications.

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1 I limit myself largely to single-authored or first-author publications, with limited references to places where he acted as a second author for research of students and other collaborators.

The broader arc of his work argues for a more empirically grounded ecclesiology, but the empirical research, from which he draws throughout, consistently uses research projects emanating from the work of the DRC. The DRC is the location where he does the empirical ecclesiological research for which he argues theoretically from his PhD to his most recent publications in ecclesiology. In multiple publications, his mostly quantitative work illustrates the ecclesiological proposal he developed.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN THE DRC

The scope of the early work on a consciously sociological analysis of the DRC is staggering. In empirical research projects of the DRC preceding Schoeman's involvement, approximately half a million households were visited for a church census, and up to 60,000 church council members completed the surveys, to give but a glimpse into what transpired (Schoeman 2011). These were immensely expensive and time consuming. The initial work combined the various instruments into a single perspective that ran simultaneously (congregational, leadership, and membership surveys). More recently, these operate on separate cycles, with far more modest participation numbers. At the same time, the incorporation of online surveys has tremendously reduced the cost of this work, contributing to the long-term sustainability of these research projects.

In recent years, the research task team of the General Synod has used three primary instruments for empirical research in the DRC.

- The congregational survey<sup>3</sup> is done every four years, with the most recent in 2022. It is an extensive questionnaire that requests congregations to draw on multiple people in the administration and leadership of the congregation to complete. In 2022, this questionnaire

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2 There is also a more qualitative thread in his work that is often done in collaboration with co-researchers who are themselves ministers or junior academics. For example, a study of multicultural congregations drawing on interviews in the DRC Hugenoot congregation with Nico Mostert (Mostert & Schoeman 2021), of small congregations looking at the DRC presbytery of Fauresmith and the community of Philippolis more specifically with Carin van Schalkwyk (Schoeman & Van Schalkwyk 2013) or on shifting patterns in congregational involvement in communities with Wessel Wessels where they draw on five interviews with ministers from the Free State Synod of the DRC (Schoeman & Wessels 2021).

3 Initially, the entire collection of empirical research instruments was called *Kerkspieël* (Church Mirror), and the 2008 research protocol of the General Synod still described *Kerkspieël* as the overarching brand name for the broad empirical research work of the DRC (General Synod of the DRC 2011:266). More popularly, the congregational survey is known as *Kerkspieël* nowadays.

consisted of nearly 400 questions or sub-questions. Changes to the questions are limited between different years, in order to keep track of longer term trends.

- In recent years, annual ministers' surveys were sent to a randomised sample of 20 per cent of all ministers in DRC congregations. The number of questions in a particular survey is limited to what would take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Questions vary between years and are mainly drawn from priorities set by the synodical leadership and its task teams. More recently, a dedicated survey of all licensed ministers and proponents has been done every four years, the last of which was in 2023.
- The Church Life Survey-South Africa (CLS-SA), an attenders' survey that draws the majority of its questions from the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS), which is the broader project of which the South African version forms part, is also completed every four years. This project is open to congregations both within and beyond the DRC, and an increasing number of congregations outside of the DRC also take part in it. This includes a 10 per cent randomised sample of DRC congregations who are asked to complete this survey to provide an attender's view of the DRC.

Versions of these instruments have all been in use for over 40 years, with the most recent addition being CLS-SA, which was first introduced in South Africa in 2006. The instruments are mainly quantitative in nature. *Ad hoc* qualitative projects have also been launched in recent years, focusing particularly on congregational responses to various societal circumstances such as social crises or longer term changes in their communities.

Currently, the research projects under the umbrella of the DRC generate a significant amount of data in each four-year cycle between General Synod meetings, and, due to capacity constraints, only a fraction of this is actively analysed and discussed either in internal reports or in academic publications. As far as academic publications are concerned, while numerous individuals have published from work drawing on various of these research instruments, Schoeman has by far been the most important academic interpreter of the empirical research in the DRC, with numerous publications drawn from these research instruments.

#### 4. SCHOEMAN'S ANALYSIS OF THE DRC

Given his critical role in establishing a culture of empirical research within the DRC, it is worth asking how Schoeman interpreted the DRC during his academic career. It is perhaps important to note Schoeman's particular lens when studying the DRC. In his PhD, he developed a theoretical framework for studying congregations (Schoeman 2002). Throughout his career, he pays attention primarily to the study of congregations. Over time, this is articulated more explicitly in issues concerning the development of ecclesiologies (Schoeman 2014b; 2015; 2020b) and is best captured by the image of an ecclesiology "from below" (Schoeman 2011:473; 2020b:104). While a great deal can be studied empirically regarding churches and religion, the main focus of Schoeman's work is the local congregation (Schoeman 2020b:98).

One observation that should be made is that the shifts in his interpretations also followed shifts in the priorities of the church. For example, his early analysis of the church mirror research, from 1981 to 2006, focused almost exclusively on issues of changes in membership (membership numbers, age distribution, employment, and migration patterns of members) and church attendance (Schoeman 2011:479-487). Issues regarding relevance are mainly tied to the DRC's market share of white South Africans (Schoeman 2011:484).

The research protocol of 2008 situates research explicitly within the DRC's statement of calling from 2007 (General Synod of the DRC 2011:265), which included, among others, an emphasis on the place of the DRC in Africa, a call to respond to challenges such as poverty and HIV, and a commitment to service (General Synod of the DRC 2007:220). Schoeman's more recent focus in his analysis of the DRC reflects this commitment, and, in particular, the later shift in situating the DRC as a "missional church".<sup>4</sup>

Through numerous publications, Schoeman reflects on the possibilities and limitations of congregations in the DRC's ability to make a positive change to their local communities (Schoeman 2012; Schoeman & Van Schalkwyk 2013; Schoeman & Wessels 2021). Of interest is how he interprets the way in which the DRC related to the changing South Africa and the challenges facing communities in which congregations are based.

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4 While exact descriptions of what is meant by "missional church" remain somewhat contested (Dreyer 2020), it is often associated with a significant shift in the theological development of the DRC (Benadé & Niemandt 2019). There are, however, legitimate concerns as to whether the language of the missional church in the DRC does the work of engaging with its history of apartheid and the complex process of redefining its place in a democratic South Africa (Botha & Forster 2017; Nell 2020).

In Schoeman's broader project of developing guidelines for a practical theological ecclesiology, this emphasis on the mission of the local congregation is also central (Schoeman 2015:74). His own description of a move from "isolation to involvement" (Schoeman 2020a), as a more normative argument for what should be the response of a congregation to its calling, situates his personal view.

Perhaps Schoeman's interpretation of the DRC could best be described as one of being concerned. In his 2012 analysis, which explored data up to 2006, he argues that the DRC congregations' development work mainly focuses on welfare and relief and happens through projects run by individuals and focused on individual communities. More sustainable systems and people's movement-focused development work are mainly absent in the DRC (Schoeman 2012:5).<sup>5</sup> He concludes the argument by proposing how this could be changed to a more sustainable development agenda.

More recently, drawing from 2018 SA-CLS data, he argues that

DRC congregations tend to be more on the isolation extreme of the continuum, due to the focus on maintenance and the financial constraints they experience. More important to note is that the attendees experience a lack of clear vision and that the leadership should encourage them to be involved in an innovative way in the challenges facing the South African society (Schoeman 2020a:330).

We observe in Schoeman's work a shift from a focus on concerns of growth and membership in the DRC to a concern for the role of the congregation in society and in concrete local communities, in particular. This agenda is served through the extensive gathering of empirical data, and in his own deeply committed and carefully articulated manner reminding the DRC that the empirical data indicates their own stated commitments to contribute to the care of society in a changing democratic South Africa require far more development in the life of typical DRC congregations. On the other hand, he often joined hands in studies that sought to bring a deeper understanding of the places where congregations are making a concrete difference.<sup>6</sup>

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5 In this instance, he draws on the generations of development work described by Naas Swart.

6 Some of the work that has not yet been published includes the work on beacon-congregations that emerged following the 2019 scenario of the DRC (General Synod of the DRC 2023:35) and research on how congregations respond to disasters, which became a key focus of the 2023 General Synod of the DRC.

## 5. OUTSTANDING CHALLENGES AND AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

The first section of this article outlined Schoeman's contribution to empirical research in the DRC, concluding with his work in recent years on what we know about how congregations are relating to challenges in their communities. This second section explores a number of limitations and challenges that require attention by those who will build on his work in years to come.

### 5.1 Weird ecclesia and a South African future

In a 2010 article analysing a series of subdisciplines in psychology, researchers from the University of British Columbia noted how research samples in various fields of Psychology reflected a particularly skewed population, and where findings were then universalised, mistaken assumptions concerning human nature could arise. In this case, samples were drawn from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) populations, which not only did not represent humanity as a whole, but this population group was also often the least representative of humanity as a whole (Henrich *et al.* 2010).

It is no longer contested that theology is an inherently contextual undertaking, and that ecclesiology reflects, in a particular way, the diversity of culture, tradition, and socio-economic conditions. For this reason, it is crucial to work with concrete realities, to understand the church as a social, not merely theological reality, and to pay careful attention to the empirical findings concerning congregations.<sup>7</sup> The focus on developing ecclesiology in close conversation with empirical research, as Schoeman emphasised throughout his career, is therefore crucial for the work of the DRC.

However, despite the following argument concerning a more nuanced understanding of the shifts in the DRC in recent years, all indications are that the DRC is a particularly "weird" representation of Southern African society. The fact that the organisation is almost exclusively white and Afrikaans is important in this instance. From the congregational survey,

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7 Much of the energy concerning a more consciously empirically grounded approach to ecclesiology has, in recent years, revolved around the ecclesiology and ethnography conversation (Idestrom 2019), Schoeman's work (Nel & Schoeman 2015), and that of practical theology at the University of the Free State (Schoeman *et al.* 2012) describe the required methodological commitment as empirical theology, and Schoeman's bibliographies often draw on those describing the task of practical theology with the language of empirical theology.

we also know that the age distribution of the DRC reflects a far older demographic than South Africa (where most of the members are located) (Schoeman 2023).

Some initial work has been done to develop more ecumenical datasets that could be related to the empirical work in the DRC. The congregational survey is also used by the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (*Hervormde Kerk*) where there is a very close overlap in demographics. Schoeman has, however, been key in expanding CLS-SA beyond the confines of the DRC, which could potentially provide some initial comparative data.<sup>8</sup>

While the value of empirical research for the local church has been established and will hold potential for the South African church, if more capacity is available to do this work, the value for the DRC is what concerns me in this instance. The work of understanding DRC congregations in a changing South Africa will inevitably require a better understanding of how congregations from different traditions and reflecting different social demographics function within similar contexts.<sup>9</sup> It holds particular value for understanding the DRC and challenging assumptions concerning its place and role in a changing South Africa.

## 5.2 Critical theory and empirical research

In their publication on appreciative enquiry, Schoeman and Van der Berg (2011) briefly cite Grant and Humphries to acknowledge that critical theory should not be completely discarded:

In 'n kritiese evaluering van Waarderende ondersoek wys Grant en Humphries daarop dat kritiese teorie kan help om die proses te verryk. Die kritiese rol van kennis en mag kan die verstaan en bevordering van verandering bevorder (Schoeman & Van der Berg 2011:6).<sup>10</sup>

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8 See, for example, the use of CLS-SA data in an analysis of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Free State (Venter & Schoeman 2020).

9 Nel and Schoeman (2015:97-98) also argue for an ecumenical commitment, due to the fact that the social and community challenges, to which congregations in South Africa need to respond, require the ecumenical collaboration of multiple congregations. Understanding the practices of different traditions is then vital.

10 "In a critical evaluation of Appreciative enquiry Grand and Humphries indicates that critical theory can assist to enrich the process. The critical role of knowledge and power can contribute to the understanding and promotion of change." (My translation)



There is an obvious difficult relationship between critical theory and religious leadership.<sup>11</sup> Religion is a fundamental part of that which is the object of critique, even more so when it relates to religions or denominations that exist in close relationship to structures of power and the ideologies that maintain these. Historically, work typically associated with critical theory, and the theological application thereof, has not often been strongly welcomed in the DRC.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the DRC continues to grapple with its own history of white racism and patriarchy, while finding its place as part of the so-called “mainline” churches (De Gruchy 2014) in a society where the role of religion is being renegotiated, and the vast majority of people align with Christian traditions not associated with structures and traditions typical of churches drawing from European Christianity. South African society also remains one of the most economically unequal countries in the world, and questions on how to form a more just society draw out deeply held ideological commitments that require critical analysis.

To use one example from Schoeman’s work. In a 2012 analysis on how the DRC responds to social change, drawing on empirical work done in 2006, he notes that DRC congregations typically have an evangelist orientation in relation to their communities – meaning that they focus primarily on individual change and inviting people into the congregational space. A second way is that of a civic orientation:

These congregations motivate their members to be upstanding and co-operative citizens of the community, helping out where they can. They will not significantly challenge the *status quo* (Schoeman 2012:6).

Of interest, in this instance, is another category from the typology he uses that he identifies but which is seemingly not found among DRC congregations – that of activist congregations that “see their goal as requiring advocacy and change” (Schoeman 2012:6). Schoeman does not explore this question, but it does beg asking: Why would DRC congregations

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11 I would argue that the initial research protocol of the DRC, which listed the purpose or research as describe, understand, explain, and plan (General Synod of the DRC 2011:266), would see the action of critique, in the sense used in this instance, as something outside the scope of church-sanctioned research.

12 While this claim would require a longer and more detailed analysis, I would briefly note that, while there are often signs of incorporating historical critical insights into biblical interpretation within the DRC process, there is less evidence of incorporating critical insights concerning social processes and relations of power in its analysis of its own role in society and its analysis of congregational life. For an overview into the history of how the General Synod of the DRC reflected on issues concerning race from its first rejection of apartheid to the present, illustrating aspects of this claim, see Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard (2021).

not take on an activist and advocacy role in society?<sup>13</sup> For example, de Gruchy (2007:32-33) traces the example of the Rondebosch United Church in Cape Town which has played such an activist and advocacy role, and he more specifically outlines the longer history of formation that allowed for this. Different social communities and processes of formation can result in vastly different congregational identities in similar contexts.

While the empirical research plays the vital role of describing what is happening within the denomination, different tools are required to critically evaluate *why* this is happening – and *why* certain things are *not* happening. In part, this is of significance because of the way in which these relations to communities, and more broadly to society at large, and to the political and economic forces that shape the lives of people in communities, are a function of broader theological convictions, particular ecclesial histories, but also of social location and past and present relations to structures of power. For example, Botha and Forster (2017) point out how the limitations of the missional theology of the DRC for working towards justice, and the impact of the historical aversion to liberation theologies in the DRC (Van der Riet & Van Wyngaard 2021:18) – or more specifically, the factors that informed this vehement rejection historically – should raise questions regarding what informs congregational approaches to social change.

Schoeman preferred a more appreciative approach to congregational analysis (Schoeman & Van der Berg 2011), which was also generally echoed in official congregational research in the DRC more broadly (Niemandt *et al.* 2018). However, given the long entanglement of the DRC and apartheid, a more critical engagement with issues concerning race and whiteness raises questions that cannot be ignored. Critically understanding how race impacts on social and religious formation could provide key insights into how we should interpret empirical data and could alert us to potential reasons why particular patterns emerge. While the white demographic of the DRC has received an increasing amount of attention, the popular perception that the DRC is mainly a middle-class church, and how this is to be related to the context in which it is situated, is seldom explicitly acknowledged.<sup>14</sup> This would require more attention in years to come.

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13 At present, a portion of younger ministers in the DRC view their task as that of a more activist role (Van Wyngaard 2020). In line with the kind of congregational research outlined in this argument, it would be entirely relevant to explore whether this translates to congregational identity in time.

14 As similarly noted, the largely suburban demographic of the DRC is also seldom explicitly stated (Van Wyngaard & Louw 2023:478). Earlier versions of *Kerkspeël* are insightful, given that the full church census did explore profession, and trends up to 2000 confirm the suspicion that the DRC was becoming an increasingly upper middle-class church (Schoeman 2011:483).

How should we interpret descriptive accounts of the church in light of critical insights into the impact of a social identity largely tied with multiple markers of privilege? Allowing a more critical perspective to inform our empirical analysis of congregational research can provide important insights into why the church intersects with society in the ways it does. It can assist with deeper insights into questions of why DRC congregations are involved in South African communities in the way they are, and what might be the reasons for that or inhibiting factors to transform this engagement. For example, is there not more to be said than noting the parallels with declining financial resources and membership numbers as causative factor (Schoeman 2020a:328-329), given the complex relationship that the DRC and its members have had with a shift to democracy and various social movements in society? A more critical interrogation of empirical data on and from DRC congregations can contribute to the analyses that would be required to gain a deeper understanding of the possible causes of various attitudinal trends in the DRC. In the words of Tally (2022:4),

[c]ritique therefore has a fundamentally political vocation: it is called to challenge the forces of the status quo, to oppose the tyranny of 'what is' and to seek out potential alternatives.

Tally's reminder is that the task of critical theory is, in fact, to seek constructive alternatives, although such alternatives may subvert existing entrenched interests. However, for the sake of accompanying congregations to make more lasting impacts in communities, a more critical interpretation of DRC congregational practices and attitudes, and the way in which these are formed and what would transform them remains important.

### 5.3 Longitudinal trajectories

As indicated earlier, some of the research instruments emerging from the work of the DRC has been used for over four decades. The DRC research protocol of 2008 also identified longitudinal studies – focusing on longer term trends – as one aspect of its focus (General Synod of the DRC 2011:266). Such longitudinal possibilities have been recognised early in the process, which prompted attempts to maintain the methodological consistency over the earlier decades (Schoeman 2011:477). Schoeman himself explored some longitudinal trends from 1981 to 2006, but as outlined above, this related mainly to shifts in membership trends, which was the priority at the time (Schoeman 2011).<sup>15</sup> Behind the numbers,

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15 This longitudinal trajectory of membership is repeated in a 2014 publication which extends it to 2010 (Schoeman 2014a) and continues to be extended for more popular publications into the present (Schoeman 2023).

there are, however, attitudinal changes that require further analysis and reflection.<sup>16</sup> More recently, and when reflecting on shifting attitudes, Schoeman's work focused on shorter term changes, using data comparing different points across two surveys, usually four years apart (Schoeman 2012; 2019; 2020c). However, these instruments span a period including some of the most significant social and political changes in modern history, within an ecclesial community that underwent some of the most significant changes in modern church history. It can be immensely valuable to revisit the archives of empirical data to explore some of the key trajectories concerning congregational attitudes and practices.

- The process of writing the history of the DRC's break with apartheid and movement into a democratic society will continue for many years. The records of congregational, leadership, and congregant surveys provide a key lens into this period that can contribute to a more nuanced picture of this transition.
- Discourses on the DRC will, at times, reflect both a sense of immense change (from a church that supported apartheid to a church that seeks to be in service of local communities in all their diversity) or continuity (a church that remained mainly white in membership and leadership decades after the end of legalised apartheid). Developing a better understanding of the real levels of change over time will require exploring the longer trajectories from the datasets that were developed over decades.
- Perhaps most urgently, and closely related to the ecclesiological work proposed by Schoeman, changes in local contexts and noting how congregations responded to these will allow other congregations to see the future changes they will be facing and learn from the congregations' response to these.

This shifting research interest into congregational practices requires greater longitudinal attention. In particular, the discourse on a significant shift in the ecclesiology of the DRC could benefit from more longitudinal comparisons on what congregations reported over time. The wealth of data that was collected through the empirical research projects of the DRC for over more than four decades has potential for further analysis in the present.

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16 For example, the work of Leon Foot attempts to trace changing attitudes on reconciliation in a DRC congregation over a 14-year period, based on research through focus groups done over time (Foot & Van den Berg 2014).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The influence of the empirical research tradition since the 1980s within the DRC during Kobus Schoeman's academic career and Schoeman's influence on this history have been significant. Schoeman's work has been key in shaping the development of various research instruments, and his development of a South African perspective on the formation of local ecclesiologies drew heavily on empirical work done in and through the DRC.

Schoeman's academic publications were analysed as a lens on the state of empirical research in the DRC, indicating how he moved, alongside the DRC, from a concern with shifting membership numbers to a concern for describing and understanding the impact of congregations on their communities – a key aspect of the development of local missional ecclesiologies. In response, I argued that in years to come this research process would need to be expanded along at least three lines:

- To become more ecumenical in nature, so that the unique character of the DRC can be understood in relation to other traditions and congregations embodying a different social location in society who are responding to similar contextual challenges.
- A deeper appreciation for the role of critical theological and social perspectives, in order to analyse the empirical data from DRC congregations in relation to how it relates to structures of power in the contemporary world.
- Expanding the longitudinal work on membership trajectories to also explore longitudinal data on changing attitudes, particularly in relation to a changing South Africa and how congregations respond to changing contexts.

The purpose of these focus areas would be to develop a more critical perspective on the practices of a denomination that continues to reflect a demographic that is significantly different from the South African society as a whole, and to more critically understand the changes that have occurred and continue to occur in congregations of this denomination.

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