

**The Helpmekaar: Rescuing the “volk”
through reading, writing and arithmetic, c. 1916–c 1965**

*Anton Ehlers**

Abstract

This article looks at the establishment and shifting role of the Helpmekaar Society of the Cape Province as welfare catalyst, set up in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1914–15. Driven by Afrikaner ethnic nationalist motives – it set itself two goals. The immediate aim was to save Afrikaner rebels and their families from financial ruin. The second objective was complicated and changing: to promote the general development, upliftment and welfare of the Dutch-speaking section of the South African population and to develop a distinctive Afrikaans culture. The paper concentrates on the evolution of the second goal into a sharp educational focus aimed at unlocking the potential of Afrikaner youth as a solution to the poor white problem. Because the Helpmekaar was shaped by ideologies of class and race, this analysis engages with a couple of existing historiographical conversations about poor whites, the state, welfarism and also provides a revealing lens into the politics of white education itself. Despite the Helpmekaar’s sectional ethnic and racial focus and the accompanying socio-political engineering, it acted as a welfare catalyst that contributed significantly – financially and as lobbyist for educational causes – in effecting educational change; in this regard it benefited a far wider community than was originally intended.

Keywords: Helpmekaar movement; Rebellion of 1914-15; Afrikaners; education; welfare; nationalism; welfare state; ethnic mobilisation; ACVV.

Opsomming

Die artikel ontleed die bydrae van die Helpmekaarvereniging van die Kaapprovinsie as welsyns katalisator in die ekonomiese opheffing van Afrikaners in die vaarwater van die Rebelle van 1914–15. Die Helpmekaar het ’n tweekledige doelwit beoog. Eerstens

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om Afrikaner rebelle en hul gesinne van ekonomiese ondergang te red. Die tweede doel was meer gekompliseerd: die bevordering van die algemene ontwikkeling en welsyn van die Hollandssprekende deel van die Suid-Afrikaanse bevolking met die fokus op die ontwikkeling van 'n spesifieke Afrikaanse kultuur. Die artikel fokus op die ontwikkeling van die tweede doelstelling in 'n spesifieke opvoedkundige fokus, naamlik om die arm blanke probleem deur die ontsluiting van die potensiaal van die Afrikanerjeug deur opvoeding, op te los. Die Helpmekaar is gevorm deur ideologieë van ras en klas. Die artikel sluit dus aan by 'n aantal bestaande historiografiese debatte oor arm blankes, die welsynstaat, en verskaf ook insae in die politiek van wit onderwys. Ten spyte van sy eng etniese en nasionalistiese fokus en die gepaardgaande sosiale ingenieurswese het die Helpmekaar deur sy finansiële bydraes en as kampvegter vir opvoedkundige sake 'n beduidende rol in die bevordering van onderwys en opvoeding gespeel wat 'n veel wyer gemeenskap as wat aanvanklik beoog is, bevoordeel het.

Slutelwoorde: Helpmekaarbeweging; Rebelle van 1914-15; Afrikaners, onderwys en opvoeding; welsyn; nasionalisme; welsynstaat; etniese mobilisering; ACVV.

Introduction

Christian and Marius Barnard,¹ Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert,² Breyten Breytenbach,³ Pieter Dirk Uys⁴ and Arno Carstens.⁵ Although this is an impressive group of Afrikaans public figures it is not ultimately these prominent beneficiaries of the Helpmekaar Society of the Cape Province who define its impact and contribution, but rather the approximately 6 300 students the Helpmekaar financed with over R83 million and the estimated 100 welfare causes and institutions it supported with £53 981 over more than eight decades. This was achieved through the approach propagated in 1920 by the then Helpmekaar chairman, Advocate H.S. van Zijl:

The best and most lasting work, also in the case of philanthropic and constructive work in the service of the *volk*, is that which is done in a quiet and composed way. This is the way in which the Helpmekaar – after its high profile on the public stage and exposure in the press during its founding phase – will have to learn to work if it wants to become a sustaining influence for good in our country.⁶

The historical roots of the Helpmekaar (translated loosely as “help one another”) lie in the Orange Free State and the consequences of the Afrikaner

¹ They pioneered medical surgical procedures that enabled them to perform the first human heart transplant operation in the world.

² He broke out of the typical Afrikaner mould to become Progressive Federal Party leader and a personification of white Afrikaner defiance of the apartheid system.

³ Well known literary figure, recipient of the Hertzog Prize and a fierce critic of apartheid.

⁴ Social commentator, stand-up comedian and creator of the Evita Bezuidenhout persona.

⁵ Influential performer and member of the Springbok Nude Girls rock band.

⁶ Helpmekaar Study Fund Office, Parow (hereafter HSO): Helpmekaar Society of the Cape Province (hereafter HSCP) Congress minutes, 26–27 May 1920, p 2.

Rebellion of 1914-1915. This rebellion was an armed protest by a section of the Afrikaner population against the Union government, sparked by parliament's decision that South Africa would participate actively in the First World War as a British ally against Germany.⁷ The losses that loyalists (citizens who did not rebel) had incurred as a result of rebel actions led to a barrage of claims lodged against the rebels in the aftermath of the rebellion.⁸ Because a sizeable number of rebels came from the so-called *bywoner* or poor white class of Afrikaners,⁹ it soon became clear that the rebels were not in a financial position to pay these claims (totalling some £300 000).¹⁰ Against this background the Helpmekaar idea – to collect money to settle the rebel debt – took root in the affected districts of the northern Free State and western Transvaal. It developed into a broader movement which eventually spread throughout the Union during the course of 1915 and 1916 and manifested in the formation of four provincial Helpmekaar societies. The Helpmekaar's efforts were sufficient to settle the rebel debt and leave the Helpmekaar movement¹¹ with a surplus of £92 000.¹² In the process, many rebels were saved from joining the ranks of the Afrikaner poor whites. The surplus funds were divided pro rata among the four provincial societies according to the contribution of each province to the surplus.

The need for a provincial organisation to coordinate the Helpmekaar efforts in the Cape Province culminated in a founding congress held in June 1916 in Cape Town. The congress, under the chairmanship of Dr D.F. Malan, editor of *Die Burger*, was attended by 37 representatives from 42 branches and it adopted a constitution that provided for the establishment of the Helpmekaar Society of the Cape Province (hereafter Helpmekaar).¹³ Anybody 16 years and older who could identify with the aims of the Society could become a member. The Helpmekaar was organised on a branch system, each with its own local executive, with the highest authority vested in a Congress that met annually and consisted of the delegates from the various branches. The Congress annually elected a Central Committee (CC) comprising a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, treasurer and eight other members. The CC was responsible for implementing the decisions of the Congress and the general management of the matters of the Society.¹⁴

The Helpmekaar set itself a dual goal: firstly, to rescue Afrikaner rebels who participated in the Rebellion of 1914–15 and their families from financial ruin.

⁷ A. Grundlingh and S. Swart, *Radelose Rebelle? Dinamika van die 1914–1915 Afrikanerrebelle* (Protea Bookhouse, Pretoria, 2009), pp 14–18.

⁸ UG 46-16, *Report of the Rebellion Losses Commission*, p 9.

⁹ UG 28-15, Department of Justice. *Annual Report for the Calendar Year 1914*, p 186; Grundlingh and Swart, *Radelose Rebelle?*, pp 23–26.

¹⁰ "OVS Saamwerk", *De Burger*, 29 December 1915.

¹¹ The Helpmekaar movement refers to the four provincial Helpmekaar Societies (Cape Province, Transvaal, Orange Free State and Natal) whose combined efforts generated the funds to settle the rebel debt.

¹² HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, pp 5, 7.

¹³ "Helpmekaar Kongres te Kaapstad", *De Burger*, 29 June 1916; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 28–29 June 1916, pp 1–3.

¹⁴ HSO: HSCP, Argiefstukke, "Konsept-Konstitutie" (pamphlet).

Secondly, it wished to promote the general development, upliftment and welfare of the Dutch-speaking section of the South African population and to facilitate the development of a distinctive Afrikaans culture. This article analyses the role of the Helpmekaar in twentieth-century South Africa as a welfare catalyst primarily devoted to the economic and social upliftment of Afrikaners. The second goal of the Helpmekaar, as this essay will argue, developed into a socio-politically driven educational drive exclusively aimed at unlocking the potential of Afrikaner youth as a solution to the poor white problem.

Because the Helpmekaar was shaped by ideologies of class and race, this analysis engages with a couple of existing historiographical conversations about poor whites, the state, welfarism and also provides a revealing lens into the politics of white education itself. According to a working paper written in 2006 by Jeremy Seekings, recent historiography on the development of welfare state-building in South Africa is characterised by the pivotal position afforded to the 1930s Carnegie Commission of Inquiry into the poor white problem in South Africa. This commission is credited with the status of being the catalyst and dynamo that kick-started and propelled the state into welfare state-building.¹⁵ Without denying the importance of the Carnegie Commission, Seekings offers a corrective by arguing that the origins of the South African welfare state predates the commission and he locates it in the early 1920s with the coming to power of the Pact government in 1924.

Seekings argues that the appointment of the Pienaar Commission that investigated the matter of old age pensions and national insurance, which culminated in the 1928 Old Age Pensions Act, proves his argument. He locates this Act in the broader segregation policy of the Pact government as part of the attempts to elevate whites as the “civilised” section of the population above the “uncivilised” (African) section by means of a combination of “civilised labour policies, land settlement policies in the countryside, and welfare reform”.¹⁶ The welfare reforms of the Pact government were therefore part of its broader attempts to re-order society according to a racial hierarchy with a clear division between the “civilised” (whites) and the “uncivilised” (Africans).¹⁷ Secondly, Seekings argues that with the exception of education, many of the commission’s findings were attempts to turn back the clock in terms of programmatic welfare state-building (which he labels as “modernist”). He alleges that the commission sought a return to the Church as the primary channel of welfare relief (which he labels “anti-modernist”) – in the process causing a splintering of welfare efforts that retarded the expansion of welfare programmes.¹⁸

¹⁵ J. Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission and the Backlash against Welfare State-building in South Africa, 1931–1937”, Centre for Social Science Research, Working Paper No. 159, May 2006, p 1.

¹⁶ J. Seekings, “‘Not a Single White Person Should be Allowed to Go Under’: Swartgevaar and the Origins of South Africa’s Welfare State, 1924–1929”, *The Journal of African History*, 48, 3, 2007, pp 377–378, 382.

¹⁷ Seekings, “Not a Single White Person”, pp 378–379.

¹⁸ Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, p 1.

While the role of Afrikaner institutions such as the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK, Dutch Reformed Church) and the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging (ACVV, Afrikaans Christian Women's Association)¹⁹ forms an integral part of discussions on the development of the welfare state in South Africa, there is a silence on the role of the Helpmekaar. An analysis of the Helpmekaar can therefore broaden this historiographical conversation because it provides a window on a non-governmental or private space that gives an insight into the way Cape Afrikaner elites involved with the Helpmekaar viewed the poor white problem and sought remedies for it within the means at their disposal. This private engagement by the Helpmekaar with white social problems not only predates the Carnegie Commission but also helped to pave the way for it – strengthening the Seekings corrective on the over emphasis of the pivotal role of the Carnegie Commission and the origins of welfare state-building in South Africa. As a private welfare initiative of a special kind, the Helpmekaar contributed to welfare state-building in South Africa by providing financial assistance to students for educational purposes in the form of study loans. A study of the Helpmekaar also gives insight into the intertwined private/state networks of the Afrikaner nationalist movement which manifested in shared personnel and rhetoric. Through these networks the Helpmekaar, although private, shared the same socio-political ideological thinking that motivated government attempts at welfare state-building after 1924 and in that regard served as a precursor (laboratory and pressure group) for ideas (specifically on education) that fed into government efforts at welfare state-building after 1924.

The broader context of Helpmekaar thinking on the poor white problem

This section has a twofold objective. It aims to contextualise the Helpmekaar path that led to its mantra of social upliftment through education as its contribution and primary solution to the poor white problem; and secondly, to provide a window on the Helpmekaar's relationship with the ACVV, the most prominent existing Afrikaner welfare organisation in the Cape Province, one which the Helpmekaar needed to consider in its positioning.

The ACVV was founded in 1904 and by 1916 it already had an established set of welfare practices²⁰ focusing on poor white Afrikaners. Its activities also went beyond welfare practices and in the words of Du Toit, "the ACVV's everyday practice involved promoting identification with an imagined community defined by race, language and religion" that resonated with their motto of working for "*kerk, volk en taal*" (church, people and language).²¹ The Helpmekaar wanted to position itself within this context. The Society was born in the "presence" of the ACVV. The organisation was represented at the Helpmekaar founding congress in 1916 by its

¹⁹ Seekings, "The Carnegie Commission", pp 4, 16–18.

²⁰ They "handed out old clothes, visited the poor and provided medicines". See M. du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: Volksmoeders and the ACVV, 1904-1929", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1, March 2003, p 160.

²¹ Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", pp 162, 163.

president, Mrs Roos²² who was also a member of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar.²³ The tone and basis of the relationship between the Helpmekaar and ACVV was set by a resolution accepted at the Helpmekaar founding congress. It expressed its appreciation for the work done by the ACVV and wished its members success for the future. The congress further recommended that Helpmekaar branches consult with the ACVV and other local Christian organisations on local needs to avert friction and competition – a suggestion endorsed by Dr D.F. Malan at the 1918 Helpmekaar Congress.²⁴ Over time, the two organisations came to view each other as “blood sisters” – both arising from difficult times of struggle.²⁵ They were represented at one another’s annual conferences²⁶ during which the cordial relationship between them was highlighted²⁷ and they took note of one another’s activities.²⁸ Furthermore, the Helpmekaar supported ACVV initiatives financially²⁹ and the ACVV was particularly appreciative of the assistance received from the Helpmekaar for its social initiatives in Salt River among the poor Afrikaners.³⁰ The fact that both organisations identified with education as the “saviour” for the “upliftment of our people”, was the common ground that sealed their relationship and made Rev. Roome, chairman of the Helpmekaar, declare in 1935 that the interests of the ACVV resonated well with those of the Helpmekaar.³¹

Since the Helpmekaar’s inception, this close and cordial relationship was facilitated by the networks that linked them, pivoting on shared institutional membership and familial networks, primarily those of the Cape elite, which converged in the membership of the Helpmekaar CC and the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar. On the retirement of Roos in 1921, Minnie Roome (who was also a member of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar)³² became the chairman of the Cape Town branch of the ACVV while the national presidency went to Elizabeth

²² HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 28–29 June 1916, p 1.

²³ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 5 December 1916, pp 162, 163.

²⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 28–29 June 1916, p 6; and 22–23 May 1918, p 5.

²⁵ They saw themselves as “eie susters – eners in oorsprong, albei het sy ontstaan in donkerdae van stryd gehad”. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 3–4 April 1934, p 2.

²⁶ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 13 June 1928 to 12 December 1935, Central Committee, 26 October 1932, p 102.

²⁷ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, p 9.

²⁸ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 13 June 1928 to 12 December 1935, Central Committee, 13 December 1934, p 146.

²⁹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 13–14 April 1927, p 6; 16–17 April 1930, p 15.

³⁰ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 13 June 1928 to 12 December 1935, Central Committee, 7 June 1933, p 115.

³¹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 23–24 April 1935, p 1. The special relationship was also demonstrated by more personalised behaviour such as the telegram sent to Roos by the 1918 Helpmekaar Congress to congratulate her on her birthday. The high esteem which she had held in Helpmekaar circles was underscored by the resolution passed by the 1925 Congress to sympathise with her passing. She was referred to as a “deceased mother of the nation”. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 22–23 May 1918, p 4; 15–16 April 1925, p 4.

³² HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 18 December 1918, p 187.

Jordaan from Cradock. In 1930, Roome took over the presidency from Jordaan. Jordaan was married to Gert Jordaan, a farmer from Cradock,³³ a founding member of the Helpmekaar and member of the Helpmekaar CC from 1916 to 1935.³⁴ Minnie was married to the Rev. F.X. Roome,³⁵ a member of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar and its chairman since 1920;³⁶ a member of the Helpmekaar CC since 1921³⁷ and the CC chairman from 1928 (a position that he held for 13 years until 1940).³⁸ Anna Geyer, described by Du Toit as “a dynamic and influential member”,³⁹ of the ACVV and her husband Dr A.L. Geyer, who succeeded Dr D.F. Malan as editor of *Die Burger*,⁴⁰ were both members of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar.⁴¹

In December 1922, Maria Elizabeth Rothmann⁴² who had recently moved to Cape Town and was counted among the influential “Western Cape women”⁴³ who dominated the ACVV in the 1920s and 1930s became a member of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar. The fourth member of the so called “vier-skaar”⁴⁴ of the ACVV, Miss Alida (Ida) Theron, also joined the ranks of the Cape Peninsula branch of the Helpmekaar briefly in the period after she was appointed as assistant to Rothmann at *Die Burger* in 1922.⁴⁵ The close links between the ACVV and Helpmekaar that peaked in the 1930s was best described by Mrs L. Steytler, ACVV representative at the 1937 Helpmekaar Congress, when she referred to the cordial relationship and the excellent manner in which the two organisations were led from the same (Roome) household.⁴⁶ Figuratively speaking, the two organisations shared the same pillow. From a Helpmekaar perspective the hub of this entangled web was the Cape Peninsula branch whose membership included other members of the Cape elite such as advocate (later Judge of the Cape High Court) H.S. van Zijl, Fred Dormehl (first

³³ Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 168.

³⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 28–29 June 1916, pp 1, 9; 23–24 April 1935, p 10.

³⁵ Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 168.

³⁶ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 9 December 1919, p 50.

³⁷ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, p 9.

³⁸ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 4–5 April 1928, p 14; 16–17 April 1941, p 1.

³⁹ Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 169.

⁴⁰ C.J. Beyers and J.L. Basson (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek. Volume 5* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1987), p 306.

⁴¹ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 11 September 1923, p 215; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 23–24 April 1935, p 1.

⁴² HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 8 December 1922, p 210.

⁴³ Du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism”, p 169.

⁴⁴ Beyers and Basson (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek, Volume 5*, p 306.

⁴⁵ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 7 June 1923, p 213; Beyers and Basson (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek Volume 5*, p 816.

⁴⁶ Original Afrikaans: “Die twee verenigings, so voortreflik uit een huis gelei deur ds Roome en mev Roome, steun mekaar hartlik ...”, see HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 30–31 March 1937, p 1.

managing director of Sanlam)⁴⁷ and later his widow,⁴⁸ W.A. Hofmeyr (first chairman of the Sanlam board) and his wife,⁴⁹ Adv. Wessel Roux (National Party MP), Miss Sarah Goldblatt,⁵⁰ Adv. H.A. Fagan (National Party MP),⁵¹ and Dr D.F. Malan,⁵² to mention but a few. Given these linkages it is hardly surprising that the two organisations had a shared broad focus of upliftment through education.

The engagement of the Helpmekaar in seeking solutions for the poor white problem and its role in these solutions can be traced to its founding congress in 1916. A proposal put forward by Gert Jordaan, husband of the later president of the ACVV Elizabeth Jordaan, called for a *volkskongres* to be organised by the DRC in cooperation with the Helpmekaar and women's organisations in the Union, and was unanimously accepted by the Congress. The resolution recognised the poor white problem as an urgent and complex national issue that was in need of a final solution; emphasised the need to mobilise the *volk* on the national level to sensitise them and create a national desire to solve the problem. The suggestion was that the poor white issue had to be investigated fully by professionals with the necessary knowledge and expertise.⁵³ The resolution almost sounded like a brief to be dealt with by the Carnegie Commission.

This initial engagement with the poor white problem was followed by a period of experimentation in which various solutions were tried, tested and discarded.⁵⁴ In the light of a declining interest in the Helpmekaar among its members, the 1922 Congress appointed a commission to assess all aspects of the Society and to propose a practical scheme that could focus its activities, inspire its members and rekindle interest. In its report to the 1923 Congress the commission came to the conclusion

⁴⁷ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, Founders Meeting, 13 January 1916, p 150.

⁴⁸ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General Meeting, 4 March 1921, p 197.

⁴⁹ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, Council meeting, 9 August 1923, p 61; General meeting, 6 December 1917, p 179.

⁵⁰ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 6 December 1917, p 178.

⁵¹ HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General meeting, 4 March 1921, p 198.

⁵² HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, General Meeting, 11 March 1918, p 180. Although Malan was a crucial figurehead for the Helpmekaar, his position as editor of *De Burger* prevented him from much day-to-day active participation. At the 1918 annual general meeting of the Cape Peninsula Branch, Mrs Hofmeyr remarked: "hoop dokter sal tog die vergaderings bietjie bijwoon." (... hope Dr will indeed attend the meetings more regularly).

⁵³ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 28 and 29 June 1916, p 9.

⁵⁴ Among the proposals put forward were the holding of *volkskongresse*; land settlement proposals; the creation of labour colonies; establishment of industries; housing schemes; prodding the government to deliver on its promise of a poor white census; and the implementation of the findings of the 1921 Commission on Unemployment. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 11–12 June 1917, Report of the Central Committee, p 3; HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 31 March 1917, pp 53–54; 5 May 1917, p 56; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, pp 7–8; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 26–27 May 1920, p 5; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, Report of the Central Committee, p 2; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, pp 12–13.

that the Helpmekaar had neither the financial resources nor the organisational ability to undertake grand schemes to solve the poor white problem.⁵⁵ The committee then suggested an approach that was accepted by the Congress and became the template for Helpmekaar activities for the next four decades. It suggested that the Helpmekaar should campaign for an investigation into the causes of “this cancer in the life our *volk*” (the poor white question)⁵⁶ because it was felt that the causes held the key to finding solutions. However, an investigation of this nature was not the domain of congresses. It was a task that needed to be undertaken through dedicated and intensive study by one or two individuals in cooperation with specialists who had the necessary practical knowledge to address the issue.⁵⁷

This echoed the spirit of the 1916 resolution without the discredited *volkskongres* idea and again sounded like a brief for the Carnegie Commission. Secondly, the commission suggested that the Helpmekaar continue with its budding focus on education because this would equip the *volk* for the struggle to survive.⁵⁸ In so doing it identified the saving and upliftment of the *volk* through education⁵⁹ as the primary focus of the Helpmekaar. As a third leg of Helpmekaar strategy, this focus could be complemented by continuing to support worthy causes for the survival of the *volk* without taking responsibility for it and on condition that it did not jeopardise the financial position of the Helpmekaar. In essence, the specific formulation of this third leg meant that as a general principle the Helpmekaar should steer away from normal day-to-day “charity” that was seen as the work of other societies.⁶⁰ With the acceptance of this approach the Helpmekaar demarcated its identity as the torch bearer (in the private sphere) for the social elevation of the *volk* through education. This focus narrowed over time to eventually concentrate exclusively on tertiary education.

In terms of Seekings’ categories of modernist and anti-modernist, the Helpmekaar approach to welfare from the 1920s displayed elements of both.⁶¹ In its

⁵⁵ Schemes such as the establishment of labour colonies, land resettlement schemes and the establishment of industrial centres with housing schemes to employ and accommodate poor whites were suggested. The Helpmekaar felt that these schemes were the responsibility of the central government or local municipalities. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, “Rapport van Kommissie om Ondersoek in te stel en Rapporteer or ’n Praktiese, Opbouende Skema wat tot Inspirasie kan Dien vir die Helpmekaarbeweging”, p 8.

⁵⁶ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, “Rapport van Kommissie”, p 9.

⁵⁷ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, “Rapport van Kommissie”, p 9.

⁵⁸ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, “Rapport van Kommissie”, p 9.

⁵⁹ “die redding en handhawing van ons volk deur die onderwys”. HSO: HSCP Congressminutes, 25-26 April 1923, Rapport van Kommissie, p9.

⁶⁰ The minutes read: “... dis ’n liefdadigheidswerk wat by die ander vereniginge tuishoort”. See HSO: Minutes of the Cape Peninsula Helpmekaar Branch, 9 February 1916 to 29 October 1930, Council meeting, 11 September 1923, p 216.

⁶¹ Modernist: The Pact government’s approach of programmatic state aided welfare provision. Anti-modernist: The Carnegie Commission’s approach of “promoting self-help”; “measures for the discouragement and breaking down of dependency”; and its rejection of the something-for-nothing approach. See Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, pp 11, 13, 21, 31.

lobbying attempts, ideological rhetoric and motivation, the Helpmekaar identified with the welfare state-building approach followed by the Pact government after 1924. This synchronisation was aided by political linkages between the institutions of government and the Helpmekaar of which the following two examples are a demonstration. Adv. Wessel Roux, treasurer of the CC of the Helpmekaar (1917–1958) was a member of the five-man Pienaar Commission that was appointed by the government to investigate old age pensions and national insurance in February 1926.⁶² At the 1926 Congress of the Helpmekaar a resolution was passed that stressed the urgent financial need of thousands of aged poor and requested the government to give serious consideration to a system of old age pensions. Roux supported the motion and informed the Congress about the government commission. He assured the Congress that its decision would strengthen the hands of the commission.⁶³ This was followed by a motion during the 1928 Congress thanking the government for introducing old age pensions.⁶⁴ The 1929 Congress raised the bar even further by requesting that the pension scheme be extended to include needy, blind and disabled people under the age of 65.⁶⁵ In this way the Helpmekaar actively supported welfare state-building and exerted influence through its members who were actively involved in government policy-making bodies.

In his 2007 article on welfare state-building, Seekings quotes Dr A.J. Stals⁶⁶ on the poor white problem to demonstrate the ideology underlying the Pact government's welfare reforms:

In this country, there is a small number of whites against the natives, a few civilised people against uncivilised hordes, and for that reason it is so important that not a single white person should be allowed to go under ... There is no greater problem than this, because the existence of the European civilisation in this country hinges on it.⁶⁷

This provides the second example. Stals was elected as the chairman of the CC of the Helpmekaar in 1922,⁶⁸ a position he held until 1928, after which he served as vice-chairman from 1929 to 1931.⁶⁹ Although the Helpmekaar proceedings were dominated by the poor white problem from its inception, this endeavour intensified under the leadership of Stals. His first chairman's address in 1923 was dominated by the message that the *volk* was "bleeding" to death. He identified five possible causes of

⁶² Seekings, "Not a Single White Person", p 385.

⁶³ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 7–8 April 1926, p 9.

⁶⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 4–5 April 1928, p 15.

⁶⁵ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 3–4 April 1929, p 6.

⁶⁶ He was elected as National Party MP for Hopetown in 1924. See D.W. Kruger and C.J. Beyers (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek, Volume 3* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1977), p 772.

⁶⁷ Seekings, "Not a Single White Person", p 382.

⁶⁸ HSO: SCP Congress Minutes, 26–27 April 1922, p 7.

⁶⁹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 7–9 April 1931, p 5. In June 1948 he became Minister of Education, Health and Welfare in the Cabinet of D.F. Malan. See Kruger and Beyers (eds), *Suid-Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek, Volume 3*, p 772.

the bleeding. Apart from material and social degradation, he identified education that did not keep tread with the times; and the disintegration of family ties. He identified the combined effect of these circumstances on the “prestige of the *volk*” in its own eyes and “in the eyes of the less civilised population surrounding us”, with the resultant “gradual disappearance of the division (*skeidslyn*) between white and non-white”⁷⁰ as one of the causes of the bleeding. In ideological terms it resembled his 1924 statement. In terms of the main focus of the Helpmekaar, namely the social elevation of the *volk* through education, this translated into an ideal that became a central and permanent tenet of Helpmekaar rhetoric over time – the saving of the Afrikaner youth through education. This was the primary safeguard for Afrikaner survival.

While supporting the programmatic modernist approach of the Pact government on the one hand, the Helpmekaar education focus displayed elements of the anti-modernist Carnegie Commission approach to welfare. In its financial support to students there was a strong emphasis on creating independent individuals with self-respect and respectability that could sustain themselves. In return for its financial support the Helpmekaar not only demanded financial repayment with interest but in Carnegie Commission rhetoric it insisted on proof of “gratitude, good conduct, the right use of the relief ... No one should get something for nothing”.⁷¹ The development and implementation of this education focus is the topic of the next section.

The welfare activities of the Congress and Central Committee

Funds for welfare purposes were voted annually by the Congress to be disbursed by the CC. These funds were disbursed in two categories according to the template agreed upon in 1923. The first category was contributions to “worthy causes” that were specifically directed at addressing the Afrikaner poor white problem. The second category was money voted for bursaries (initially) and study loans for the Afrikaner⁷² youth – with special focus on those applicants who were needy and who showed promise.

The need for financial support for educational purposes became manifest very early in the history of the Helpmekaar. In September 1916, while still struggling to settle rebel debt, the CC received a request from the Riebeeck East branch requesting financial support for the local school. The Helpmekaar responded that for the time

⁷⁰ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, p 2.

⁷¹ Seekings, “The Carnegie Commission”, p 11.

⁷² In Helpmekaar terms, Afrikaners were ethnically Dutch/Afrikaans speaking and racially white. The Helpmekaar went to great lengths to stress that it was a non-political body – it was not supporting a specific political party. In practice the Helpmekaar was, however, overwhelmingly dominated by members sympathetic to the NP and the nationalist movement. As Helpmekaar membership was crucial for access to Helpmekaar loans the bulk of Helpmekaar aid went to the children of people sympathetic to the NP and the nationalist movement or who were perceived to be supporters thereof.

being it was not in a position to assist, referring the request to the ACVV.⁷³ Over the next five years, however, the Helpmekaar – through the debates at its annual congresses – adopted an educational focus. This shift was shaped by the changing nature of the requests for assistance that were received and the backdrop of the pervasive poor white problem.

Initially, requests received from scholars and students for financial assistance to further their studies could not be granted, because the Congress of the Helpmekaar had not voted any money for this purpose. However, during the 1918 Congress, the CC voted £800 for bursaries to “*Afrikaner seuns*” (Afrikaner boys/males) who had already completed a first degree, to pursue commercial/economic studies (*handelsopleiding*) overseas.⁷⁴ In the five-year period after the initial allocation of £800 for bursaries for commercial studies in 1918, the scope of the Helpmekaar as financier of Afrikaner education mushroomed and also evolved from bursaries to loans. The growing demand for loans⁷⁵ convinced the CC that by supporting the youth with loans to further their education, the Helpmekaar was providing an enormous service to the *volk* and it urged Congress to vote as much money as possible towards this cause.⁷⁶ In 1919 the allocation of bursaries was extended to fields of study other than commercial training, and £300 was voted for this purpose.⁷⁷ This decision proved very popular and applications for study bursaries and loans more than doubled to 130.⁷⁸ Eventually the CC accepted and allocated ten bursaries to the total value of £342 and 25 loans to the total value of £1 291 for the 1921 financial year.⁷⁹ The fact that the CC could report at the 1921 Congress that one of the students who had received a Helpmekaar loan, I.W. Olivier, had been employed in a school in

⁷³ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 2 September 1916, p 13.

⁷⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 22–23 May 1918, pp 1, 4. The initial proposal that was accepted by the Congress and to which this decision was a response, stated that the bursaries would be awarded to “*Afrikaner seuns*” (Afrikaner boys/males) for overseas studies. In the subsequent award of bursaries these two conditions appear to have been given preference. See also HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 8 June 1918, p 115; 10 August 1918, p 131; 1 February 1919, p 144; 8 March 1919, p 157. Also HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, Central Committee Report, p 3.

⁷⁵ In the 1919/1920 Congress year the demand for financial support for educational purposes grew rapidly, as demonstrated by the 62 applications for bursaries received by the CC. Of these, 12 were for commercial studies, 10 for medicine and dentistry, and the rest were for – among other fields – attorneys, education and mathematics. The CC also received more than 12 applications for loans from students who wanted to further their studies locally and abroad. The first loan (£30) was issued to G.C. Malherbe, a medical student who studied in Dublin, Ireland. The conditions were that he had to sign an IOU and repay the loan on demand or pay interest on the capital. See HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee 28 June 1919, pp 11–12; 9 August 1919, p 19; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 26–27 May 1920, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

⁷⁶ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, Report of the Central Committee, p 6.

⁷⁷ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, pp 8, 9.

⁷⁸ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

⁷⁹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, Report of the Central Committee, p 4; HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 27 August 1921, p 40.

Rustenburg in the Transvaal and had already started repaying his loan, seemed an indication that the system was successful in the development and upliftment of Afrikaner individuals through education, and that the circulation and growth of capital that the system of student loans promised was indeed being realised.⁸⁰ Private welfare towards higher education appeared to be a resounding success.

In 1921 the Congress accepted a proposal that all future financial support to students would be in the form of loans.⁸¹ While the 1923 annual report of the CC underlined the success of the system of financial support to scholars and students since 1918,⁸² it did sound a cautionary note that all the responsibility in this regard could not be placed on the Helpmekaar – a tendency for which they found proof in the many letters of recommendation for loans that they received.⁸³ Despite this caution, the CC was convinced that it was on the right track to concentrate on “upliftment through education” and that it could “never spend our money better than investing it in education”.⁸⁴

The methodology and ideology of Helpmekaar financial support

In the process of treating the applications of students and scholars for financial support in the period after the 1918 Congress, a number of methodological and ideological principles were established. A set of rules and regulations for the granting and repayment of loans was accepted by the 1923 Congress. Although the CC was initially very accommodating towards students it soon demonstrated that it was fully prepared to institute legal proceedings to recover Helpmekaar money if students did not keep their side of the loan agreement.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, Report of the Central Committee, p 4; HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 19 March 1921, p 3. Olivier, who came from Oudtshoorn, borrowed £60 in 1921 to study for a BA degree at the University of Stellenbosch. He settled his loan with a last instalment of £3 13s 4d in 1925, for a total repayment of £64 13s 4d.

⁸¹ The last bursary payment in this category was made in 1923. Thereafter only loans were granted. After 1923 bursaries were only granted in rare and highly exceptional cases.

⁸² From 1918, there were 180 students and scholars supported through loans and bursaries. Of these, 70 became independent by completing their studies, while 110 were still in the process of furthering their studies. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, Report of the Central Committee, p 6.

⁸³ It is unclear to whom this caution was directed. In the light of the ongoing correspondence with the government on the availability of government bursaries, the CC warning was probably part of its efforts to prod the government to extend the upper boundaries of free education. Bearing in mind that there were many applications received from outside the Cape Province it might also have been an admonition directed at the other provincial Helpmekaar Societies. On this see HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, Report of the Central Committee, p 6.

⁸⁴ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 3 December 1923, p 231.

⁸⁵ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 7 February 1920, p 75; 24 April 1920, pp 80–81; 25 May 1920, p 88. Pleading poverty as a reason for not repaying a loan was not accepted. Hermina Burger of Montagu who borrowed £35 was held responsible for repaying her loan despite the fact that she was unemployed and

On an ideological level the focus in the Helpmekaar constitution on the Dutch-speaking section of the South African “*volk*” meant that Helpmekaar welfare was racially and ethnically circumscribed and translated into support for white Afrikaners. To unleash the genie, the Helpmekaar lamp had to be rubbed by a combination of dire need (*behoeftheid*) and merit or worthiness (*verdienselikeid*).⁸⁶ The Helpmekaar was interested in the financial position of the parents of the candidate and focused primarily on students whose parents could not afford to pay for their children’s education.⁸⁷ The Helpmekaar’s definition of needy did not necessarily mean “poor white”; instead it referred to a condition in which the student was not in a position to further his or her studies without outside support, and it was the most needy applicants who were given preference.⁸⁸ Worthiness in Helpmekaar terms had both an intellectual and moral component. Although intelligence was not a precondition for financial support the most sought after candidates were those who were both needy and intelligent (*skrand*).⁸⁹

Furthermore, the character and so-called “moral values”, in other words the respectability⁹⁰ (*sedelik gedrag*⁹¹) of the candidate also carried considerable weight in the evaluation process. Individuals from the candidates’ local networks, such as clergy and teachers, were approached to glean information on the financial position and “character” of the applicants⁹² to determine whether they were worthy young

her father was a poor white (“*armeblanke*”). The outstanding £22 10s was eventually written off in 1935. See HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 21 May 1924 to 3 April 1928, Central Committee, 30 March 1925, p 70.

⁸⁶ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 18 October 1919, pp 33, 37.

⁸⁷ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 1 February 1919, p 143; 14 December 1918, p 139; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, Central Committee Report, p 3. The father of an applicant D.G. Steyn was too affluent (*welarend*) and his application was therefore rejected. See HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 28 June 1923, p 188.

⁸⁸ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 15 February 1924, p 248.

⁸⁹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 21–22 May 1919, p 8.

⁹⁰ The quest for respect and respectability as integral in Afrikaner nationalism has been treated extensively with regard to the Afrikaner working class women of the Garment Workers Union. See E. Brink, “‘Only Decent Girls are Employed’: The Respectability, Decency and Virtue of the Garment Workers on the Witwatersrand during the Thirties”, Paper presented at Wits History Workshop, The Making of Class, Johannesburg, 9–14 February 1987, pp 1–29; and L. Vincent “Bread and Honour: White Working Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 1, 2000, pp 61–78.

⁹¹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 22 November 1919, p 53. In the case of R.L. Barry, references were obtained from Prof. W.E. Malherbe of Stellenbosch, Rev. Gerdener, P.G. Roos, Prof. J.T. Morrison, Prof. A.H. Mackenzie and the Rev. Kotze. Barry seems to have managed to survive the scrutiny of his “*sedelike gedrag*” and his intellectual ability because it was reported that he was “*seer skrand*” and was subsequently awarded a bursary for commercial studies in Holland.

⁹² HSO:HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 14 December 1918, p 139; 10 May 1919, p 175; 20 May 1919, p 178.

Afrikaners (*verdienstelike jong Afrikaners*).⁹³ Respectability was a two-way street that was rewarded and simultaneously enforced. The Helpmekaar associated with and sought respectability from the candidates it selected. In the process of awarding financial support it strengthened this respectability by providing access to better career opportunities and higher social class – as it put it, *'n beter werkkring*⁹⁴ and a *ho'er Handelsstand*.⁹⁵ The Helpmekaar's opinion was that a higher level of education, and specifically tertiary education, bestowed these advantages on the chosen candidates. In that sense, Helpmekaar support was an exercise in building respectability.

It is difficult to pinpoint the Helpmekaar definition of respectability but one can gain glimpses of it in Helpmekaar correspondence with students. Negatively perceived behaviour or characteristics could jeopardise a student's chances of financial support. Inconstant behaviour or fickleness (*onstandvastigheid*), dishonesty or stepping out of line from the perceived norm, were frowned upon and led to the rejection of applications – even those of candidates considered to be intelligent.⁹⁶ Rosa van der Merwe, a Helpmekaar beneficiary was instructed by the CC – on the basis of her correspondence with the secretary – to pay more attention to her use of language.⁹⁷ It appears therefore that respectability was also measured by the purity of an individual's use of the Afrikaans language. The application submitted by B.B. Eybers, who aspired to become a missionary, was rejected on the grounds that his application was untidy and slapdash, which was judged to reflect negatively on his respectability.⁹⁸

It was also expected from beneficiaries to show the appropriate gratitude and appreciation for the Helpmekaar support they received (Carnegie Commission style) and a lack thereof met with stern disapproval and indignation. The secretary reprimanded such beneficiaries, notifying them that their behaviour would be

⁹³ HSO:HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 28 June 1919, pp 10, 11. In 1941 the process was formalised to ensure the continued worthiness and respectability of students receiving financial support with the introduction of two official forms that had to be filled in annually by the local minister (*predikant*). He had to comment on the "thrift" and "good behaviour" of the candidate, and also had to make a recommendation on whether the candidate's conduct ("*lewenswyse*") merited further financial support; and the head of the educational institution where the student was enrolled. Furthermore he had to report on the candidate's academic progress and class attendance, and also had to make a recommendation whether the candidate's progress merited further financial support. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 27–28 March 1941, pp 12–13.

⁹⁴ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 22 November 1919, p 46.

⁹⁵ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 7 February 1920, p 71.

⁹⁶ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 10 May 1919, pp 174–175; 20 May 1919, p 178.

⁹⁷ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 27 August 1921, pp 38, 41.

⁹⁸ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 16 February 1923, p 152. "*Sy applikasie is baie slordig ingevul en aangesien ons geld toeken aan verdienstelike jongmense word hy afgewys.*"

reported to the CC.⁹⁹ The loan originally allocated to F.J. Celliers was withheld when a negative report on his behaviour came to the attention of the CC.¹⁰⁰ Rudeness and discourtesy evidenced in correspondence met with strongly disapproval.¹⁰¹ Neglecting one's duty – such as not repaying one's loan regularly or not informing the Helpmekaar about a change of address – were seen as careless and were interpreted as disrespectful; this invariably met with a stern letter from the secretary.¹⁰² Trust in the Helpmekaar was also a consideration. When the father of Douw Steyn complained about the formulation of the IOU he had to sign, the CC's response was that Steyn simply had to trust the CC otherwise he would not receive financial support.¹⁰³

On the opposite pole of the behavioural spectrum, application letters written in a *mooi gees* (submissions that came across well) found favour with the CC.¹⁰⁴ In response to a request to comment on the worthiness of an applicant, Paul Roos, the principal of the Stellenbosch school of the same name, reported that the applicant was a well brought up young man who deserved to be supported.¹⁰⁵ A candidate's ability to gain financial support from sources other than the Helpmekaar, or showing a willingness to utilise his/her own funds was seen as a guarantee or confirmation by the Helpmekaar of the suitability of the particular applicant.¹⁰⁶ In 1921, sound health was added to the respectability basket when a question about the state of health of applicants was added to the application form.¹⁰⁷ Diligence was also viewed favourably and had the potential to secure the applicant a second chance.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 22 March 1923, p 161. The importance of showing gratitude is also apparent in the demonstrations of gratitude that were specifically recorded in the minutes. The fact that R.L. Barry, one of the first students sent to Holland and America for commercial training, personally visited the Helpmekaar office after his return from America to express his gratitude was duly recorded. Similarly, M.H. de Kock recognised the financial support of the Helpmekaar for his overseas studies in the foreword of his published PhD dissertation; this acknowledgement was likewise recorded. See HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 22 March 1923, pp 161, 162.

¹⁰⁰ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 28 June 1923, p 193. "*Mnr J.L. Jordaan skrywe dat F.J. Celliers aan wie geld toegesê was so sleg uitgedraai het.*"

¹⁰¹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 3 December 1923, p 228.

¹⁰² HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921–15 April 1924, Central Committee, 17 March 1924, p 254; HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 21 May 1924 to 3 April 1928, Central Committee, 31 August 1927, p 193; 21 May 1924, p 4.

¹⁰³ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 12 November 1921, p 54.

¹⁰⁴ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 22 November 1919, p 46.

¹⁰⁵ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 11 December 1920, pp 146–147.

¹⁰⁶ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 27 August 1921, p 38.

¹⁰⁷ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 10 December 1921, p 64.

¹⁰⁸ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 19 March 1921 to 15 April 1924, Central Committee, 15 October 1923, p 215.

The respectability of the successful applicants was monitored closely and the Helpmekaar took remedial action when deemed necessary. In March 1926 the secretary indicated to the CC that letters received from the students reporting back on their progress were becoming more courteous, and that only one letter was returned to the sender – who in the meantime had apologised for the rude tone of his letter.¹⁰⁹ The CC also recommended that branches should “keep an eye on students who are supported with Helpmekaar money”.¹¹⁰ There were, however, cases where students were given a chance to redeem themselves and regain respectability. For example, C.J. Jooste who was involved in an unspecified “incident” in Stellenbosch, was informed that the incident should serve as a warning. It was noted in the minutes that “we will have mercy on him and continue supporting him”.¹¹¹

Conforming to Helpmekaar norms of respectability was therefore an ideological precondition for financial support and a harmonious relationship with the Helpmekaar. An integral part of Helpmekaar rhetoric was the need to create self-sufficient and independent individuals¹¹² who were expected to display the respectability worthy of a young Afrikaner supported by the Helpmekaar.

The focus of Helpmekaar welfare education: Primary, secondary or tertiary?

Apart from revealing the contestations and dynamics within the Helpmekaar management as far as its focus on education was concerned, this section also provides a revealing lens into the politics of white education at the time and the Helpmekaar’s relationship with other organisations such as the ACVV, with whom they shared similar interests.

An early example of criticism against the Helpmekaar’s focus on educational welfare arose during the 1923 Congress, when the Helpmekaar’s emphasis on providing support to commerce students who were furthering their studies at overseas universities and institutions was questioned. A resolution was accepted that more money should rather be granted to the deprived section of the *volk* within South Africa than on bursaries/loans for students who were studying abroad.¹¹³ The context of this resolution was an unprecedented three-year economic depression which made the chairman, Dr A.J. Stals, reach the conclusion that economically speaking, the *volk* was bleeding to death.¹¹⁴ His view coincided with the growing prominence of the poor white question in public discourse and in Helpmekaar circles.

¹⁰⁹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 21 May 1924 to 3 April 1928, Central Committee, 19 March 1926, p 129.

¹¹⁰ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 7-8 April 1926, Report of the Central Committee, p 5.

¹¹¹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 13 June 1928 to 12 December 1935, Central Committee, 20 February 1929, p 23.

¹¹² HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 1 February 1919, p 142.

¹¹³ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, p 13.

¹¹⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 April 1923, “Chairman’s Address”, p 2.

Because the students who qualified for overseas studies already possessed a first degree, it was probably felt that genuinely impoverished whites should be supported instead.

In 1935 the Helpmekaar Congress accepted a proposal that a commission of five members should be formed to investigate the desirability of the Helpmekaar adjusting its focus to provide assistance to school-goers rather than those who were enrolled for higher education. In the motivation of her proposal Mrs Anna Geyer argued that although the Helpmekaar performed a great service by educating a group of Afrikaans men when the *volk* certainly needed such leadership skills, there was currently an oversupply of highly qualified Afrikaners and many were unemployed. She further argued that this situation was exacerbated by the range of bursaries that was being granted by the state for higher education. In contrast to this oversupply, as many as 46 percent of the white population did not possess a Standard Six Certificate. Geyer went on to say that 58 percent of the farmers in the Union had not passed Standard Six – and that this percentage rose as high as 71 percent in certain poorer regions of the country. On the basis of these statistics, she maintained that the *volk* was not in a position to profit from the scholarship of the experts educated by the Helpmekaar. She argued that the Helpmekaar should rather assist the lower section of the *volk* to gain a higher level of basic education. By focusing on school education, it would be able to assist five times as many pupils than was the case with students. The proposal was unanimously accepted by Congress and it was decided to task the proposed committee to establish whether it would be desirable and possible for the Helpmekaar to cooperate with the ACVV on this matter. The committee to take the proposal forward comprised the chairman, Rev. F.X. Roome, Mrs A. Geyer, Dr C.F. Albertyn, Mrs M.C. Botha and Mrs H. Roux. In what was probably an attempt to bolster the respectability of the committee and to gain an external perspective on the issue, Mrs Roux nominated Prof C.G.W. Schumann of Stellenbosch University to replace her on the committee.¹¹⁵

Although a copy of the report of the select commission has not survived, it is clear from the feedback given by the commission at the 1936 Congress that the Geyer proposal was not in fact endorsed by the commission. A proposal by Advocate W. Roux that attempted in part to accommodate the sentiment of the original suggestion (that more money should be spent on school education) was however accepted by the Congress. Accordingly, a total of £500 would be made available annually to the Helpmekaar branches in subsidies to allocate on a pound-for-pound basis to assist pupils in local schools, but there was a proviso that no branch would receive more than £20 for this purpose.¹¹⁶ Lack of evidence makes it difficult to determine what made the commission decide that the Helpmekaar should stick to its original focus on tertiary educational support. The presence on the committee of members with a tertiary education, notably Rev. F.X. Roome, Dr C.F. Albertyn and Prof. C.G.W. Schumann might perhaps have been the reason, because they probably realised the

¹¹⁵ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 23–24 April 1935, pp 10–11.

¹¹⁶ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 15–16 April 1936, p 10.

value and credibility (not to mention respectability) of such education. The fact that C.G.W. Schumann owed his position at Stellenbosch University largely to the generous support of the Helpmekaar, might also have influenced the commission's findings.

The broader context of the motivation for the Geyer proposal should also be taken into account. One of the major initiatives of the ACVV in the 1930s was to combat the tendency of white pupils to leave school at an early age. To drive these efforts the ACVV established a Standard Six Committee in 1932 of which Geyer was an important driving force. The aim of this committee was to get as many pupils as possible to attend school up to Standard Six. Although the Helpmekaar was sympathetic towards the ACVV, abandoning its focus on tertiary education would have stripped them of the one defining characteristic/branding that differentiated its work from that of the ACVV. Against the background of an increasingly crowded and competitive Afrikaner cultural and welfare organisational environment, the sacrifice was probably too much to ask. The subsidy proposal was probably a compromise to retain the Helpmekaar's defining identity and to keep its relationship with the ACVV intact.

Furthermore, changing urbanisation patterns gave rise to a move to question the Helpmekaar's focus on subsidising academic education. During the 1947 Congress the impact of Afrikaner urbanisation was demonstrated by a proposal put forward by the Port Elizabeth West branch that the Helpmekaar should also support the *Afrikaner seun en -dogter* to gain technical and apprenticeship training. The argument was that taking such a step would also equip these young Afrikaners to take their rightful place in the industrial sector. Mr Burmeister, the Port Elizabeth representative, maintained that because the salaries received by apprentices were so meagre, many of them ended up as ordinary labourers because they could not make ends meet on an apprenticeship salary. However, the chairman gave the Congress the assurance that such applications had certainly not been rejected in the past and that the proposal should therefore be dismissed.¹¹⁷ This suggestion did, however, reflect the concerns of newly urbanised areas with a high percentage of poor whites, such as was the case in Port Elizabeth.

The Helpmekaar as career counselling centre for the youth of the *volk*

In 1920 a proposal by the Victoria West branch that the Congress should nominate a committee to advise young people about study courses and institutions was accepted¹¹⁸ and it was decided that the CC would serve in a career guidance capacity for students. Those who wished to take advantage of this assistance were advised to direct their inquiries to the secretary.¹¹⁹ At a time when there were few student

¹¹⁷ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 2–3 April 1947, p 9.

¹¹⁸ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 26–27 May 1920, pp 4, 5, 9, 10, 16.

¹¹⁹ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 25–26 May 1921, Report of the Central Committee, p 4; HSO: HSCP Minute book, 28 June 1919 to 19 February 1921, Central Committee, 19 March 1921, p 3. By 1931 the CC found it necessary for the first time to refer to the administrative impact of the ever-growing number of students on the books of the Helpmekaar. By the end

counselling facilities available, the Helpmekaar central office¹²⁰ and its officials¹²¹ duly became a centre providing students with assistance over and above the financial support they received. The Helpmekaar functioned as a “career guidance information centre” for scholars and students who were now able to enquire about courses, career opportunities and financing possibilities.¹²²

In its annual report to the 1934 Congress the CC elaborated extensively on the close interactive relationship between the students and the Helpmekaar. It noted the expressions of gratitude and appreciation made by the vast majority of the students for the support they received.¹²³ In their relationship with the students the CC – which was the “public face” of the Helpmekaar – did more than just allocate financial aid to students. In its ongoing correspondence with the students it also acted as guardians and engaged on a personal level with the unique circumstances of each student. In the process, friendship and reciprocal trust developed between the CC and the Helpmekaar’s beneficiaries. Students were even referred to as “our sons and daughters”. The CC was also imbued with a sense of satisfaction that the Helpmekaar could make this meaningful contribution to the education of the youth and gave the honour to God “from whom the Helpmekaar was born”.¹²⁴

This relationship between students and the Helpmekaar was particularly relevant for the first four decades of its existence – the years that coincided with the heyday of Afrikaner nationalism and ethnic mobilisation. For some students the Helpmekaar became a home away from home and accorded the Helpmekaar the

of 1930 the CC had 250 students who were in the process of repaying loans and 110 students were still actively studying. The personal attention that these students required and the correspondence that this generated increased the workload of the secretary and treasurer tremendously. The secretary periodically made use of an assistant secretary. The treasurer received an annual honorarium but was not a fulltime employee of the Helpmekaar. See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 7–9 April 1931, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

¹²⁰ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 4 November 1916, p 24; HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 11–12 June 1917, Report of the Central Committee, p 3. These facilities were located in the Lloyds Building, Burg Street, Cape Town.

¹²¹ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 3 July 1916, p 5; 20 April 1918, p 105; HSO:HSCP Congress Minutes, 11–12 June 1917, Report of the Central Committee, p 3. The secretary was the only fulltime paid official and the treasurer received an annual honorarium.

¹²² HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 3 July 1916 to 20 May 1919, Central Committee, 14 December 1918, p 137; 8 March 1919, pp 151, 157; 5 April 1919, pp 164–165. The education department had no official career guidance system for most of the 1920s and 1930s. School principals provided informal advice to pupils on career guidance. In 1937 career guidance was introduced as a school subject for Standards 5 and 6. The first inspector of career guidance for learners was only introduced in April 1944. See C.R. Venter, “Ontwikkelingsrigtings in die Onderwys van Kaapland hoofsaaklik met betrekking tot sekondêre onderwys 1930-1958”, PhD thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1973, pp 467–468, 469, 471.

¹²³ For example: “Heartfelt thanks for your support. It not only enabled me to support myself but also my widowed mother and baby sister ... It is difficult for me to grasp that I am writing my last cheque to you this evening and want to thank you for your patience throughout all these years and especially for your love and compassion after my mother’s death.” See HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 3–4 April 1934, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

¹²⁴ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 3–4 April 1934, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

status of an extended family; there was little evidence of dissenting voices. There is, however, some evidence that towards the 1960s, when the mesmerising, prescriptive ideological straitjacket of Afrikaner nationalism began to lose its grip on urbanised and increasingly consumer-orientated Afrikaners, the career counselling function of the Helpmekaar was resented by some students. Pieter-Dirk Uys who was awarded a Helpmekaar loan in 1969 recently related how the Helpmekaar “insisted”¹²⁵ that he take up a position at the SABC when he returned from his studies in Television and Film Technology at the London School of Film in 1972. Instead, he chose to break free of the restrictions placed upon him and joined the non-racial Space Theatre together with many other self-assured and “angry”¹²⁶ young people in Cape Town.

Helpmekaar: Lobbyist for educational causes

By its close involvement in the education of the Afrikaner youth, the Helpmekaar shaped and challenged the history of education in the Cape Province for the half century after Union in 1910. The Helpmekaar acted as a lobbyist for educational causes by prodding the education authorities on the burning issues of the day. In the process the CC played a crucial role in addressing the calls to the relevant departments, meeting with officials such as the superintendent general of education in the Cape Province,¹²⁷ and following-up on responses from state departments. In the process the efforts and contributions of the Helpmekaar were met with appreciation and due recognition from authorities such as the Cape Provincial Administration and the Education Department.¹²⁸

In his identification of the drivers for the introduction of state social assistance in the early 1920s, Seekings comes to the conclusion that the demand for this assistance “was supported by a broad coalition of white political actors”, of which the National Party, “driven by a concern to reorder society”¹²⁹ according to their strategy of racial segregation, was the primary force. As a private lobbyist the Helpmekaar became an integral part of this broad coalition. The degree to which it was successful in the field of education is probably best demonstrated by the fact that one of the main reasons advanced for the decline and eventual demise of the Helpmekaar branch system in 1965, was the disappearance of the need for educational support of primary and secondary-level education. This came about as a result of the introduction of adequate free compulsory education by the state. In this regard the Helpmekaar – or at least its branch system – was a casualty of its own success.

¹²⁵ “Die Hardste Baklei met Homself: Uys vir Lewenswerk Vereer”, *Die Burger*, 22 June 2015, p 13.

¹²⁶ “Die Hardste Baklei met Homself: Uys vir Lewenswerk Vereer” *Die Burger*, 22 June 2015, p 13.

¹²⁷ HSO: HSCP Minute Book, 21 May 1924 to 3 April 1928, Central Committee, 28 October 1925, pp 103–104.

¹²⁸ HSO: HSCP Congress Minutes, 23–24 April 1935, Report of the Central Committee, p 3.

¹²⁹ Seekings, “Not a Single White Person”, pp 378–379.

Conclusion

“The Helpmekaar was born of God”.¹³⁰ These famous words uttered in Bloemfontein by M.T. Steyn, the former state president of the Orange Free State Republic to the Oranje Vroue Vereniging (a Free State women’s welfare society) in his last public speech before his death in 1916, became the inspiration for the missionary zeal with which the Helpmekaar approached its chosen role in twentieth-century South Africa. This “blessing” by Steyn was as close as one could get to an Afrikaner version of a papal blessing¹³¹ and it ensured the canonisation of the Helpmekaar. As an Afrikaner “welfare” organisation it had an ethnic and nationalistic flavour. Focusing on upliftment of the Afrikaner youth through education, it played a significant role in the Cape Province in combating the poor white problem both through the investment of its funds and acting as a public voice expressing the educational needs of a marginalised section of Afrikaner youth. Despite its sectional ethnic and racial focus and the accompanying socio-political engineering, it acted as welfare catalyst that contributed significantly – monetarily and otherwise – in effecting educational change. Indeed, its contributions benefited a far wider community than had originally been intended.

¹³⁰ J.J. Oberholster and M.C.E. van Schoor, *President Steyn aan die Woord: Openbare Geskifte en Toesprake van M.T. Steyn* (SACUM, Bloemfontein, 1953), pp 221–222.

¹³¹ President Steyn was in Cape Town during the founding congress of the HSCP in June 1916. His return to the Free State on the evening of 29 June was mentioned by the chairman on the last day of the conference proceedings, to which the representative of the Steynsburg Helpmekaar Branch remarked: “Hij is die ongekroonde koning niet alleen van die OVS, maar van geheel de Unie.” (Translation: He is the uncrowned king not only of the Orange Free State but of the whole Union.)