

**From a farm road to a public highway:  
The Dutch Reformed Church and its changing views regarding  
the city and urbanisation in the first half of the 20th century  
(1916-1947)<sup>1</sup>**

*Robert Vosloo*

Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology  
Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

*Abstract*

The big question which should be in every theologian's mind is: How did the Dutch Reformed Church's response to the rapid urbanisation of the Afrikaner people in the first half of the 20th century unfold and develop? This was a painful transition to the many Afrikaner *volk*. And in order to address this question, this article looks more closely at some of the popular booklets by Rev JR Albertyn from the 1940s, the *Kerk en Stad* report (1947), and the published papers and decisions of the *Volkskongres* of 1947. These texts give us a glimpse onto the (changing) views on the city and urbanisation within the Dutch Reformed Church, as well as within the broader Afrikaner society. This article will also highlight the possible theological convictions that played a role in an attempt to face the challenges arising from a new urban environment. This article will furthermore focus on the way in which the discourse, within the Dutch Reformed Church, which related the challenges posed by urbanisation to the so-called "race problem", was dealt with.

**Introduction**

During the Second World War, Rev JR Albertyn, the then general secretary of the Poor Relief Committee ("Armesorgkommissie") of the Dutch Reformed Church in the then Transvaal, wrote a booklet entitled *Die*

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<sup>1</sup> This article was read as a paper at the annual meeting of the Church Historical Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA) in Bloemfonte on 15-17 August 2013. The theme of the conference was: "The African churches and the environment in historical perspective". One of the sub-themes was: "The Church and the City".

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*Boerekerk word Stadskerk (The Boer Church becomes a City Church)*. This revealing brochure, published in 1942,<sup>2</sup> ends with the following words:

God's Word starts with a garden – Paradise – but ends with a city – the new Jerusalem. In the Old Testament one finds mainly the depiction of the agricultural era of the world, but in the New Testament it is the era of the city. This will also be the direction for our church. In the beginning the rural perspective was dominant in religion, but the centre of gravity has now shifted to the urban aspect. May the church have the necessary vision and faith to settle successfully in this new environment” (1942:36).

What is striking about this quotation – and the booklet as a whole – is the sense of the historical (and even theological) progression from rural to city life. Although the booklet is clear on the pitfalls associated with urban reality, the author is nevertheless religiously candid about the fact that the church should adapt to this new reality.

This booklet should be seen against the backdrop of the rapid urbanisation of the Afrikaner community in the first half of the 20th century. In the early 1940s, the Dutch Reformed Church responded to this challenge by hosting two church conferences; one was held in Johannesburg and the other in Cape Town (this is according to Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:iii). Albertyn also wrote a series of booklets at the request of the General Poor Relief Committee of the Dutch Reformed Church in Transvaal (or the “N.H. of G. Kerk”). This series was called the “My eie’ reeks” (“My own” series), and titles in this series of 12 booklets include “My eie lewensmaat” (“My own spouse”), “My eie nasie” (“My own nation”) and “My eie kerk” (“My own church”). The title of the first booklet in this series is relevant for the theme of this article: “My eie boeresitplekkie of sal ek stad toe trek” (“My own boer space, or should I move to the city”). This series was intended, as stated in the *Preface* dated September 1941, not as a booklet about the poor but as a booklet addressed to the poor (the so-called “minderbevoorregtes” (“the less privileged”)) (Albertyn 1941:*Preface*). This project can be seen as a continuation of the attempt to deal with the “poor white problem”, as reflected in the report of the Carnegie Commission of 1932, and the *volk* and church congresses of 1934 in Kimberley.<sup>3</sup> In 1947

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<sup>2</sup> The booklet is not dated, but it was published as a series in *Die Kerkbode* in 1942. For an announcement of the publication of the booklet, see *Die Kerkbode*, 4 November 1942, 15.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Volume 5 of the Carnegie Report, which deals with “Die Armblanke en die Maatskappy” (“The Poor Whites and Society”) (Albertyn and Rothmann 1932), as well as the report of the national conference (“volkskongres”) on the poor white problem held at

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another influential national conference (“volkskongres”) was held in Johannesburg, this time dealing with the phenomenon of rapid Afrikaner urbanisation. This conference was preceded by the publication of an influential report on the situation of Afrikaners in the city, *Kerk en Stad (The Church and the City)*.

In this article I would like to attend more closely to some booklets by Rev JR Albertyn from the 1940s, the *Kerk en Stad* report, and the published papers and decisions of the *Volkskongres* of 1947, since these texts give us a glimpse onto the (changing) views on the city and urbanisation within the Dutch Reformed Church, and within the broader Afrikaner society. In addition to the descriptions of the city and urbanisation, this article is also interested in highlighting the possible theological convictions that come to the fore in the attempt to help people to deal with the challenges of a new environment. In his book, *The Afrikaners: a biography of a people*, Herman Giliomee rightly notes: “Urbanisation was a rapid, chaotic, and almost always traumatic experience” (Giliomee 2003:323). Elsewhere I have argued that the so-called poor white problem, along with the church’s response, was closely intertwined with views regarding the so-called “native problem” (Vosloo 2011). In a similar vein, one can question the role played by racial views and attitudes in the process of dealing with the challenges associated with Afrikaner urbanisation.

The way in which the Dutch Reformed Church responded to the challenges posed by Afrikaner migration to the city in the 1940s represents an important shift from the attitude during the first decades of the 20th century. This changing attitude was of course linked to the changing economic situation in South Africa, which attracted people from all over country into the cities. Literature shows that before the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the number of Afrikaners in the cities was fewer than 10 000, and by 1920 it was around 100 000, and in 1945, according to the church census, there were at least around 400 000 Afrikaners (cf. Botha 1957:202; Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:iii; Giliomee 2003:323). This new reality challenged the Dutch Reformed Church, which was in essence, then viewed as a “Boerekerk”<sup>4</sup> (an Afrikaner rural church), to reconfigure its identity and mission. This posed quite a challenge, since – in the eyes of many – the South African society was marked by a separation between rural and city life, with the perception that English-speaking white people lived mainly in the cities and the Afrikaans-speaking white people lived mainly in the rural areas. Understandably, the city was viewed as a hostile space for the Afrikaner (cf. Botha 1957:202).

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Kimberley in October 1934 (Du Toit 1934). For a discussion of the Dutch Reformed Church’s engagement with the so-called poor white problem, see also Vosloo (2011).

<sup>4</sup> The term “Boerekerk” refers to the church of the Boers (which refers to the white Afrikaners in general), but in this article the dominant meaning is a rural church or a church of Afrikaner farmers.

### **A second trek?**

In the decades following the Anglo-Boer War, the Dutch Reformed Church was clearly concerned about the fact that thousands of Afrikaans-speaking white people were leaving their farms and rural areas as a result of dire economic circumstances in search for work and new opportunities in the cities. In an attempt to deal with the “poor white problem” the Dutch Reformed Church organised a major conference in 1916 at Cradock. This was the first of a series of conferences addressing this issue, with similar conferences later held at Stellenbosch (1922), Bloemfontein (1923) and – following the publication of the Carnegie report in 1932 – in Kimberley (1934). At the Cradock conference of 1916, the dominant call was still to work at solutions to try and keep the Afrikaner in the rural areas, and even help those who are in the cities to return to the rural areas (see Botha 1957:205). The call was “Back to the Land,” and city life was viewed as a graveyard for the Afrikaner soul (cf. Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:58). Dr DF Malan, who was also one of the speakers at the Cradock conference, afterwards wrote a series of articles for the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* (of which he was the editor), and these articles were later published in a booklet, titled *De Achteruitgang van Ons Volk: De Oorzaken Daarvan en de Redmiddelen (The Degeneration of Our Volk: The Reasons and the Solutions)*. In a chapter, with a heading “Terug naar het Land” (Back to the Land), Malan refers to the trek to the cities as a new or second Great Trek, and further comments: “But, sadly, this trek is not from confinement to open space. It is the move from a condition of freedom and abundance to a condition of poverty and want. It is the trek from Canaan back to Egypt. It is the journey of the happy and prosperous landowner to the land of misery” (1917:21).

Malan was also a speaker at the conference dealing with the poor whites that was held in Bloemfontein in 1923, and here, his contribution already reflects something of a shift in the approach to the reality of urbanisation. In this speech Malan (1923:7) states: “(the question of) people already living in the cities is not, or need not be, something completely negative. It may be the foundation of a stronger Afrikaner nation (*volk*). No *volk* can be strong if it consists only of farmers”. Again he biblically referred to the journey of the Israelites to Egypt, which he described as something “apparently evil, but it ensured their survival as a nation. We also see the trek to the cities as a vice (‘euwel’), but something good might be born out of it” (Malan 1923:8). After the Bloemfontein conference Malan again published some of the articles he wrote in the wake of the conference for *Die Burger* in booklet form, under the telling title *Die groot vlug (The great flight)*. Malan opens this brochure by acknowledging that the poor whites conference in Bloemfontein took decisions that would, if implemented, go a long way to

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improving the conditions of the Afrikaners in the rural areas and curb the exodus to the cities. But he is also clear about the fact that this will not deal effectively with the problem, since a more comprehensive approach would be necessary, including a board appointed by parliament to deal exclusively with this issue. For Malan, the people (the white Afrikaners) moving to the city were not merely motivated by a sense of adventure or by the comforts and pleasures of city life. Instead, at least according to Malan, they were motivated by economic pressures (cf. Malan 1923:8). And this booklet also indicates, as did his earlier writings, that Malan viewed racial segregation as an important way of ensuring the (financial) survival of white Afrikaners in the cities. As Richard Elphick (2012:137) notes in his recent book, *The equality of believers*: “Malan’s views on poor whites had narrowed into a white-centred theory that overshadowed his mission-derived concerns.”

Malan’s views that the Afrikaner *volk* should face the challenges of urbanisation head-on became influential and over time the view became stronger – also in church circles – that one should adapt to this new reality. However, the sense of nostalgia for rural life, and the sense of the dangers associated with city life remained, but slowly the awareness grew that city life (and the church in the city) can also be a blessing, albeit a mixed blessing. As Giliomee (2003:399) summarises this new social reality: “(T)he Boer on the farm was a dying breed and the real challenge for Afrikaners lay in the cities.”

The centre of gravity was clearly shifting. Rev. JR Albertyn’s call in his booklet *Die Boerekerk word Stadskerk* (1942:8, 9) that the church should deal with this reality captures the new situation well:

Our nation (“volk”) was born and bred on the wide open plains. All that is dear in our cultural heritage, all that is typical of the Afrikaner nation, is inseparably bound to the land, the soil, rural life. Here the Afrikaans flame burns brightest and warmest ... It is therefore with deepest sadness that we observe how life on the farm (“die boerelewe”) is moving into the background as it is replaced with a new life style. Yet our church, with its deeply rooted Calvinistic worldview, has always proven its close links with the soul of the nation (“met die volksiel”) and knows how to serve its needs. And this gives us hope: the rural church (“boerekerk”) must and will become a city church (“stadskerk”).

This quotation reflects something of the nostalgic longing for rural life, but this nostalgia is interwoven with a kind of practical realism that acknowledges the need to deal with the inevitable, and even to make a virtue out of a vice.

### **Church and City (1947)**

Towards the end of *Die boerekerk word stadskerk* (which was initially written as a series of articles for *Die Kerkbode*), Albertyn endorses the plea for a special commission of inquiry to deal with the Afrikaner migration to the cities and the implications of that for the church. Albertyn suspects that the ensuing report would be one of the most momentous ever submitted to the church (cf. Albertyn 1942:36). In 1944 a decision was indeed taken to appoint a commission of inquiry by the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches to study the church and the religious situation in the nine major cities of the then Union of South Africa, namely Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Kimberley and Johannesburg (“die Witwatersrand”). The goal of this inquiry was to gather information on the economic, social and religious situation of the members of the Dutch Reformed Churches in the cities of the Union of South Africa, and to interpret these data to indicate the church’s course of action for the future (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:iii). The inquiry was furthermore limited to urban whites, although the report states the need for reflection on the situation of black people in the cities and the significance of this for the church. However, the report referred to black urbanisation only as it impacted on white urbanisation, for instance, when dealing with the mixing of races and segregated neighbourhoods (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:v). This inquiry into white urbanisation produced a report that was published in 1947 under the title; *Kerk en stad (Church and city)*.

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed description and evaluation of this influential report.<sup>5</sup> I do want to highlight, though, the way that the report describes life in the city as a mixed blessing, as well as the way it contrasts rural and city life. In the description of the characteristics of urban life, the report mentions some positive aspects such as the possibility of acquiring greater wealth, given the access to more jobs, and that children in the city also have access to better educational opportunities. In addition, the reports state that city life provides the opportunity for character formation, since it requires virtues such as punctuality, orderliness and trustworthiness, and because the surrounding social problems call on one’s social consciousness. There are also opportunities in the cities for enriching oneself through cultural activities, arts and science, as well as through greater access to the media and larger social gathering. The report even mentions that in all past ages, the great reform movements on the religious terrain came out of the cities of the world (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:37). This more

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<sup>5</sup> The report was viewed as of monumental significance for church and national life and has been described as a milestone in the history of the development of the Dutch Reformed Church’s societal care (see Botha 1957:204). In the first month after its publication at least 5 000 copies of the report were sold (see *Volkskongres* 1947:1).

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positive description of city life is countered by the reference to negative influences, such as materialism, secularisation, the disruption of family life and class differences (cf. Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:38).<sup>6</sup>

The way in which the report differentiates between rural and city life is also quite telling (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:42-47).

- In the life on the farm and in rural areas one finds a greater dependence on the Creator, given that the forces of nature cannot be controlled, while in the city a person is more dependent on people (like the employer, the trader, the government). In the process there is a danger that the Afrikaner can lose his connection to God.
- A second difference relates to a person's public position. In the rural area he (sic) is known personally by others, and this can keep him on course, but in the city he can disappear into the masses, and the anonymity of city life can lead to promiscuity and other excesses.
- The uniformity ("gelyksoortigheid") of rural life is further contrasted with the heterogeneity ("vreemdsoortigheid") of city life. In the city one finds a plurality of languages and races.
- A fourth difference relates the stability of the rural areas compared to the constant change in the city. This can destabilise family life and undermine traditions.
- The report also contrasts frugal country life with the excesses and temptations of city life. The temptation to spend money at the "bioscope", bar and dog races are specifically mentioned.
- In the city the personal independence of life on the farm gives way to subservience ("knegskap"). This can lead to feelings of humiliation and inferiority, resulting in a lack of confidence.
- The tranquillity of rural life as opposed to the restlessness of city life.
- The report also contrasts the racial apartheid in the rural areas with the mixing of races in the city. The report argues that the well-established Boer tradition of blood purity and the concomitant disapproval of any social contact with "non-whites" has served the church well in

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<sup>6</sup> In 1949, as a result of the recommendation of the Volkskongres of 1947, a national conference dealing with issues of public morality ("maatskaplike euwels") was held. See *Om hulle ontwil* (For their Sake) (1949).

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the past, but urban poverty is a powerful force to obliterate the dividing lines between whites and blacks.

- Lastly, the report mentions that the honest, pious attitudes that prevail in the rural areas are exchanged in the city for a recklessness in religious and moral matters.<sup>7</sup>

The report clearly romanticises rural life and demonises city life, yet the goal does not seem to be to motivate a movement back to the countryside, but rather to make members aware of the fact that they should join city congregations, and that they need cultural support structures to maintain their balance in the cities. In addition, the report also mentions some characteristics of the Dutch Reformed Church that the church member in the city should remember and from which he or she can draw strength. These include the church's Calvinistic view of life, its conservative nature, its high values and strict discipline, the thorough training of its pastors, its effective organisation, its slow pace in accepting change (which has advantages and disadvantages), and its suspicion of what is viewed as foreign (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:70-73). In the light of the fact that this article seeks to highlight some underlying theological notions related to urbanisation, it is interesting to note how the report uses the church's Calvinistic worldview as a way to deal with the changing situation. The report grounds the essence of Calvinism in the belief in the sovereignty and rule of God. Therefore, according to the report, the Afrikaner believes in the presence of God's hand in the current changes, even if he or she does not understand them: "Thus he recognizes the divine providence in the current trek towards the cities, and believes that he also has a calling in the city, for *volk* and church" (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:70).

The practical realism of the report also makes some suggestions regarding the way in which the church can make the most out of the opportunities provided by the city for church life. It can also be mentioned that the report suggests that the church can be of service by proclaiming social justice, and although it should be intimately involved in all labour issues, it should advocate healthy labour laws, and work for better housing, health and working conditions (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:84). The *Church and the City* further discusses the spiritual calling, the organisation, the ministry and the societal work of the church, as well as the role of the family, the youth and women workers within the city church. In addition, the report highlights the city church's views on labour issues. It is suggested that the

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<sup>7</sup> For a similar description of the contrast between rural and city life, see also Albertyn 1941:8-20.

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church should be more closely involved with the working classes.<sup>8</sup> The church should not only work for the poor, but also with the poor.

The last chapters of the report address the social problems of the city church, the relationship between the church and the state, and the policy of the church for the future. These chapters affirm the view that the proposed solutions to deal with the problem of Afrikaner urbanisation included the rejection of the mixing of races and the critique of mixed neighbourhoods. We read, for instance that: “Naturally the most important solution to the mixing of races is: *separate neighbourhoods*. This is the big issue that the church should campaign for” (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:333).<sup>9</sup> Church councils too must strive for separate neighbourhoods (see Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:361). The report clearly views the mixing of races as a threat to the Afrikaner *volk* and argues that the church should support racial *apartheid* in order to give each race the opportunity to develop in the best possible way within its own racial group (“volksverband”) (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:391). It is also suggested that the church should agitate for the demolition of the so-called slum areas (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:358, 362, 364). The above remarks illustrate that the church’s attempts to deal with urbanisation were closely interwoven with arguments for racial *apartheid*.

**The National Congress (“Volkskongres”) in Johannesburg (1947)**

The publication of the *Church and the City* was followed by a *Volkskongres* on “Die stadwaartse trek van die Afrikanernasie” (“The Afrikaner nation’s trek to the city”), held from 1-4 July 1947 on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand. At this conference Rev Albertyn gave the opening address. He affirmed the continuity between this conference and previous conferences, such as those in Cradock, Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein and Kimberley. According to Albertyn, the influx to the cities represented a turning point in the history of the Afrikaner nation:

The path of the nation (“volk”) has reached a mountain top,  
from where new horizons unfold, but also where gaping gorges

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<sup>8</sup> The report refers in this regard to a study done by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Berlin in 1931 on the reasons why 1 000 former members left the church. The main conclusion was that the church did not have a heart for justice and the oppressed, and stood on the side of the status quo and the ruling classes. Instead of challenging unjust rulers, the church recommended that the poor and the oppressed accept their situation patiently, in the hope of a better situation in the afterlife. See Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron (1947:308-309).

<sup>9</sup> The report also put the following forward as one of its recommendations: “The mixing of races is becoming a growing vice, and can be prevented through separate neighbourhoods, and – where possible – separate businesses for blacks and whites” (Albertyn, Du Toit & Theron 1947:341).

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pose dangers ... The whole nature of the landscape has changed; where the road was relatively straight and flat in the past, in now leads through twists and turns. Or – to adapt the image a bit – the route in the past resembled a quiet, private road, used by the same kind of people, with ample time and opportunity for the meeting and conversation of kindred spirits. But now suddenly the way has become a wide, public highway, where people race back and forth at a feverish pace, and where the traveller has to find his way with toil and trouble through the masses. With longing and yearning he might think back to the quiet old farm road, but what I want to emphasise is that he will never travel that road again. That has past. And the sooner he adapts to the new circumstances, the better, otherwise he will be pushed aside” (*Volkskongres* 1947:5).

Albertyn’s pragmatic approach boils down to the idea that the times are changing and the Afrikaner must change with the times. In terms of the metaphor used in the above quotation: the Afrikaner must adapt to the movement from the quiet and private farm road to the city’s bustling public highways.

Several other speeches were made at the conference, and the report of the conference contains 16 contributions, including speeches by Dr TC de Villiers on “Die Afrikaner se landelike herkoms en sy verstedeliking” (“The Afrikaner’s rural heritage and urbanisation”), Dr S Pauw on “Die Afrikaner se taak in die stad” (“The task of the Afrikaner in the city”),<sup>10</sup> Dr AJ van der Merwe on “Gevare van sedelike en godsdienstige ontwrigting” (The dangers of moral and religious disruption”), Dr N Diederichs on “Beroepsarbeid” (“Occupational labour”), Rev HS Theron on “Die gemeente in die stad” (“The congregation in the city”) and Dr W Nicol on “Die kerk in die stad” (“The church in the city”). The report concludes with 95 decisions that were taken at the conference. The first decision acknowledges the guidance of God’s providence in the affairs of nations. It expresses the firm belief of the conference that urbanisation is part of God’s governance (“albestuur”), and that *volk* and church have a calling and mission in the cities.

A series of decisions regarding the adaptation of Afrikaners in the city is in line with the racial ideas expressed in the *Church and the City* report. The report of the *Volkskongres* (1947:119), for instance, suggests that the Afrikaner in the city must join Afrikaner groupings (“volkseie kringe”). In a series of decision relates to racial policy, the congress states as its firm position that a conscious and extensive policy of racial separation (“rasse-

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. Pauw’s book *Die beroepsarbeid van die Afrikaner in die stad* (The Occupational Labour of the Afrikaner in the City), published in 1946.

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apartheid”) should be applied to every sphere of society (Decision 45; 1947:124). The principle of guardianship (“voogdyskap”) is also affirmed, as well as the decision that the church should take the lead in defining a racial policy for the *volk*. These decisions on race policy make it clear that the problem of Afrikaner urbanisation was inextricably intertwined with the “native problem” (“die natuurlike-vraagstuk”). It is also quite telling that one of the papers that was not included in the report is that of Dr G Cronjé on “Racial policy” (“Rassebeleid”),<sup>11</sup> since it was to be expanded and be published on its own. Later that year the book *Regverdige rasse-apartheid* (Just racial separation) was indeed published (with the collaboration of Dr W Nicol and Prof EP Groenewald), and this book became one of the important text in justifying apartheid, also on theological grounds (see Cronjé 1947).

There can be no doubt that the *Church and the City* report and the *Volkskongres* of 1947 represent pivotal episodes in South African (church) history. They received extensive media coverage, including in Christian media such as *Die Kerkbode*. Pastors in congregations reported and preached on the report and the conference. A recent publication of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, entitled *Vreesloos gehoorsaam*, (Fearlessly obedient) presents a selection of the sermons of Beyers Naudé, including a sermon he preached in Pretoria in the wake of the 1947 conference (see Coetzee, Hansen & Vosloo 2013:97-99). It should be noted that within the Dutch Reformed family of churches there were people like Beyers Naudé who continued to reflect on the implications of white and black urbanisation for a just future for all in South Africa. Jaap Durand’s book *Swartman, stad, en toekoms* (The black man, the city and the future) (1970) can also be mentioned as a pioneering book in this regard from within Dutch Reformed Church circles.

### **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this article I referred to Albertyn’s statement that the Bible starts in the garden and ends in the city. I must admit that as a city person I like this idea, although I am suspicious of the idea of giving a theological warranty to a view that romanticises the city. Nevertheless, many of the challenges for the church currently lie in the city; hence continual theological reflection on the changing city landscape is necessary.<sup>12</sup> In the current discourse on urbanisation one should also take note of the fact that

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<sup>11</sup> See also the editor’s article on “Ons Kerk in die Stad” (Our Church in the City) in *Die Kerkbode* 23 July 1947: 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> For a wonderful theological engagement with the shifts in urban culture, see Graham Ward’s book *Cities of God* (2002).

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cities are often spaces of resistance to destructive forms of capitalism.<sup>13</sup> As churches in South Africa today grapple with the challenges posed by the shifting urban landscape, one would do well to engage in a theologically and historically informed way with the past responses of churches to urbanisation, such as the response of the Dutch Reformed Church that is discussed in this article. As it happened back then in the 1930s and 1940s, people who flocked into cities for work found the city environment to be a hostile and contested space; and sadly this is still the case in some instances. Given these struggles for economic and symbolic survival, our societies are vulnerable to ideological forces that seek to eradicate the messiness of our lives together amidst the forces of fundamentalism and globalisation. For the church this implies the need for continual discernment. In the process we would do well to take to heart the ending of Italo Calvino's (1974:165) novel *Invisible Cities*:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: see and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the argument put forward in David Harvey's *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2012).

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