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# Born free? Born free for what? Exploring the lived experiences of Christian young adults in South Africa regarding inequality and social justice

Nadine Bowers Du Toit, Dione Forster, Shantelle Weber and  
Elisabet Le Roux

## Introduction

South Africa is one of the world's most unequal nations. The legacy of Apartheid remains dire, as the sharp divide between the rich whites and poor Blacks remains. This chapter examines inequality in South Africa. By focusing on the experiences of religious youth in Stellebosch, a town in the Western Cape, the chapter lays bare the impact of religion on inequality. It highlights the extent to which young adults feel alienated by current political processes and draws attention to the need for churches to be actively involved in developing theologies that will be liberating for young people. The chapter expresses the hope that churches might play an important role in addressing inequality in South Africa. However, they will need to be more deliberate and creative if they are to achieve this goal.

## Background

South Africa is currently ranked as the most unequal nation in the world by the World Bank, with high rates of racially skewed poverty and inequality still largely a legacy of the past (Baker 2019: 1–11). For many young South Africans born either just before or after the demise of apartheid, termed 'Born Frees', the

ongoing realities of poverty and inequality bring to light the question of whether they are truly 'free' in a post-apartheid era (Mattes 2012: 133; Malila 2013: 4–7; cf. Nwadeyi 2019). Their lived experiences of inequality, views on issues such as reconciliation and restitution, as well as their own understanding of their role in societal change are, therefore, important to understand against this backdrop. Furthermore, how do Christian 'Born Frees' understand and interpret these issues in light of scripture and their lived experiences within community and church?

The research findings presented in this chapter, therefore, seek to engage the lived theologies of inequality among young South African Christians (between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five). The focus of this study is the community of Stellenbosch, a town in the Western Cape, as this community is considered as one of the most unequal places in South Africa and remains largely geographically segregated along its former racial lines. It is also a youthful community, as it is estimated that 64 per cent of the population in this Wineland district is under the age of thirty-five (Cubizolles 2011: 33–55; Waal 2014: 1–6).

## The context(s) of the study

### **South Africa, reconciliation and the church**

South Africa remains a deeply religious nation. The most recent survey of the South African population conducted by StatsSA was done in 2013. This survey shows that 84.2 per cent of South Africa's citizens self-identified as Christians (*General Household Survey 2013, 2014*; Schoeman 2017: 3). This is an increase of 4.4 per cent from 79.8 per cent in 2001 (Hendriks and Erasmus 2005; Schoeman 2017: 3). The largest percentage of Christians belong to a diverse conglomeration of churches and Christian groupings which are collectively categorized as 'African independent' (40.82 per cent) and 'Other Christian' (11.96 per cent). The traditionally 'mainline' Christian Churches remain prominent, with the Methodist Church of Southern African as the largest mainline Christian denomination (9.24 per cent), followed by the collective grouping of Reformed Christian churches (Uniting Reformed Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Presbyterian Church, etc.) at 9.04 per cent. This last grouping is particularly prominent in Stellenbosch, with deep historical roots throughout the community. A 2010 Pew report found that 74 per cent of South Africans 'indicated that religion plays an important role in their lives' (Lugo and Cooperman 2010: 3; Schoeman 2017: 3–4). The Global Values Survey helps us to understand an

aspect of this 'important role' – this survey shows that religious organizations remain among the most trusted institutions in society, enjoying higher levels of public trust and confidence than either the state or the private sector (Winter and Burchert 2015: 1). The report notes that there was increasing dissatisfaction with the state of democracy '... while trust in political institutions recedes. In contrast, civil society organisations enjoy growing trust' (Winter and Burchert 2015: 1–2). In this report, the church is classified within the 'civil society' grouping. Hennie Kotzé, the lead researcher on the Global Values Survey for South Africa, clarifies the situation when he comments, 'Religion in general, and churches in particular, plays an important political socialization role [for South Africans]' (Kotzé 2016: 439–40; Kotzé and Garcia-Rivero 2017: 33).

Reconciliation and forgiveness become central concepts in such a heavily polarized society as South Africa's. However, within the South African social, political, economic and religious context, reconciliation and forgiveness are contested issues. The 2015 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) report found the following:

While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country's political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve a reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the 'new South Africa.'

(Hofmeyr and Govender 2015: 1)

Recent events in South Africa, such as the #Feesmustfall protests (which impacted the community of Stellenbosch as well) against economic inequalities and economic injustice in higher education, the spate of racial slurs and denials of Black pain on social media and the re-racialization of society through identity politics (Mbembe 2015), seem to support the IJR's findings.

The lived experiences of inequality among South Africans have a significant influence on their views of 'the other' and their willingness, or unwillingness, to engage in processes that may contribute towards forgiveness. It has been widely argued that forgiveness is a necessary condition for moving forward to a better future for all South Africans (Mandela 1995: 617; 2012: 44; Thesnaar 2008: 53–73; 2013: 1–13; Tutu 2012: 47–8, 74, 218). Yet, some of the entrenched theological, social, racial, economic and political challenges that South Africa faces seem to suggest that forgiveness and reconciliation are almost impossible.

A survey of research in this field shows that Black and white South African Christians hold very different views on the concepts and processes of forgiveness (Byrne 2007; Chapman and Spong 2003: 169; Daye 2012: 8–18; Elkington 2011: 5–35, 135–55; cf., Forster 2019a; 2018: 1–13; 2019b: 70–88; Gobodo-Madikizela and Van der Merwe 2009: vii–xi; Krog 2010; Thesnaar 2008: 53–73; 2013: 1–13; Tutu 2012: 10–36, 47–60, 92–124; Villa-Vicencio and du Toit 2006: 75–87; Vosloo 2012; 2015: 360–78). Vosloo notes with regard to the unfinished business of forgiveness in South Africa that ‘forgiveness and related concepts regarding engagement with the past continue to be influential, albeit also highly contested, in public discourse’ (Vosloo 2015: 363). This is particularly true for the public life and witness of Christian communities and Christian individuals in South Africa.

One significant problem that has been identified is that these un-reconciled persons seldom have contact with each other because of the legacy of the apartheid system which entrenched inequality by separating persons racially, according to economic class, and geographically (Hofmeyr and Govender 2015: 1). The result is that, as the inter-group contact theory suggests, each group’s own social views and religious beliefs (in-group identity) become entrenched, and the views and beliefs of the ‘other’ (out-group identity) are rejected or ignored because they are not understood or engaged across the aforementioned separating boundaries (Brewer and Kramer 1985: 219–23; Bornman 1999: 411–14; 2011; Duncan 2003: 2, 5).

In at least one sense this makes processes of reconciliation very difficult. Not only is it difficult for persons to forgive one another since they have no proximate or authentic social engagement, forgiveness (as aforementioned) is also theologically contested because of deeply held and entrenched faith convictions about the nature and processes of forgiveness. Moreover, the lack of restitution and enacting of justice on behalf of the beneficiaries of apartheid (white South Africans), seeking the well-being and dignity of those persons harmed under apartheid and beyond (Black South Africans), has created deep wounds, a great deal of distrust and understandable anger (Bowers du Toit and Nkomo 2014: 1–8; Forster 2018: 1–13). In other words, there are both a hermeneutic and a social barrier to forgiveness that is complicated by the lived reality of inequality in South Africa. In fact, in recent years the discourse of reconciliation in South Africa has shifted to include that of restitution in order for the injustices wrought by the apartheid system to be addressed by socioeconomic means, such as land, but also through social restitution. South Africa, therefore, faces significant challenges with regard to dealing with the ‘sins’ of its past and the complexity of our present life (Hofmeyr and Govender 2015: 1–3).

## Born free? Youth and inequality

This study focuses on young adults (eighteen to thirty-five years) within Christian congregational contexts. Young people turning twenty-six years old in 2020, and the majority of South Africa's young population who were born after them, have been labelled as the 'born free' generation.<sup>1</sup> The term 'born free' is deeply contested (John et al. 2015). It most often refers to young South Africans born after the so-called end of political apartheid in 1994. Unfortunately, many of these youth face the same daily reality of poverty, racism, violence and spatial injustice that their parents and grandparents faced (Mattes 2012: 133–55; Kotze and Prevost 2015: 142–68). Therefore, while this generation has experienced the 'right to have rights', the enactment of those rights has not been realized in any significant and transformative manner (Benhabib 2004; 2013). Jansen (2015) notes that one of the most devastating aspects of poverty is that if you were born poor and struggle to secure food, there is a good chance that you will become a young child, adolescent and young adult still poor and uncertain of where you will find your next meal. Young people are the biggest cohort of new job seekers and are, therefore, the most vulnerable group with regard to unemployment, which is one of the pressing concerns in relation to inequality impacting South Africa (Cloete 2015).

Some social commentators, such as Manamela (2015: 8), have described today's youth as depoliticized and apathetic. Nevertheless, youth culture across the globe has placed emphasis on institutional questioning, public accountability, and the need for direction and honest communication between people. According to Mawuko-Yevgah and Ugor (2015: 7) a social crisis is brewing due to a majority of youth and their families having increasing difficulty accessing good education, land and housing, food, security, medical care, drinking water and other socioeconomic services due to the private interests and gain of a tiny class of global elite. Weber (2014) makes the point that there is, therefore, a need for intentional engagement with the realities these youth face, and that this requires creating safe spaces where they could ask questions concerning their faith, morality and identity. In their reflections on African Youth and global resistance to neoliberalism through exploring the dialectics between cosmopolitan and identity politics, Abembia Ayelazuno (in Jurgens 2018: 38–40) confirms that the agency of South African youth is clearly visible in the struggles waged for example by the Shack Dwellers Movement, *Abahlali base Mjondolo* and many other protests by the poor. In fact, the #Feesmustfall protests in South Africa (2015–17) at tertiary institutions with regard to issues of equal access to

tertiary education, institutional racism and a decolonized curriculum indicate that youth agency exists within South Africa (cf. Grassow and Le Bruyns 2017: 1–9; Costandius et al. 2018: 65–85). Unfortunately, these protests also remind us that race still divides its citizens and that class consciousness has still not dominated race consciousness, making it problematic to forge solidarity between Black and white youth.

Weber (2020: 10) makes the important point that some of this generation's parents and grandparents are so traumatized by the past that any mention of engaging with such matters within church spaces is frowned upon. Nevertheless, engagement with youth around issues related to their country's histories, their familial or tribal positions within those histories and also social justice issues that impact their faith daily is imperative in South Africa today (Weber 2017: 8). Christian youth today need to be able to live out and experience their identity in Christ alongside morally engaging in society and growing in their faith (Weber 2017: 8). Sadly, according to Lee, the Christian young adults and activism during #Feesmustfall were a cause for young people to experience 'disappointment and alienation in their church settings, which they [found] to be dismissive at best and oppressive at worst toward their activism' (2018: 4). Lee's findings highlight that the church could become a space from which young activists drew courage, spiritual support and were bolstered by theological teaching (such as Liberation Theology), which gave voice to their plight (Lee 2018: 81–7). This research, therefore, seeks to explore how South African young people understand and discern this tension between their Christian faith and the unjust realities they live through every day.

In the town of Stellenbosch, inequalities are most visible in the marked differences of where young people live, the schools they go to, their parental income groupings, language and race (Swilling et al. 2012). This is further reflected in things like sport, afterschool activities and leisure time activities. Some poor youth do not have as many opportunities, resulting in boredom, which in turn leads to various criminal and irresponsible sexual activities, which eventually impact this local community. Where these youth live would also give one an idea of the municipal services (water, sanitation, electricity, safety and security) they have access to; these have also been described as unequally distributed in Stellenbosch and aligned to previous racial segregation (Swilling et al. 2012). Various university students (Krige 1998; Robyn 1998; Hendrich 2006; Simmons 2008; Robertson 2015; Meiring 2017) have focused research on different aspects of inequality among youth in Stellenbosch.



The empirical study discussed in this chapter, therefore, seeks to contribute towards texturing, troubling and thickening of the understandings of what it will take for this generation to become truly free. The town of Stellenbosch is used as a case study to do so.

## Research methodology

Our key research question was the following: ‘In what ways do the lived realities of the continued and intensified realities of inequality in post-apartheid South Africa, impact on the lived theologizing and political agency of the “born free” generation of South Africans (18–35 years) concerning issues of social justice, inequality and reconciliation?’

The project addressed the following aims:

1. to discuss the current socioeconomic milieu of South Africa and Stellenbosch<sup>2</sup> in particular;
2. to explore and contrast perceptions in relation to race, class and inequality in the eighteen to thirty-five age group of church-attending young adults;
3. to explore theological and ethical constructs that may shape these perceptions and
4. to investigate the notion of political agency and how it related to issues of social justice, inequality and reconciliation.

In investigating the lived theologies of inequality, the research followed a qualitative, inductive methodology. A qualitative approach is considered more suited to this study as it allows the researchers to investigate issues that require explanation or understanding of phenomena in specific contexts (Snape and Spencer 2003: 54). An inductive and interpretivist approach is needed when it is not fully understood why certain actions and events occur, or how these are being dealt with and understood (Bryman 2008: 3665; Babbie and Mouton 2010).

A multi-case case study which allows contemporary phenomenon to be investigated in depth and within a real-life context, while considering multiple factors and sources of evidence approach, was employed (Yin 2009: 187). The collection and integration of multiple perspectives and accounts enable the development of a detailed, in-depth understanding of the research issue, which in a multi-case case study approach strengthens the generalizability of the findings. A multi-case case study approach, therefore, provides a more holistic, comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the issues being studied (Lewis 2003: 528).

Our three case studies were of congregations of the same confessional background within Stellenbosch, a town known for its extreme socioeconomic disparities characterized by a racial element. These three congregations each represent one of the three main racial groups in Stellenbosch<sup>3</sup>: a church from the so-called coloured community<sup>4</sup>; a church from the black (Xhosa) community and a church from the white community. It is important to note that due to the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, the communities in which these churches are situated remain racially homogeneous and separated, which is why to a large extent the churches can still be categorized according to race. We focused our study on youth between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years, conducting twelve in-depth interviews within each congregation. A gender balance was attempted and was largely successful. A list of thirty potential participants was compiled by a leader from each church, with the research team doing final selection of the twelve participants from each congregation. The issue of whether to use racial designations within the study was a contested one; however, as race and inequality remain directly aligned, we chose to maintain these designations. Ethical clearance was obtained via Stellenbosch University.

The core research team was responsible for liaising with the churches and arranging access for the researchers. One of the collaborators and two research assistants interviewed the respondents and interviews were conducted in the participants' language of choice (English, isiXhosa or Afrikaans). Interviews were then recorded and transcribed (and also translated, in the case of isiXhosa interviews). Transcribed interviews were then analysed thematically, using Atlas.ti.<sup>5</sup> A provisional coding sheet was designed by the research team, which was updated and adapted based on the content of the data. Each case study was firstly analysed individually and then, based on the individual case study findings, a synthesis report was produced, reflecting on the lived theologies of inequality of Stellenbosch youth. The team that both interviewed and analysed were diverse in terms of race and gender.

It should be noted that studies of this nature have limitations. As the study aimed to give voice to the lived experience and lived religion of Christian young adults in Stellenbosch as recounted by them, it does not necessarily document their actual engagement with these issues – only their perspectives. It also cannot be generalized to the whole of South Africa. However, this type of grounded, qualitative research does provide a 'thick' description of the kind of perspectives emerging from Christian young adults on these issues. The key findings discussed below are the main findings discussed in the synthesis report.

## Key findings

### **Inequality is a lived reality for young adults and it remains aligned to race**

All respondents recognize the reality of poverty and inequality in South Africa and, more especially, the inequality within the context of the town of Stellenbosch. This finding, indeed, echoes the perception of Stellenbosch as one of the most unequal places in South Africa. White respondents all agreed that South Africa has high levels of inequality and all agreed that Stellenbosch is a very unequal town – save one younger participant who does not live in the town. Furthermore, it is clear that race and inequality are aligned. Those white respondents who had crossed racial or economic borders and had been confronted with ‘the other’ noted they were less likely to be able to ignore the reality of poverty and inequality. For the Black and coloured respondents, inequality is a very real lived experience, which often provoked raw emotions. Several coloured respondents noted feelings such as feeling heartsore, angry, frustrated or even numb. Black respondents also had undercurrents of anger in the tone of their responses. Black and coloured respondents both made much of the ways in which the legacy of apartheid and spatial inequalities and social divisions continued to be replicated in Stellenbosch:

I think that there's an established boundary I would say like, rich is somewhere, and poor is somewhere, like even within the community of Stellenbosch if you go to certain areas you can clearly see okay this is a rich area or this is a poor area. And people don't actually associate, I mean there are those exceptional ones that associate with different classes like rich and poor, but most times it's the rich and the poor. (Coloured respondent)

Both these groups noted the way in which their communities faced challenges relating to safety, access to basic services, access to opportunities and education, infrastructure and transport. This, of course, illustrates the nature of generational inequality and once again highlights the question as to whether these young people are truly ‘Born Free’. All three groups were asked regarding their understanding of the notion of ‘white privilege’ and all recognized that privilege remains aligned to race in a post-apartheid context. While some white respondents acknowledged the privileges accrued from the past system, a number of white respondents felt that policies such as affirmative action could be seen as minimizing these apartheid gains and even for some it was viewed as reverse oppression.

## **Churches in the town mirror the inequality young adults see in society**

In what could be viewed as an indictment of the churches in the town, the research found that all respondents noted that the churches in Stellenbosch still reflected the inequalities and racial divisions in broader society and that there appeared to be little 'border crossing'. Whether or not this is true at the leadership/pastoral level is not verified by this study; however, young adults from this study's perceptions were that there is little ecumenical engagement across race and colour lines in the town. From the perspective of Black and coloured respondents, there was evidence also of distrust towards white churches in central Stellenbosch, who they felt were elitist and also possessed an unequal amount of resources (such as buildings and equipment):

Um, the churches within this town specifically in town, central town, make a lot of money. Because if you think about the elites of the elites actually going to these churches.

It is clear that there is not only little trust, but little proximate engagement between groups.

Relative privilege was also evident between Black and coloured churches, and Black respondents noted that the coloured churches were more privileged relative to the Black churches. All three congregations were almost completely racially homogenous. This is of course in turn a reflection of the geographical divisions, which remain aligned to race in this town. These findings are particularly worrying if one considers that churches are key civil society role-players who have an important role to play in the transformation of society and yet it appears that rather than leading in the crossing of racial and socioeconomic boundaries churches appear to merely replicate the inequalities aligned to these factors.

## **Forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution remain contested issues**

The fact that issues of forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution were clearly 'hot button' issues which elicited a large number of different perspectives and elicited conflicted and nuanced responses within the groups is unsurprising in light of the 'unfinished business of forgiveness' and the contestations already noted. While some white respondents felt that reconciliation would only be possible with forgiveness, others felt that as they had not participated in apartheid and, therefore, despite admitting that they had benefitted in some ways, maintained

that these decisions were taken by another generation and they, therefore, did not require forgiveness as it had not been enacted by their generation.

I don't feel like I have to apologise to someone or ask for forgiveness. For me it is that many of these things (are the result of) decisions taken by many people on my behalf and many years (before I was born). (White respondent)

Coloured respondents on the other hand felt that while it was important to forgive, it was harder to forget the pain and it was clear that this pain had been transmitted across generations.

And with the young people, like we didn't really see what went on, but our parents felt pain. So now the parent carries the pain that they felt onto you, now you also 'sommer' feel angry, because you parents suffered under it or something.

It is interesting, therefore, that reflections on this issue have generational dimensions to it.

Respondents in this church appeared to be conflicted as to whether reconciliation and restitution were different or the same; however, all respondents appeared to indicate that actions to right the wrongs of the past were needed to address the injustices of Apartheid and the ongoing unjust legacy. Nevertheless, it appeared that respondents in this church were also conflicted concerning restitution and some felt it may amount to 'revenge seeking', with restitution perceived a kind of necessary evil, but not necessarily the answer to relational brokenness. Black respondents, however, were clear that there is no reconciliation and forgiveness without justice:

... yes, you know reconciliation is a process; you can't have reconciliation without justice and for that matter people in South Africa and everywhere you get, in Stellenbosch, people are talking about reconciliation but justice is the issue, let's get things fair on the table, let's try to correct the past then we talk about reconciliation, you know the whole issue of forgiveness, you can't forgive people; I mean or reconcile with people without really having the process of, reconciliation is kind of the end result, there will always be tension between races, especially between black and white people if there is no justice and we really need to work towards that justice in order to reconcile and even to consider forgiveness its really impossible to just reconcile if these issues are not corrected. (Black respondent)

A fascinating perspective from Black respondents is that they felt that the expectation for forgiveness is placed on them rather than it being something that white persons should take responsibility for and work towards. In comparison to coloured respondents, Black respondents spoke plainly about restitution. Both

the general issue of wealth sharing and economic transformation and that of land redistribution (with consent and compensation and without compensation) were raised many times by participants. Restitution and righting the injustices of the past, which continue to be features of inequality today, also included for these respondents issues related to the economic sphere, education, transportation, safety, employment, job security, etc.

White respondents were also conflicted when it came to issues of restitution and what this entailed. Most agreed that land reform and affirmative action were understandable in light of the past (despite some respondents feeling that they should not take responsibility for the actions of previous generations) and recognized that it was nuanced, but several respondents noted that there should be conditions under which these took place:

But I can understand when people feel that it isn't right, but I don't know, there are so many different opinions. It doesn't feel right, because it feels as though it just throws the injustice over to the other side. But, I mean white people had so many privileges, that I guess you need to correct it in some way. I would just say that it needs to be corrected by competent people, competent people employed in the right positions, not employing someone who doesn't deserve to be there. (White respondent)

Respondents were also fearful of land reform in terms of land grabs (which Stellenbosch was experiencing at that time), which some said did not make economic sense or if not managed properly or tainted by corruption could affect property prices.<sup>6</sup> Some also felt that it made little economic sense, but had important symbolic value:

I think about it in two ways. The one is – first the hard one – I don't think it makes economic sense. As in it does not make sense to try and give land back to people who originally owned it, especially not if that land is being used for farming and those kinds of activities. But, on the other hand, I also know that there is a thing such as human dignity and it is important and it makes sense. So people have a very strong emotional reaction to land and sometimes it would be better for the country to not think about it economically, but to think about the people. So there is this trade-off between economics and humanity. (WC respondent)

These reflections by respondents highlight the pressing need to address the well-being and dignity of those harmed by Apartheid and for young Christians like these to dialogue regarding the notion of justice in order to challenge entrenched beliefs which are often aligned with race and class.

## **Lived theologizing is focused largely on the Golden Rule**

In terms of what participants believed the Bible helped them to think about poverty and inequality, the overarching agreement across groups was that the love of neighbour and the fact that 'God is love' should motivate one to both act in compassion regarding poverty and inequality and cross-borders. From this ethic, once again, respondents across the board felt that this challenged them to treat others with respect, love, tolerance and understanding. The issue of human dignity was a strong theme in the coloured group:

*Because everyone is created in His image, everyone is equal in His eyes and so if you are now the richest man or the poorest person on the street, we are all maar equal.*

This was also tied to Jesus as being seen as being '*for the marginalized, was for the people that were basically, were seen as nothing, were dehumanized*'. The Black respondents interpreted love in light of the concept of Ubuntu and believed that this should be a guiding value. This indigenous framing also problematized the notion of love saying that this was not evident in the ways in which inequality in the town still existed and were concerned that while the majority of South Africans reside in faith communities, there was still inequality and, therefore, still a lack of love. Therefore, Christian and indigenous values should guide us in our engagement with these issues.

White respondents also problematized certain parts of the Bible, because they felt that their faith calls them to treat everyone with dignity and saw Jesus as an example of being with the marginalized as reflected here. This is a possibly encouraging point of contact for intergroup contact. A concerning, but marginal, view was that some also spoke about the fact that Jesus also said that 'the poor will always be with us' or never condemned slavery. The latter implies that there might be a need for hermeneutics around issues of justice and inequality and reflects the very different views of white and Black Christians concerning such issues.

## **Lack of clarity regarding the ways in which the church can act for change**

The question regarding the church's role regarding issues of inequality elicited a range of responses, many of which were vague. This perhaps indicates that respondents struggled, despite being able to articulate the issues around poverty

and inequality, its racialized nature etc., still difficult to point to what churches should actually do.

Black and coloured respondents did not appear to be clear on the ways in which their own churches were currently responding to poverty especially – despite the fact that there were some direct initiatives which they were not aware of. In contrast, the white group all appeared to be aware of their church's involvement in surrounding areas through a faith-based organization (FBO) and its encouragement to be engaged. They were positive about this involvement and also understood it as allowing them the opportunity to cross racial and class boundaries, although two respondents did reflect on whether this was an outflow of white guilt and some noted that perhaps the church could do more to encourage engagement.

The coloured congregation is involved in community work (coaching, life skills, youth ministry), but perhaps due to the transient nature of their attendance, quite a few respondents were not aware of the initiatives. This group appeared to suggest that the key role of the church is spiritual formation and that churches should equip young people in particular to engage with societal issues better and to be empowered to be self-reliant:

And so I will say the church is lacking in education on these issues, they're really lacking in terms of, that they don't tell you that when you're outside, this is going to happen to you. They just tell you that trust God, pray and that's where the problem comes in.

Coloured respondents also noted that the church could become a place where job opportunities are shared or resources mobilized, or people educated for civic participation, but it was also clear that some thought that there was not much a 'poor' church could do. Black respondents, interestingly enough, largely suggested cognitive strategies as starting points to address the problem such as workshops, inviting speakers and hosting discussions in order to understand the problem. However, they did not seem to view the Church as a space in which concrete and practical action could be taken. Perhaps this is because they felt that the church was not proactive enough in encouraging societal transformation and they appeared to indicate that political parties and action might be more effective. The church was not, therefore, seen as being able to take concrete action (mobilization for advocacy, development, etc.). This is an important point for church leaders and members to note and is worrying considering the public role the church is expected to play in civil society and the considerable influence it has on society. It means that the church is not adequately equipped,



or able to serve its members, in bringing about actual structural change. Black members, however, noted that one of the ways that inequality could be bridged was by communities sharing resources and that churches should lead the way in this as there still remained too much inequality between churches in the area; yet, the shared Christian faith obligates people to act in love towards their neighbour. They were also clear, however, that this should not come in the form of paternalistic ‘hand outs’ from white churches.

The latter reflects the ongoing racial divide and growing mistrust between racial groups and sadly, also between confessing Christians from different races – as well as the need for church leaders in the town to take note and continue to take bold steps towards ecumenical engagement on issues of social justice such as inequality, reconciliation and restitution.

### **Responses regarding youth agency for change were surprising**

There is often a great deal of inertia and hopelessness in responding to what appears to be an enormous task, and this could be one of the reasons why young people responded in the ways that they did. While the university #Feesmustfall protests were led by students of similar age, who mobilized largely Black and coloured students concerning advocacy for change, it is interesting that none of the respondents appeared to mention advocacy, protest or community mobilization as a personal strategy in addressing these issues. These responses also reflect the dialogical tension between apathy and action found in the literature review.

The most prominent means suggested for change across all race groups was that of creating dialogue across race, class and geographical lines (which of course intersect in the town). All three groups talked about the need to facilitate dialogue between communities as a starting point. This suggestion certainly affirms inter-group contact theory’s approach.

The most prominent way in which white respondents spoke about their own role in change was to treat others with human dignity – to treat all South Africans fairly and with respect. This would be enacted through reaching across borders of class and race in friendship and getting to know others’ stories. Respect should be a given; however, it is implied by one persons’ example of teaching her children to treat the Black domestic worker with respect as one of the ways in which she can address the human indignities resulting from inequality that it becomes clear that this is not a given. This is a very basic – and perhaps even problematic – starting point and reveals the racial and economic fissure lines in our society that are still

not healed. Another common way towards change suggested more especially by Black and coloured respondents was on coaching of youth and children to build self-reliance and self-respect in an unequal and still racist society: 'Given a chance, personally I would actually concentrate on the children ... if we ever focus on the youth because they have like youth power to change the outcomes of the future.' While white respondents focused on volunteerism and creating employment opportunities, very few respondents in the other two congregations barely touched on this. This finding is not surprising, in that due to the socioeconomic circumstances of the two groups such action could either be seen as part of their everyday culture (i.e. volunteerism) or that unlike the white respondents they are less likely to own businesses through which to create employment.

For the large part, however, while Black respondents were politicized and articulate when it came to the political means necessary for change, they appeared to look towards authority figures to take leadership in societal change. Most of the Black cohort are fulfilling several ministerial roles within church but did not expressly mention their role in societal renewal – one noted that they are

... striving to do the righteousness of God always but I don't want to use my power to do that I just need the Lord's spirit to lead me in doing that for instance the simple things, not to preach too much, not to sing too much, not to pray too much, ... to take care and show the love of God to other people and take care of the people ... poor people, disadvantaged people, you are taking the real Gospel to the people by doing that not by standing on the pulpit and shouting too much.

The latter provides a hopeful departure point for societal engagement and reveals that young adults are open for dialogical engagement across racial lines, but it becomes clear from the findings that there is a need for training perhaps in community advocacy and mobilization, which addresses the root causes of poverty and inequality in this divided town rather than only deal with the symptoms through projects or dialogical engagement.

## Conclusion

This study focused on the intersection between Christian young adults, inequality, reconciliation and restitution in South Africa. Sadly, what emerges from this study is in many ways a deep challenge to the churches and it, therefore, uncovers pointers that need to be taken into consideration by congregations in this context. Congregations in Stellenbosch clearly still echo the socioeconomic

and racial divisions of the town, and its apartheid history. While young people saw it as important for the church to engage and even be part of restitutionary action, they struggled to point to what churches should actually do, despite the fact that they note that there are inequalities and a need for restitution. The reason for this could be a result of the conflicted feelings many had regarding the notion of restitution and its relationship to reconciliation. Most respondents, therefore, focused on dialogical engagement across racial lines, non-governmental organization (NGO) interventions or on the equipping of children and younger people to overcome these inequalities through empowerment and self-reliance. While these are certainly good places to start to engage issues of racial and socioeconomic division and empower communities, churches were not, for instance, noted as places from which economic activities could be engaged. Nor were they noted as sites of advocacy for community change and mobilization. As noted in the introductory sections, this is not surprising if young adults have experienced 'disappointment and alienation in their church settings, which they find to be dismissive at best and oppressive at worst toward their activism'.

The lived theologizing of young people was also interesting as they focused on the 'Golden Rule' of love of neighbour, but seldom engaged the prophetic and social justice texts within the Pentateuch or Prophets as theological resources. The latter is neither right nor wrong, but it is interesting in light of the fact that South Africa's prophetic tradition of Liberation Theology and Black Theology could be seen as rooted in these texts rather than the Golden Rule (Mtshiselwa 2015: 1-9; Boesak 2016) and that these texts speak more prominently into issues such as socioeconomic injustices, many of which were raised by respondents as needing to be addressed. The latter implies that there might be a need for hermeneutics around issues of justice and inequality. It is interesting to note, however, that indigenous values (such as *Ubuntu*) reinforce or align with values in scripture, but also assist in critiquing praxis. Ultimately, respondents across racial lines were hopeful, and this hope was rooted in their faith. Churches in towns such as Stellenbosch, therefore, have a great deal of work to do in seeking the welfare of their communities. Young adults could be at the forefront of this work if equipped with theologies that allow them to develop their prophetic imagination, and spaces are created for them to not only dialogue across lines of race and class, but actively engage the economic and social injustices that lie at its roots.