Room for refugees? A Johannesburg church opens its doors: A Johannesburg church opens its doors

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In the movie *District 9*, an alien spaceship stalls in the skies above Johannesburg. After three months with no communication, South Africans decide to board the ship, only to find a million aliens who need rescuing. They move them to District 9, an area that's a cross between a township and a refugee camp. But eventually the welcome for the aliens grows thin; the government forcibly relocates them to a remote area and brutally enforces their separation from the rest of the population.

District 9 evokes the worst of South Africa's apartheid era, when people were treated as aliens in their own land. This painful mockumentary also depicts an international relief industry in which the inefficiency of the United Nations is replaced by the ruthless capability of a transnational corporation, which is also seeking the secret of the aliens' ultrapowerful weapons technology. The film is an embarrassing indictment of how we treat the stranger.

Even more embarrassing is how South Africa has treated the real refugees who have fled across the borders it shares with Zimbabwe and other troubled neighbors. Facing rejection in many quarters and outright violence in others, the persecuted refugees have sought safety in the country's churches. At the center of the tension between hospitality and xenophobia is Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, a once prestigious congregation that today is home for some of the region's poorest people.

On any given day, more than 3,000 sleep in the church. Pastor Paul Verryn ends his benediction at the nightly worship service with the words, "Go in peace, sleep well," and the refugees scramble to every corner of the church to sleep, with the overflow crowd spreading blankets and cardboard on nearby sidewalks.

Life isn’t easy in the church. A Zimbabwean woman reports, “I was scared when I first came here, but now I have friends. Sometimes the men fight. There’s theft, so when you wash your clothes you have to watch them dry or someone will take them. And there never seems to be enough oxygen to breathe at night.”

However rough the conditions, for many it’s better than home. In recent years Zimbabwe has experienced food insecurity, cholera, political violence and rising unemployment. Despite a good harvest last year and occasional political advances, almost one-quarter of the Zimbabwean population has fled to neighboring countries, particularly South Africa. At best, the refugees face extreme difficulty in finding shelter and safety; at worst they become victims of xenophobic violence. Sixty-one Zimbabwean refugees were killed and more than 100,000 were displaced in 2008—the year Neill Blomkamp and Peter Jackson were shooting *District 9* in the rambling Soweto area of Johannesburg.

Organized like a small city with its own clinic, school and elaborate internal organization, Central Methodist has had to fight to protect the refugees. In 2008, police raided the church and detained 350 people; the judge who ordered their release said that they were treated worse than South Africans were treated during apartheid. Last year the police and the Red Ants, a security company known for its brutal practices, harassed and arrested Zimbabweans sleeping in front of the High Court near the church. Local businesses sued the city and Central Meth odist, complaining that the refugees were bad for business. Nearby shops erected a tall metal fence between themselves and the church, making access to the building more difficult. As the country moves closer to hosting the soccer World Cup in June, pressure is mounting to push the homeless refugees out of public view.

Violence has also been directed at those who offer the refugees hospitality. Death threats are not new to Pastor Verryn, a fervent opponent of apartheid who angered other activists when he worked to curb the thuggish excesses of Winnie Mandela, then wife of the incarcerated Nelson Mandela. His criticism of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has earned him the rancor of African National Congress leaders, who remain reluctant to oppose the ruthless Mugabe because of his historic role in the region’s liberation struggles.

Verryn, who retired as bishop in November and was reappointed to Central in a supervisory role, believes the violence directed against Zimbabweans is motivated by more than simple hatred of foreigners.

“It’s not straightforward xenophobia. Of the 61 people killed [in 2008], one was white and 21 were South Africans. So this thing doesn’t always have a neat boundary around foreign nationals or migrants,” he said. “While it starts with refugees, it won’t end with them. If this is unchecked it could become a civil war.”

Verryn adds that, although apartheid officially ended 15 years ago, “this country has been schooled in prejudice, and prejudice was sanctified until 1994. Changing the words in the constitution doesn’t change the heart.”

The refugees arrive expecting that South Africa will not deny them safe harbor since it’s led by the ANC, which only recently relied on countries that opened their borders to South Africans fighting apartheid. Verryn too believes that history gives South Africa a special vocation. “We’re part of the international family again, and it’s both a privilege and a huge responsibility. When there are countries that find themselves in conflict and war, like we were, then our doors will be open and hospitality will be part of who we are as a nation.”

Yet that history means little to those who see the refugees as competitors for postapartheid South Africa’s limited spoils. Like migrants in many lands, the Zimbabweans—and a smattering from Mozambique, Malawi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—make handy scapegoats for domestic problems.

Verryn believes South Africa’s political leaders have stoked the violence.

“We’ve got ambivalence from the top, a police force that rigorously hunts down foreign nationals, and a popular mindset that the migrants shouldn’t be here. Some even use the term ‘illegal alien’ for them. If you really want to set up a problem, call people that,” Verryn said. “It all makes a fairly good recipe for xenophobia. People say, ‘They’re stealing our jobs, they smell, they’re criminals.’ But it doesn’t stop there, and the violent attacks could resume at any time.”

Verryn says the country’s economic policies are part of the problem. “The government wants to fence off certain opportunities for South Africans only. But if people are being forced out of the labor market, what are their options? People have to eat. If ultimately we make the stakes so high for them, aren’t we in some ways beginning to criminalize them?”

Women refugees face particular challenges, says Kim Alexander, a former associate pastor at Central.

“Women face abuse at all levels, even from their own community at times. It’s difficult for them to get work, as many women come with few skills,” she said. “Many will hand out pamphlets at stoplights, earning 20 Rand [less than $3] a day, and then at the end of day they aren’t paid. Because they don’t have money and they need to eat, it makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation within the building, trading sex for food or money.”

Running a crowded building is a management nightmare. Last year Verryn faced accusations that he hadn’t done enough to stop abuse of children within the facility. The congregation trained a committee of ten refugees—eight women and two men—to investigate complaints and take action to stop abuse. And Verryn moved several girls to a church dormitory in Soweto, at the same time helping to initiate court proceedings to have a legal guardian appointed for the children.

Ministers of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa aren’t allowed to initiate legal action on their own, nor can they speak to the media—though Verryn has not been shy about doing just that. In January, the pastor was suspended by church leaders, who refused to detail the charges publicly, leading to speculation of deeper problems. Verryn protested both the charges and the secrecy around them, and both sides agreed to arbitration. Although still officially suspended, the feisty pastor nonetheless continues his work at Central, albeit quietly, generally refusing to speak to journalists.

Despite the challenges from inside and outside the church, in an interview last year Verryn said the congregation’s ministry presents a unique opportunity.

“Almost every problem you can think of domiciles itself here. There’s a huge amount of conflict resolution that has to go on all the time. But it’s also quite exhilarating, in that it gives you an opportunity to see the very best of people as new life begins for them. So much good rises from the ashes of this place that it’s a huge privilege to be here. It’s a wonderful opportunity to tell the Good News,” he said.

Verryn would like Central to be more than a shelter, and he believes it could make a long-term contribution to social change in a region where there’s a lack of good news. When it was too dangerous for Zimbabwean children to attend public schools during the antiforeigner violence of 2008, he and the refugees started the Albert Street School. The school now has some 600 students, about one-fifth of whom arrived in South Africa unaccompanied by any family.

Principal Alpha Zhou, a Zimbabwean teacher turned refugee, says the school has a mission beyond just keeping the children safe.

“Our children in Africa are suffering and will suffer for a long time. We’re destroying the generation that’s supposed to build Africa. We opened the school to change the lives of children so that tomorrow we’ll have better leaders who will run their countries properly.”