Between a Bible and a Hard Place

Johannesburg’s Central Methodist Church opens its doors to refugees and the homeless.

Freshly dressed in clerical attire, he moves quietly down the staircase from his third-floor office, careful not to disturb the refugees sleeping on the steps. When he reaches the second floor, he heads down a hallway lined with more refugees nestled under pads of drywall insulation and tattered blankets. Unfazed by the piles of trash and the putrid smell of human waste, he strides toward the chapel. There, he’s greeted with hearty handshakes and hugs from the poor and dispossessed.

Now that Bishop Paul Verryn has arrived, the Thursday evening service can begin.

But it’s not the lively services at Johannesburg’s Central Methodist Church that draw a crowd. Instead, it’s the promise of refuge that Bishop Paul has extended to those with nowhere else to turn, those whom his native South Africa will not help.

The inner-city church houses about 2,000 of Johannesburg’s most needy. Under Bishop Paul’s open-door policy, Central Methodist welcomes all those who need shelter. But mainly, it receives Zimbabwean refugees seeking safety from the political violence and economic turmoil in their homeland. For some of the millions who’ve fled Zimbabwe, the church is their only hope for a new beginning.

Saint or nuisance?
When Bishop Paul took charge of Johannesburg’s largest Methodist church in 1997, he opened its doors to all those in need, regardless of race or religion. He had previously ministered to the poor of Soweto, a township on the city’s outskirts.

At first, the bishop housed a few dozen of the inner-city homeless in a reasonably comfortable arrangement in the basement. But as the years passed, hundreds of refugees from neighboring countries began seeking asylum. Then the number reached a thousand. By the middle of this decade, Bishop Paul had become a saint to those seeking refuge and a nuisance to the South African Police Service (SAPS), which viewed his actions as harboring undocumented criminals.

The bishop’s open-door policy received international attention in January 2008, when SAPS raided Central Methodist in an attempt to find undocumented people living there illegally. Media accounts of police brutality and the illegal jailing of foreigners ignited public criticism of SAPS and incensed Bishop Paul. Ever since, Central Methodist has followed its own rules.

One of Bishop Paul’s top priorities is ensuring that foreigners seeking asylum in South Africa aren’t harmed or unlawfully arrested. “If people are seeking asylum,” he says, “the police are actually supposed to help them in the process, not harass them or pursue them or hunt them down.”

**Hope for a new beginning**

Every day as many as two dozen newcomers find themselves at Central Methodist, simply hoping for a blanket and a place to sleep. They’re ushered up to the bishop’s office. Sometimes they wait outside for an hour, other times for a day and a
night, depending on how busy Bishop Paul and his small staff are.

When prospective church residents get into the bishop’s office, they begin the lengthy process of getting squared away with the Department of Home Affairs. Many don’t realize how long and arduous a process gaining refugee status can be.

Bishop Paul spells out the definition of a refugee—someone fleeing a country because of the threat of political persecution. “I’ll say to them, ‘Where are you from in Zimbabwe? Why did you leave your country?’ And the reason I ask that question is so I can hear: Is this going to be economic or political?”

“Then I ask, ‘Have you been to Home Affairs? Have you filled out a form? If you haven’t filled in the form…’” Bishop Paul pauses, shakes his head, shrugs and lets out a sigh. He must repeat this legal process many times a day.

If refugees aren’t clear about why they’re fleeing their native land, they will almost certainly be sent back home to any dangers that might await.

**Giving with two hands**

Bishop Paul has never turned away anyone looking for a safe place to stay. His compassion reassures those who have fled oppression, violence and unfathomable hardships.

“You know here, there is Bishop [Paul]. This man, I don’t know how to explain,” says Martin Sibanda, a 29-year-old Zimbabwean who calls the church’s second-floor hallway home. He laughs nervously as he speaks. His broken English forces him to use his hands to narrate what his mouth cannot. His palms open upward as he stammers, “He will always give two hands.”
The married father of a 4-year-old daughter, Sibanda fled Zimbabwe the first chance he got. A former Zimbabwean soldier, he abandoned his shift while patrolling the border and braved the razor-wire fencing and crocodile-infested waters of the Limpopo River, which divides Zimbabwe from South Africa.

Now, Sibanda finds himself penniless and lonely at Central Methodist.

Although stories like this aren’t unusual, they still leave Bishop Paul bewildered every time he hears them. “As a citizen of this country, I have no concept of how traumatizing this must be,” he says. His hearty smile fades and his thick auburn beard sags. “To be sort of dropped into a place where you just don’t belong anywhere….you must belong in thin air.”

Better than the alternatives

By the bishop’s own account, the living conditions at Central Methodist are miserable. Overcrowding has left the five-story building in shambles and increased the threat of crime and widespread sickness. In winter, broken windows invite frigid nighttime air. Trash pollutes hallways. Toilets overflow. Phlegm-wrenching coughs punctuate the air.

Mothers care for their babies in a small basement room that used to hold Sunday School services for children. Now, the walls echo with the sounds of crying infants, muffled only when it’s time to suckle or snooze briefly amid incessant commotion. Male residents roam the church, finding comfort wherever there’s enough room to spread a blanket and lie next to their belongings—bundles of clothing, stacks of documents and books, and sentimental items reminding them of a life that once was.
Nonetheless, for Zimbabwean refugees, it’s better than the alternatives. It’s better than struggling to survive in a country where a loaf of bread costs $10 million Zimbabwean dollars—more than their fathers earned in a lifetime. It’s better than living in a country where political discussions could lead to torture or even death.

After fleeing six-figure inflation and government-condoned violence in their homeland, Zimbabwean refugees now fear the xenophobia plaguing South Africa. Many native South Africans feel threatened by the foreigners—Africans from other nations, both legal and illegal—living in their communities. With 60 percent of South Africans below the poverty level, according to the South African Human Sciences Research Council, frustration fueled hatred and violence.

In May 2008 attacks on foreigners spread from poor areas of Johannesburg to cities throughout the country. Many native South Africans felt justified in their actions, pointing to a lack of jobs caused by the booming number of foreigners working for lower wages. The attacks left ten of thousands of foreigners displaced from their homes and families—and fearful for their lives.

Bishop Paul has vowed to keep those in the church’s embrace safe from further harm.

**Safety within**

The bishop assembled a council from the church’s largely Zimbabwean population to uphold the law within the building: no weapons, no drugs, no alcohol, no fighting. The council’s enforcers—18 security guards, mainly former Zimbabwean soldiers—oversee church safety.
In one case, Bishop Paul says, a man wielded a knife in the presence of women and children. The assailant’s intentions were unclear, but his actions appeared to be fueled by an alcohol-induced rage. In another instance a man was cornered after attempting to steal a water pump worth U.S. $600 from the church’s basement.

Such incidents are common. In both these cases, the bishop decided each man’s fate. If need be, the police are contacted, but Bishop Paul says they rarely respond to calls of distress.

**No greener pastures**

Aaron Makaze, a former Zimbabwean army captain and the self-proclaimed highest-ranking exiled official living in South Africa, oversees the church’s security guards. As the bishop’s top security aide, he secures the premises and ensures that the law is carried out. This means sweeping the building for illegal activities numerous times throughout the day, investigating criminal allegations and reporting his findings to the bishop’s staff.

Makaze hopes the time spent close to his boss will speed up the lengthy process of gaining refugee status. Bishop Paul’s strong presence in the community has led Makaze to believe that his boss has the power to usher him directly into a meeting with a Home Affairs official to decide his fate. It can take months—and sometimes more than a year—to secure such a meeting.

But above all, Makaze wants to be reunited with his family. He had to flee Zimbabwe in March 2008 after being accused of treason. Instead of facing a firing squad, Makaze was mistakenly released. He fled to South Africa without even saying good-bye
to his family.

“You see, if you’re running away from something, you can’t tell people you’re leaving,” the 40-year-old says calmly. His piercing dark eyes bespeak painful memories of his years as an army captain. Working under Zimbabwe’s notorious President Robert Mugabe, Makaze was forced to carry out some of his leader’s most ruthless orders—orders he’d rather not revisit.

Makaze wants nothing more than to see peace in his native country. “It’s not that I don’t love Zimbabwe. If things were different, I’d be back with my family, with my wife and daughter. I’m a family man....If I manage to have 20 rand (U.S. $2.50), that’s when I phone my family.”

But for the time being, Makaze lives for the short conversations with his wife and 3-year-old daughter. After a long day patrolling the sometimes-treacherous confines of his new home, he’ll curl up at the base of a stairwell and dream of a peaceful life.

“It’s not easy,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief. “I’ve got a payment on my house; I can’t pay for my house. It’s not easy. All Zimbabweans are scrambling because there are greener pastures here. There are not greener pastures here.”

**Hope through a higher power**

For those living at Central Methodist, hope is all they really have. And faith in a higher power.

A Friday night service led by Rev. Tanjewe Clacka-Clacka fills the chapel. “Tanjewe, the one you can always rely on,” she says, letting out a grandmotherly chuckle. “Yup, that’s me.”
As she walks to the lectern, the overhead lights illuminate her round face. Mothers attempt to corral their youngsters as Tanjewe leads a familiar prayer.

“Let us pray,” she begins. The coughs and adolescent laughter abruptly hush.

“Dying, you destroy our debts.” Her words are echoed by the destitute congregation.

“Rising, you restore our lives.” Again, her audience repeats the words, but this time with a heightened sense of intimacy.

“Lord Jesus, you arrive in glory!” Her head tilts upward and her palms open wide as she raises her arms toward the ceiling.

The simple phrase strikes a nerve. Many in the chapel rise from their seats as if pulled by strings attached to Tanjewe’s fingers. Their words mirror hers with a sense of urgency.

For many at the church, faith in God is all they have left. Through him they feel they will be liberated from their struggle.

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