

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: A STORY OF THE CENTRAL METHODIST CHURCH

Christa Kuljian

(Ruth First Fellow, Wits Journalism University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

By opening the doors of the Central Methodist Church to the homeless and destitute of inner Johannesburg, Bishop Paul Verryn forced recognition of their plight into the consciousness of the powerful. The result, reveals Christa Kuljian, is disarray in the halls of power equivalent only to the mess on the street. Battles rage amongst clergy, between politicians, within the civil service, and in the courts - with the police, civil society, individual citizens and the media backing all sides. But ultimately neither responsibility nor positive action is taken. Nothing meaningful is done to assist the people symptomatic of the problem. And the root problem itself, inequality and poverty, remains largely unacknowledged.

Every Friday night at 7pm at the Central Methodist Church, there is a refugee meeting. When I began my research in April this year, I planned to attend one of these meetings. My expectation was to meet in a conference room around a large table with about twenty people. I was so wrong.

The first meeting I attend is on a chilly April evening. At the entrance of the five-story Church building, women sit behind low tables – selling chicken and spinach, pap and gravy, sweets, snacks and coffee. In the sanctuary on the first floor, over 500 people are waiting for the meeting to start. Men with



Friday night refugee meeting
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

worn clothing walk in carrying flat cardboard boxes that will later be their beds. Women and children sit close to the front. The green carpet is frayed, many of the seats in the pews are broken and the lights are dim. I find a seat. One person coughs, then another. There is a cacophony of coughing. Someone hands me a copy of the minutes from last week's meeting.

Minutes? I didn't expect minutes. Bishop Paul Verryn chairs the meeting and Elizabeth Cheza, a Church resident, sits next to him taking notes. Men and women come up to the front to report on different activities – adult education, the crèche, the Albert Street School, computer training, sewing, book club, soccer and karate. Organizations working with the Church also communicate with the residents, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – which operates a clinic on the ground floor, Solidarity Peace Trust, and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV). The Bishop uses the platform to discuss issues of the week – often security in the building, job opportunities, and toilets.

“I've spoken more about toilets and plumbing in this Church than I have about Jesus,” he says. At a meeting in May, the Bishop said, “I don't understand how people go to the toilet and get angry with the toilet. Who puts oil and pap or sadza in the sink? I'm not prepared to tolerate this vandalism anymore. From now on, we are going to have security in the toilets. You'll close the door, and security will listen to what you're doing in there. I got this idea from the Rosebank Mall.”

There are eight rules for Church residents. No smoking. No drinking. No fighting. No stealing. No sex in the building unless you are in the married couples accommodation. Keep yourself and your area clean and attend a service every night at 7pm. Lastly, the Church requires that all residents are involved in at least one educational activity.

After the meeting, at about 9pm, residents start putting their mats and blankets on the floor. Soon there's no place for your feet. One night, I left the meeting out of a side door and found myself in a dark passage, stepping around people's heads and their belongings.

There are designated rooms and spaces for women and children and married couples. The landings and stairs have become bedrooms. Walking into the basement is a descent past bedding and hanging clothes. It is an informal settlement in a building.

At my second refugee meeting, I met Freedom Chivima, a former resident of the Church who has a brown belt in karate and teaches karate to other residents. Freedom was born in Zimbabwe in 1980 – the year of his country's independence. He has five siblings there who he helps to support. He was training for his black belt, but his family, along with the



Freedom Chivima
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

rest of the country, hit tough financial times so his training stopped.

Freedom came to South Africa, on his own, to search for work and moved into Central Methodist in January 2008. He found a cupboard behind the vestry that became his bed. Helpfully, in a Church with constant water and sanitation problems, Freedom is a plumber. Many at the Church are professionals – teachers, nurses, university lecturers and artisans like Freedom. Freedom found work at another building in the city on January 27, 2008. He was thrilled. Three days later, at about 11pm, Freedom was asleep in the cupboard. That’s the night the police raided the Church. “I was traumatized,” he said. “I thought I was going to be deported. It was my first time in a police vehicle. I was sitting there thinking, ‘now my job is gone.’”

During that midnight raid, the police broke windows and doors. They pulled the Bishop down the stairs by his belt loops. More than 500 people were arrested and most held for several days. “They vandalized my church, kicking anything that moved

including pregnant women, children and disabled people” said the Bishop. “They didn’t have a search warrant.” The Legal Resources Centre and a group of attorneys stepped forward to represent the residents. No one was ever charged.

The police said the raid was part of a plan to combat crime and that they acted after receiving complaints from businesses in the area. Freedom was released the following morning because he convinced a policewoman that he was from Botswana by speaking Setswana, his mother’s home language. “I was lucky,” he said. “My friend spent a month at Sun City [Diepkloof Prison].”

Judge Sutherland of the High Court compared the police raid on the church “to grotesque apartheid-era abuses of 20 years ago.”



Paul Verryn
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

Paul Verryn has been a Minister in the Methodist Church since he was 21. He became the Superintendent Minister at Central Methodist in 1997. Technically, he is no longer Bishop. Not because of his suspension in January this year but because his

term as elected Bishop ended in December 2009. His term as Superintendent Minister continues until 2013. The name “Bishop” has stuck, however, and everyone in the Church still calls him that. The Bishop says that you have a choice in the city. “You can either put razor wire around the church or you can open the doors.”

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Researchers estimate that there are likely 600,000 to 650,000 Zimbabweans in Johannesburg. The Solidarity Peace Trust says Central Methodist is the “highly visible tip of a huge iceberg of Zimbabweans in Central Johannesburg.”

Freedom was still living in the church when the May 2008 xenophobic violence erupted. He was working as part of the Church’s 17-man security detail. “Oh no, here comes another raid,” he thought. But this time the police offered protection. “One day, these guys were coming down Jeppe Street, coming for us. But the police came and the crowd dispersed,” he said.

The xenophobic violence in May 2008 and the failed Zimbabwe elections in March and June that same year resulted in an increased flow of migrants to the Church. By the end of 2008, the numbers living in the Church swelled to over 2,000 and people began sleeping outside the Church as well.

About eighty percent of the Church residents are Zimbabwean. The next largest group is homeless South Africans. The Bishop says, “Central Methodist is seen as a place to house foreign nationals, but it’s not. It’s a confrontation to society around those

in poverty, many of whom happen to be foreign nationals.” He also refers to the Church as “a protest against the disparity between rich and poor. It’s a sin,” he says.

“Central Methodist is ... a confrontation to society around those in poverty ... a protest against the disparity between rich and poor.”



Cleo Buthelezi
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

Cleo Buthelezi, is a 37 year old South African, who moved into the Church five years ago. She wasn’t always destitute. She grew up as the youngest of seven children in Nqutu, KwaZulu-Natal and went to the University of Port Elizabeth, but she was forced to leave because she couldn’t pay her fees. In 2004, Cleo got a call from a friend to take up a job as a receptionist in Johannesburg. She stayed with her cousin. Several months later, she lost her job and her place to stay so she spent two nights sleeping in Park Station with her two year old son. She had nowhere else to go.

Cleo showed me the space in the small chapel on the ground floor between pews four and five where she slept when she first arrived at the Church. She looked for piece jobs, did ironing, typing and sold the *Sunday Times*. Then she started working at the Church, cleaning, doing administration and preparing for communion.

The Gauteng City Region Observatory did a quality of life survey for 2009 and captured the reality of migration to the City. Twenty percent of those interviewed were not living in Gauteng five years ago. The Bishop says, “Many of the buildings that poor people live in in the inner city make this place look like a five star hotel.”

While the City was not oblivious to the problem, there was no unified policy towards migrants. The Inner-City Charter, finalized in 2007, acknowledged large numbers of migrants. The Mayor opened a Migrant Help Desk in 2007, which was important symbolically, but generally the City’s support has been extremely limited.



Phil Harrison
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

Phil Harrison was the head of the department for development planning and urban management for the City from 2006 through 2009. He helped form a task team to engage with Central Methodist. When I asked him about the City’s policy towards migrants, he said, “The City has taken a progressive view toward migrants, but it’s not just the City. There is no clear national policy toward migrants. There’s no framework. No certainty.”

For over fifteen years, Phil studied urban development and South African cities, especially Johannesburg. He conducted research and wrote journal articles suggesting solutions to urban problems. In late 2006, he left Wits University to work for the City.

He and Ruby Mathang, a member of the Mayoral Committee and the political head for planning, formed a partnership. They were part of the City’s task team that met with the Bishop in January 2009 to address the growing numbers of people living at the Church and to explore long term solutions.

According to Phil, it was at this meeting that the Bishop requested that the City provide a building to relocate the thousands of migrants who were sleeping in and around the Church. Phil and Ruby Mathang took up the task. They identified the MOTH Building on Loveday Street that could accommodate 750 residents. By early February, Amos Masondo’s Mayoral Committee approved a plan. Phil helped secure the commitment of the Gauteng Province to fund the building’s ongoing management costs. He also found the funds to sign on the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) to renovate the building.

The JDA had worked in the area before on an upgrade of public space. In 2007, the City spent R12



The MOTH Building
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

million to revamp the area around the Church and the High Court. The idea was to develop an attractive “legal precinct.” The JDA installed unique paving, benches and street lights along Pritchard and Von Brandis Streets, and a new, modern, red clock at the corner of Pritchard and Smal. Despite this upgrade, I have heard that many people in City government refer to this area as the “chaos” precinct.

The Church sits on the corner of Pritchard and Smal Streets. The Smal Street Mall is one of the busiest walk ways in the City. The High Court building occupies the entire block on Pritchard from Smal to Von Brandis. Across from the High Court stands Schreiners Chambers, and Innes Chambers, which is abandoned as many advocates left for new premises in Sandton in the late 1990s. Next to the Church on the other side is Pitje Chambers, a building that was renovated in 2006 to attract advocates back to the precinct. On the same side of Smal Street as the Church stands the abandoned Johannesburg Sun. Everyone who drives to the area – attorneys, judges



The High Court
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

and members of the Church congregation – parks in a garage beneath the hotel.

Rose Bond is the building manager for Pitje Chambers. For months, when Rose arrived at work before 6am, she couldn’t get into the basement parking because people were sleeping on the ramp. She hooted, patiently waited for everyone to move, and then inched down past the scores of people rising from their blankets and moving their bags and belongings. But then, Rose snapped ... “People wash themselves every morning in Pritchard Street, leaving the street and the sidewalk in a filthy, smelly state” says Rose. “They have no problem at all with throwing their waste on the pavement, urinating wherever they can, defecating in public, and loitering for most of the day.”

In mid-2008, when the residents at the Church increased substantially, Rose began meeting with the City. “I would call the police to ask them to help,” she said. They would say, ‘No we can’t come. We have a directive from the Mayor’s office not to interfere because we’ll get bad international media.’



The High Court on the left, Pitje Chambers on the right and Central Methodist Church in the centre
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

Rose called the Mayor’s office to ask them when they were going to clean the streets. “We would have these frustrating conversations that would go on for weeks,” she said. For example, “I would ask, ‘When are you going to clean the street?’

The City said, ‘We’re waiting for delivery of ecoli cleaning chemicals.’

Then I said, ‘OK then, we’ll buy our own and do the cleaning ourselves.’

‘No, but you have to use *bio-degradable* ecoli cleaning chemicals.’

‘Where do you get *bio-degradable* ecoli cleaning chemicals?’

‘You can’t get it in South Africa. We are waiting for a shipment from China.’”

“At that point,” said Rose, “I wanted to put the phone down.”

Phil Harrison said that in early 2009, the City’s task team worked to implement several short term measures. With growing health concerns, the Bish-



Rose Bond
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

op agreed that the City would conduct regular health inspections and provide fumigation services. The City also provided more regular waste collection and, in February 2009, installed a set of 19 temporary toilets along Pritchard Street. “We thought we were doing a good thing with those toilets,” says Phil. “But they became the main gripe.”

Rose said it made things worse. “It made it even more embarrassing to invite attorneys and clients to the building.”

“We were very sympathetic to the migrants and their situation,” said Rose. “That’s why it took so long for us to take action. In February 2009, I was at a meeting that the City convened in Braamfontein. It was in a lovely office with tea and beautiful snacks. I thought to myself, we should have had the meeting at Pitje Chambers so everyone could have seen the garbage and the portable toilets and smelled the urine and sewage. I don’t want any more of these beautiful snacks.”

Pitje Chambers took up a legal case against the City and the Church. They applied for a court order

compelling the City to remove the thousands of migrants from the Church because their presence had become a health hazard.

In her affidavit, Rose said, “The church and the municipality obviously have no reasonable plan to effectively address the plight of these displaced people, including housing them in a dignified manner ... the displaced persons, the Church and the toilets have now totally destroyed the idea of a world class legal precinct that would lure practitioners back to Johannesburg.”

In his responding affidavit, the Bishop said that the Church was sympathetic to the problems faced by Pitje Chambers and shopkeepers on Pritchard Street and the Smal Street Mall, but that “these problems are the direct result of the State’s failure to observe its national and international obligations to provide shelter for homeless refugees and asylum seekers.”

[“these problems are the direct result of the State’s failure to observe its national and international obligations to provide shelter for homeless refugees and asylum seekers.”](#)

After numerous emergency meetings, on the 20 March, 2009, on the High Court steps, all parties reached agreement and Pitje Chambers did not pursue the court order and they withdrew the case. The City agreed to supply two security guards at the entrance and exit to Pitje Chambers, and a dedicated team for refuse removal in the area. The City also agreed to remove the portable toilets along Pritchard Street and opened the public toilets on the corner of Pritchard and Von Brandis twenty-four hours a day.

“The City” is not one unified body. I’ve heard one urban researcher call it a multi-headed hydra. Phil confirms that he witnessed many opposing views within the bureaucracy. Lael Bethlehem, the former Director of the JDA says the City is like a Jackson Pollack painting with many painters. “Everyone is throwing paint at the canvas at the same time,” she says.

The City wasn’t the only one throwing paint. During the week that Pitje Chambers took up its legal case in March 2009, the Department of Home Affairs closed down the refugee reception centre on the show grounds in Musina, Limpopo Province, saying it was always meant to be temporary.

Several Johannesburg papers reported that migrants from Musina were being given transport to Johannesburg by mini-bus taxis but no one was sure who was providing it. Rumors circulated that the Bishop was subsidizing the move. The *Mail and Guardian* later reported that the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provided the funding.

The Mayor and his Mayoral committee visited the Church and had concerns about people sleeping on the street. Qedani Dorothy Mahlangu, then the Gauteng MEC for local government said that the UNHCR had created a crisis in Johannesburg. She announced that “any church, any community hall is not meant to be inhabited by people. I think [the Bishop] is exposing them to more danger. We are not condoning what he is doing. We condemn it.”

In late March, just as the Pitje Chambers case was being negotiated, the UNHCR and Home Affairs distributed tokens to over 2,500 people at the Church who were eligible for relocation to other buildings, including the MOTH building. Freedom Chivima got a token and registered. He said, “I didn’t have

a choice. I didn't know how long my job would last, so I needed to make sure I would have accommodation."



Top of the fence between the Smal Street Mall and the church
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

Despite the withdrawal of the Pitje Chambers case, tensions in the area continued to rise. The Bishop received a death threat. Judges at the High Court continued to be incensed by the mess at their doorstep. One attorney told me that Lawyers for Human Rights that had acted for the people sleeping on the street was concerned that they would never again get a fair trial from the High Court judges. The Smal Street Mall business owners erected a fence between the Church and the Mall that closed from 6pm until 6am every night to prevent people from sleeping on the pavement.

In June 2009, the Deputy Judge President of the High Court wrote a letter to Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department (JMPD) and the Mayor saying "this is an urgent appeal for intervention and immediate action."

On the night of July 3, 2009, more than 350 people were arrested outside the Church for "loitering."



Section of the fence that is closed each night
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

This was not the first police action in the area since January 2008, but it was the largest. Chief Superintendent Wayne Minnaar said on SABC radio, "This is part of Operation Chachamela, a campaign to ensure that people comply with the by-laws and that we clean up the city."

[more than 350 people were arrested outside the Church for "loitering"](#)

Phil Harrison says the July raid "came as a surprise. People had been registered by Home Affairs. They were preparing to move." Just three months earlier, Home Affairs had announced plans to regularize the legal status of Zimbabweans in South Africa and announced a moratorium on deportations.

Days after the July raid there was another development. The Gauteng Province reneged on its commitment to fund the ongoing costs of the MOTH building. They decided that provincial budget cuts meant that they would no longer have the resources.

Mayor Masondo and Phil Harrison were left without funding. The Mayor wrote to the provincial MEC for Social Development saying that the City had already spent R9 million on the MOTH building and that expectations were high from the media and the Church, but to no avail.

[The Gauteng Province reneged on its commitment to fund the ongoing costs of the MOTH building.](#)

Since the police raid in July 2009, there have been many significant developments. With the help of Legal Resources Centre, Lawyers for Human Rights and Section 27, the Church took the City and JMPD to court over the raid. The case is challenging the City by-laws on loitering as unconstitutional. The parties are nearing a settlement, however, that police will no longer make unnecessary arrests in the area. In October 2009, there was a 3am surprise visit by Molebatsi Bopape, the Chair of the Gauteng legislature's health and social development portfolio committee. She held public hearings and declared that the Church should be closed immediately. Allegations of abuse at the Church arose along with growing concerns for over 50 unaccompanied minors. Many of the children moved to another Methodist facility in Soweto. In January 2010, with the support of the Bishop, the court named Dr. Ann Skelton as a legal curator for these children.

[the Church took the City and JMPD to court over the raid ... challenging the City by-laws on loitering as unconstitutional](#)

Also, in January, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church suspended Bishop Verryn for taking



Paul Verryn speaking to children at the Albert Street School
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

legal steps to name the curator and for speaking to the media without permission. In May, an arbitrator set aside the charges and the Bishop's suspension was lifted. There is still talk of people moving from the Church to the MOTH building with funding from the UNDP, but since the plan was first presented in January 2009, no one has moved.

[the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church suspended Bishop Verryn](#)

In June this year, Paul Verryn began a new organization called Peace Action to monitor xenophobia. Cleo Buthelezi has been active with Peace Action. She also provides training and facilitates workshops on peace building and mediation based on a certificate course she completed at CSV. She recently began a cleaning programme outside the Church and the High Court to offer employment to single women with children. Cleo moved from the Chapel floor



Cleo Buthelezi addressing Friday night refugee meeting
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

and now shares a small room – an old storage closet – with her two children and another woman friend.

I asked Cleo if she ever thinks about moving out of the Church. “I only want to part ways when things are on smooth ground,” she said. “The Bishop is having a hard time because he’s helping other people. I know some people don’t see it like that. But he has taught me that I can make it, that I can believe in myself. He has changed my life to see that life is about other people.”

Just after the police raid last year, the numbers of people living inside the Church went up over 2,000 because everyone moved inside. Now, more than a year later, the number of people living in the Church has decreased to under a thousand. I asked Freedom and Cleo why they thought this was so. Cleo said that people were concerned when the Bishop was suspended in January 2010. “They didn’t know what would happen.” Freedom said he thought the “word had gone out that it was too crowded,” and that fears about xenophobia played a part.



The foyer of the Central Methodist Church
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

Rose Bond was surprised in August when the City sent her legal papers compelling Pitje to include the national and provincial departments of Human Settlements and Housing in the case against the City. “We withdrew from that case,” she said. “Why did they spend R50,000 on legal fees? Why did they dig up an old bone?” Rose is pleased that the toilets are gone and that now she can make her way down the ramp to the parking garage.

Phil Harrison is back at Wits as a Research Professor and is also a member of the National Planning Commission, where he will have to address new complex problems.

Freedom Chivima moved with his wife and his four-year old daughter to other accommodation downtown but his daughter still attends the crèche at the Church. He says, “This is my family. I’m attached to the Church. If I don’t come here for a day or two, I don’t feel good.” In April this year, with support from the Bishop and a karate school in Fordsburg, Freedom earned his black belt in karate.



Freedom Chivima and his daughter at the pre-school at Central Methodist Church
Photo credit: Siven Maslamoney

Central Methodist is a visible and continuous reminder of many challenges we South Africans face in our society and in our city – poverty, migration, xenophobia, policing, inner city housing and shelter, the vulnerable position of women and children, the gap between rich and poor.

The Church makes visible the crisis in Zimbabwe. In fact, the Church is a barometer. When events in Zimbabwe worsen, the numbers of people sleeping on the Church floor escalates. The Bishop says there will be no long term solution until we deal with the endemic problems in the region. “The flow of migrants is like a tide,” he said. “Sometimes it will be less and sometimes more.”

The Church makes visible the fact that Johannesburg is a city of migrants, many of whom live in shocking conditions. As we all know, Johannesburg was founded by migrants attracted to the river of gold. For its first century, Johannesburg was populated by people coming from all over South Africa,



Freedom Chivima with his black belt in karate
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

the region and the world. Continuing migration contributes to a crisis of housing and shelter in the inner city that has been recognized but not fully addressed.

Central Methodist and the entire High Court district make visible the clash between the vision of a World Class City and the reality of many people’s lives. There is a conflict between the desire for a World Class precinct and the Church as a refuge for people with no resources. South Africa’s high Gini coefficient is on display right there at the corner of Pritchard and Smal.

[South Africa’s high Gini coefficient is on display right there at the corner of Pritchard and Smal.](#)

I asked Phil Harrison about the City’s vision for a World Class African City. He says that in fact the City’s current official policy document, the Growth and Development Strategy of 2006, calls for a “World Class African City for All.” Unfortunately,



One of the many signs celebrating Johannesburg as “A World Class African Host City.”
Photo credit: Christa Kuljian

the “for all” was dropped from the City’s letterhead and from every banner and billboard throughout the World Cup and therefore from the City’s consciousness.

It is clear that the Church cannot deal with the challenges of migration and migrant accommodation alone. As Hermann Reuter of MSF wrote in the *Mail and Guardian*, “The church has become like an ambulance – visibly exposing a dilemma and raising the alarm But the ambulance is not the problem and it cannot be dealt with as such.” He says, “the government wants to deal with the Church in isolation from the broader challenge ... [and to blame] Paul Verryn for somehow creating this situation.”

This is not a story of good and evil. It would be easy if we could blame the Bishop or the Mayor. But at least they are in there with their boots on, as was Phil Harrison and Rose Bond. Perhaps we could blame Freedom Chivima for leaving Zimbabwe for South Africa or Cleo Buthelezi for ending up home-

less with her child on the floor of Park Station. But we cannot. We have to take responsibility as a society. We cannot look away. If we decide that addressing poverty and inequality in this country is the challenge that must guide every action we take, wouldn't that be powerful. Now, wouldn't that be World Class?

This article was first delivered as the "Ruth First Memorial Lecture" at the University of the Witwatersrand, 17th of August, 2010. Christa Kuljian can be reached at christak@alignafrica.com