

BOOK REVIEW with sabata-mpho mokae

Title: Sanctuary – how an inner-city church spilled onto a sidewalk
Author: Christa Kuljian
Publisher: Jacana

“THE BUILDING was viewed by many as only an eyesore and a problem, but for migrants into the city from elsewhere in South Africa and many other countries on the continent, and especially for people from Zimbabwe, it had become a refuge, a haven and a home.”

This book tells the story of one of Johannesburg’s important institutions, the Central Methodist Mission. This reviewer read this book twice. Firstly because I was fortunate to be a worshipper at the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg when refugees started trickling in, having realised that in the cold concrete jungle a church could be the only refuge.

So, I was a witness when the history unfolded. But it was quite important that I read the book again, this time with the main objective being to review it.

The central figure in this story is a well-known cleric, Bishop Paul Verryn, who opened the doors of the church to the vulnerable, much to the annoyance of nearby businesses and institutions.

“Bishop Paul Verryn once told me that of his 37 years in the ministry, the last five years at the Central Methodist had been the toughest and the most rewarding – tough because of the difficulties of housing so many people, rewarding in ministering to them. Describing an inner-city church, he said, ‘You can either put a razor wire around the church or you can open the door.’ Verryn maintained an open door policy.”

The author then leads us into this man and how he came to be where he was at the height of a xenophobic wave in the country.

“When Bishop Peter Storey recommended Reverend Paul Verryn to become the Superintendent Minister at Central Methodist in 1997, he thought that Verryn would be an appropriate choice because he had ‘a very clear voice that was not afraid to raise the issues, to take on the powers’”.

In this book we read about Verryn’s unpopular stance of opening the doors to immigrants, most of whom were undocumented and therefore illegal. The Bishop appeared in front of the parliament’s Portfolio Committee on Home Affairs.

He was warned that by “harbouring illegal immigrants” he could be criminally charged.

But what took place at Central Methodist was also influenced by the history of the church.

The author takes us back to the establishment of the church at the height of the “gold rush” in 1887 and how it served the first diggers in the mining camps from ox-wagons.

Later the Deaconess Institute was established as “the caring arm” of the church. Also in the 1980s the church offered office space to “problematic” organisations such as the Detainees’ Parents Support Committee and the Action Committee to Stop Eviction.

The several pages of images in the centre of a book give a visual glimpse into the extent of the intervention of the church in the immigrants’ problem. In one image people are seen sleeping on cardboard boxes everywhere in the church hall.

In another image Bishop Paul Verryn is officiating a marriage and in another baptising a baby. There is also

a teacher who is giving lessons to immigrant children . . . and a troubling image of immigrants being prodded like sheep with a sjambok at the Home Affairs offices in Marabastad, Pretoria.

But then the book goes into details on the origins and the extent of the refugee situation in Southern Africa, which I think is a good thing because readers are presented with a bigger picture and enough facts from which they can draw their own conclusions.

It is not only at the Central Methodist were illegal immigrants “spilled” onto the inner-city . . . “at the end of 2010 there were 800 people living at the Central Methodist” which was down from its peak of 3 000 in 2009. The church simply became a focal point and a litmus test for the country and its government. It also tested and revealed deep-seated attitudes of those who are supposed and profess to care for the vulnerable. Above all, this is the story of faith. Unshaken faith. The book also explores the church’s perceived and potential roles in an embattled era. At almost 400 pages and relatively long chapters, the book is well-detailed and is an easy read.

• **Christa Kuljian is a freelance writer living in Johannesburg. She holds several degrees including a MA in Creative Writing from Wits University. Sanctuary is her first book.**

