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FORTNIGHTLY NEWS & ANALYSIS ON PROGRESSIVE AFRICA  
21st March - 4th April 2011 Issue 12

## Faces of the new Libya

**South Africa:**  
Strength should  
follow growing  
popularity

**Côte d'Ivoire:**  
ECOWAS blames  
South Africa

Mahmoud Jibril, left, and AG Nasser, representatives of the newly formed council based in the eastern city of Benghazi, talks to the media after a meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysee Palace, in Paris, Thursday, March 10, 2011. France has formally recognized the Libyan opposition's Interim Governing Council and plans to exchange ambassadors with the newly formed body. AP



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THE FORTNIGHTLY MAGAZINE ON PROGRESSIVE AFRICA

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UK (€1.99)	KE (225)	(12.90)
RSA	BW	LR (€3.00)
(17.00)	(16.00)	GH (3.00)
NG (300)	EU (3.00)	NA (16.75)
SL (5000)	EGP	GA (50)

# Bishop Paul Verryn and Asylum at the Church

**W**hen asylum-seekers arrive in Johannesburg, they inevitably end up at Park Station, the largest railway terminal in Africa. From here at least they can make some kind of decision about their future in a foreign land, one that promises what they so desperately seek – food, shelter, medicine, water, employment and education; basic human rights that they are unable to adequately source in their home environment.

Many have fled their southern African countries impoverished. These are people who are defeated and broken, their journey often fraught with terror of persecution and fear of the unknown. They arrive in South Africa travel-weary and burdened, easily identifiable as alien, preyed-upon by ruthless street criminals and con-artists. Nowhere to turn, nowhere to go.

79 Pritchard Street is neither a hostel nor hospice but it has become a sanctuary for thousands of downtrodden asylum-seekers, and is run by Paul Verryn, a man whose humanity fits him closer than the robes that indicate his status as Bishop. He is the superintendent minister of the Central Methodist Church (CMC).

Verryn's outlook, is secular but rational. This has been both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, and in his own words: 'my whole experience with the migrants has been phenomenal, mind-exploding, life-changing.' On the other hand: 'This has been the worst experience of my life and has gone to the root of who I am as a human being.'

That's quite a dramatic statement from Verryn, given his past when in 1989 Winnie Madikizela-Mandela accused him of the sexual abuse of children under his care at Verryn's Manse in Soweto. It was a scandal of massive proportions involving the abduction and torture of four teenagers from the Orlando Methodist Mission by the Mandela United Football Club (MUFC). The murder of one of the boys, 14-year-old Stompie Seipei while in the hands of the MUFC, cast a deep shadow in Verryn's life. It was subsequently proven that the boys had been tortured into making the unfounded allegations against Verryn which they later withdrew.

Verryn, despite a suspected attempt on his life, valiantly continued to live in Soweto, a place he still calls home and loves dearly. He and Madikizela-Mandela have since reconciled and in fact Verryn says 'he has somewhat of a soft spot for her' especially given her humanitarian acts of kindness and unhesitating support of people during times of crisis.

If the events of the late 80s were traumatic, the past two years have taken a bigger toll on Verryn. His weight loss in the past year has left him painfully thin and had to endure what could be considered a smear campaign in the name of humanity.

It all started in '08 when the CMC, giving consideration to the number of children who had approached the church seeking education, began negotiations to reopen a school that had been closed in 1958 – the Albert Street School. 'The current headmaster and deputy headmaster – both

Zimbabwean teachers – felt that the inner city was not a good space for children, particularly those who were homeless and parentless, and at the peak of their learning curve,' relates Verryn.

While the Church busied itself with plans to reopen the nearby school, Verryn and his colleagues were becoming increasingly alarmed at the rumours of xenophobia, an under-current that could not have prepared them, when it hit, for the tidal wave of foreigners that turned to the CMC for protection.

South Africa has struggled with xenophobia throughout its history but when news broke of the attacks that started in Alexandria in May 2008, it caught the government unprepared. Hurriedly assembled camps could not contain the fearful thousands and the camps burst their boundaries. At its peak the CMC found itself harbouring some 3 000-plus indigents.

Verryn faced a dilemma ... throughout history churches of the world have protected and provided sanctuary for both heathen and Christian alike, but with every inch of space, including stairwells, of the CMC now occupied, he could not ignore the perils of unsatisfactory living conditions, let alone feed the masses.

Under the circumstances he and his team did the best they could. The first step was to create rules, eight of them, which Verryn refers to as 'the other Commandments': No smoking; no alcohol consumption; no fighting; no sex unless you are married and reside in the married quarters; individuals must maintain personal hygiene standards and keep the building clean; residents must enrol in an educational empowerment programme; and attend church services every night. The eighth rule was the one that started all the controversy ... no stealing.

The CMC had received a substantial donation from the Mormon Church, bags and bags of beans and mielies. Two individuals who had taken refuge in the Church stole vast quantities and were selling the products at Park Station. The headmaster-to-be and his deputy reported the matter to the police and the thieves were caught red-handed.

While in custody the two petty criminals made a number of allegations against the headmaster and the deputy, who were consequently arrested. When bail was opposed, Verryn and a legal team presented themselves at the police station. 'One of the allegations was that the CMC had become a hideout for criminals. I suggested that I would have to be completely out of my mind if the police believed that. I gave reassurance that the police had carte blanche to come into the building at any time to ensure there was no mischief or illegal goings-on. In every way possible we were transparently co-operative, but it left relations between the police and the CMC strained.'

The incident was picked up by the media and all hell broke loose. The CMC was highlighted not so much as a social cause, but as a place where human rights injustices were happening. The situation worsened when the then Gauteng legislature's health and social development

portfolio committee chairperson, Molebatsi Bopape arrived at the building with armed guards at 5am. Children especially, were awakened terrified to see the shadows of guns moving among them. Many thought they were going to be killed.

Verryn was deeply disturbed by the manner of the visit. 'We have some very vulnerable people in this building. People who have been tortured and violated in so many ways that the trauma of their past intensified. I had, and still have, no objection to visits by any interested parties, however consideration has to be given to the nature of those for whom I care.'

Bopape declared the conditions she witnessed as despicable. She was probably not aware that Verryn was already in regular meetings with the Department of Social Development and the Johannesburg Welfare Society. As the situation now threatened to spiral out of control and with media intensity escalating, Jackie Lofell from Child Welfare suggested that what the CMC needed was a curatrix for the children, especially those who were unaccompanied minors. 'We hoped that this would depoliticise the situation and prevent the children being caught between two moving trains, as it were, driving towards one another,' says Verryn.

However Verryn did not have the authority to make a High Court application for a curatrix. He appealed to his Presiding Bishop, Ivan Abrahams to do so on the Church's behalf. After consulting with the Gauteng Local Government MEC, Qedani Mahlangu, Abrahams declared he was not prepared to make the application.

Verryn, who was not privy to those discussions, was outraged. 'With all due respect I think that the situation at the CMC exposed the incompetency of the government to deal with the issue of asylum seekers. You can't have a policy that allows people to stream through your borders and integrate into society without assistance. I think that the Departments of Social Development, Health, and Education including the police, were caught completely unprepared.'

'People do not integrate by osmosis. You need to set up strategies to give the process integrity. I think the CMC stands as a challenge to that integrity and because I am so vocal about this issue, I have felt at times, that when I speak to some of those with the authority to make changes, that they hate me with a passion.'

Obscurely, because HIV/AIDS had up to this point not really featured in the news about the church, the AIDS Law Project (ALP) and the Legal Resources Centre, came to the rescue and with Verryn's full endorsement (but non-involvement) made the High Court Application with a successful conclusion. Verryn was elated that Dr Ann Skelton, a respected children's rights lawyer, was appointed as curatrix for the children at his Church.

This outcome however served to inflame Verryn's now tenuous relationship with Abrahams who had warned Verryn through a lawyer that he should be careful of taking powers that were not his to use. Abrahams legally charged Verryn, and suspended him, one for his (Verryn's) supposed involvement in the High Court application and the second for speaking to the media.

'I think that's what it is all about. As God's people we are meant to engage with one another and despite that I am what I am in this church, it really means nothing to me. I could be a rat or the superintendent, but when you encounter another human being's pilgrimage it is as though you are on Holy Ground, and that is part of my own



pilgrimage. It is as I listen to the cries of the oppressed that I discover something about my own humanity.'

Through the innumerable education and training programmes offered at the church, many of the asylum seekers have managed to become independent and self-financed. For the majority of Zimbabweans that have passed through the CMC's doors, they have been enabled with new skills and residency papers or temporary permits. Many have managed to find gainful employment and have moved into flats in the city and surrounding neighbourhoods. Others have returned to their homeland.

By January this year, the Church still harbours some 1300 migrants, with two to four new arrivals daily. A clinic run by MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) and home-based support take care of their medical needs and child-minding. Verryn makes a point of meeting everyone that comes to the church for help. He is actively involved in every aspect of their daily lives, nothing escapes his notice within the community he protects.

Even now he has things to say that need to be heard: 'Foreign nationals are not a threat to this country, in particular the Zimbabweans. If we as South Africans could begin to see their arrival in our country as our baptism and acceptance back into Africa then this could be the beginning of claiming what belongs to us as Africans, particularly the respect that we lost as a result of apartheid.'

'If we can begin to start building relationships and start planning how we are to maximise the gifts that are flowing across our borders, then this country can become a HUGE nation on this continent. South Africa has the potential to become a catalyst for healing the entire continent.' NAA can't agree more. •

Above :  
Bishop  
Paul Verryn