

Theology disrupted by the challenge of refugee children



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This article focuses on the plight of refugee children and families and takes the form of a dialogue between an academic theologian and a community activist who works for an organisation assisting refugees in Tshwane. This article is structured according to a six-dimensional 'pastoral cycle' that explores agency, contextual understanding, ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action and spirituality. In each section the views of the two authors are juxtaposed, rather than merged into a single voice. This article concludes with a reflection on the method followed.

Introduction

This article explores the challenge that refugee children¹ present to the method and content of theology. By theology we mean not only the academic versions practised at universities, but all the meaning-making and practice-shaping efforts of Christian communities, as they seek to be faithful to the gospel as well as relevant to their communities.²

Theological method

This article is structured in accordance with a 'pastoral cycle' or 'praxis' approach, which integrates the six dimensions: agency (who are we?), contextual understanding (what is going on?), ecclesial scrutiny (what has the church been doing?), interpreting the tradition (what does the Bible and the Christian tradition say?), discernment for action (what should we do?) and spirituality (how do we experience God's presence?).³ The format of the article was also shaped by the interactions we had with each other: we agreed to a dialogical format, so that our voices are not merged but juxtaposed, to embody a conversation.⁴ The article does not limit itself to using a third-person academic style, but includes first-person narratives, reflections on experience and some poetry.⁵ We reflect briefly on our method again in the conclusion.

Agency

The purpose of this section is to indicate our personal positioning in relation to the topic of our article, as this has shaped our thinking about it in a decisive way.

Martin Mande

I was born in 1981 in a small village called Lulua in Kananga, Eastern Kasai Province, in the heart of the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, I grew up in the town of Bukavu, South-Kivu Province, in the eastern part of the country, which was seriously destabilised since 1994, when the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda caused thousands of refugees and soldiers to stream into the DRC. In 1996, at age 16, some friends and I fled the violence, as many boys of our age (and even younger) were being recruited as soldiers by militias operating in the region. We decided to seek refuge in nearby Goma Province as internally displaced⁶ and unaccompanied minors.⁷

1. We decided to use the term 'refugee children' rather than 'child refugees' to place the emphasis on their being *children*, while also being *refugees*. We follow the lead of the UNHCR (1994) report, entitled *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*.

2. In this regard we follow Schreier (1985:16f) who spoke of 'a community as theologian', while acknowledging the important role played in Christian communities by trained theologians.

3. This method is called a 'praxis matrix' in earlier publications, having seven dimensions (see Kritzinger & Saayman 2011). In this paper only six of the seven dimensions are used.

4. The paper is not a transcription of a real-time conversation. It was written in five steps: (1) we both attended the child theology conference in Pretoria in March 2016; (2) Martin wrote the first draft of the paper; (3) we had a discussion on that; (4) Klippiess added his sections; and (5) we had a second discussion to finalise the text.

5. In the Conclusion we reflect on these features of the paper and indicate to what extent we see them as a disruption of theology.

6. For a definition of 'internally displaced', see <http://www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html>

7. For a definition of 'unaccompanied minor', see <http://www.unhcr.org/3d4f91cf4.pdf>

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The upheaval of the Congo war destroyed many lives and created growing hatred among Congolese. In 2000, I was arrested and tortured for being a member of a youth movement that advocated against child soldiers, but through the intervention of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) I was eventually released on 31 January 2002. I had to flee my country because of the fear of persecution and inhumane treatment because of the raging civil war in which I lost both of my parents. I found myself barely surviving as there was no social order in my area. I had to get to a place where my life would be safe and secure.

We travelled to Tanzania by boat, and from there I went on alone to Malawi, where I spent a year in Dzaleka refugee camp and then 2 years in Tongogara refugee camp, Zimbabwe. In December 2005 I entered South Africa with a group of fellow refugees from various countries, and obtained refugee status in 2009. I am presently working for Xaveri South Africa⁸ in Pretoria, which is dedicated to helping other refugees. I grew up in the Catholic Church and experienced the kindness of many members of my church (and other churches) on my long journey from Bukavu to Tshwane.

What I write is not intended to evoke pity or sympathy. We all have our problems; we have all gone through our own trials; we all are going through a valley of pains. Some of us are already experiencing a period of testing, while others will be facing it in the future. The road we walk often takes a turn that we would never have imagined we would ever witness or write into the script of our lives.

Growing up as child in a refugee camp was not easy. I am very familiar with issues surrounding a refugee child: poverty, inequality and exclusion. I am experienced at living in places that many would consider disadvantaged. My experience of living conditions in both Dzaleka and Tongogara refugee camps has left me with deep concerns and a conviction that we are witnessing a paradigm shift and entering a new normal. The journey of my life as a refugee child in refugee camps is not new, but its increasing proximity to the places where many Christians live, which has ruffled the feathers of our comfortable congregations. I expressed my refugee experiences as follows in a poem:

The actual moment, of exile, is like an illness. You are ill, with rage.
To each family, it means closing the door
on friends, culture, and your native country.

One year is an exile,
compared to ten years.

Ten years
means nothing
in the history of a country.

But for a human being,
it is a long time.

8.The name has been derived from St. Francis Xavier (1506–1552), an influential Jesuit missionary.

For a child,
a life time.
Some of us
were born in refugee camps.

Peace is 'round the corner,
what I call home
will still be
another exile,
because
I don't know home.
What a paradox
to become a refugee.⁹

Klippies Kritzinger

I was born in 1950 and grew up in Johannesburg in a middle-class Afrikaner home as a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. I had a privileged and protected life as a white child under apartheid and studied theology full-time at the University of Pretoria. In 1975 I started working as a minister of congregations in black communities until my retirement in 2015. Having interacted daily with people who were politically oppressed and economically exploited, I learnt to do theology and ministry in solidarity with black fellow believers, working for justice, equality and freedom.

I am also implicated in the topic in another sense because I am also a descendant of migrants. In 1769, Johann Jakob Kritzinger (initially spelt Grözinger) from Germany arrived in South Africa by ship (Kritzinger 1974:3–8). That first Kritzinger in South Africa was not a refugee, but a young economic migrant, who was welcomed by Cape colonial society so that his descendants could later spread to various parts of South Africa. The collective memory of being welcomed as migrants in South Africa during colonial times compels me morally and spiritually to work for the welcoming of refugees and migrants in postcolonial South Africa, taking my cue from Deuteronomy 10:17–19:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Dt. 10:17–19)

Conclusion

Both of us have experienced disruption to our faith and theology through our exposure to suffering and displacement, albeit in vastly different ways. We approach the situation of refugee children with a humble and attentive mind, having learnt not to impose our ideas on others, but instead to seek together for the wisdom to respond to such challenges. At the same time, we are committed to transforming the conditions of refugee children so that they may live dignified human lives and become (re)integrated into communities where they can grow and flourish.

9.This poem was written by Martin for the 2007 World Refugee Day commemoration in Pretoria.

Contextual understanding

Klippies Kritzinger

It is helpful at the outset to clarify how the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) defines asylum and refugee, so that we understand the legal dynamics at work:

An Asylum Seeker

He is a person who has fled his or her country of origin and is seeking recognition and protection as a refugee in the Republic of South Africa, and whose application is still under consideration. In case of a negative decision on his application, he has to leave the country voluntarily or will be deported.

A Refugee

He is a person who has been granted asylum status and protection in terms of the section 24 of Refugee Act No 130 of 1998. Under the 1951 United Nations Convention, a refugee can be a 'convention refugee' who has left his home country and has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or a membership in a particular social group. Under the same convention, a refugee can also be a person 'in need of protection' whose removal to his home country would subject him personally to a danger of torture or to a risk to his life or a risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. (Department of Home Affairs 2015a)

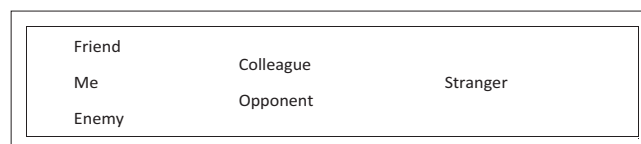
A series of permits are issued in this process: A Section 23 permit (valid 14 days); Section 22 permit ('Asylum seeker permit' – valid 6 months, renewable); Section 24 permit (valid 2 years, renewable); and Certification (permanent residence, which can only be obtained after having refugee status for at least 5 years). This process is extremely slow and frustrating due to bureaucracy and the sheer number of asylum seekers, which:

slows down all the procedures of refugee applications. This is worsened by the red tape at the Refugee Reception Offices where staff have to check everyone's identity and reasons for immigration. There are many people in the system who are not refugees, but migrants who have come to South Africa for business reasons or immigrants who are using the 'refugee card' as a reason to simply get into the country. Asylum seekers pretend to be refugees in order to get the help and rights granted to refugees. (Bekkai 2016)

All of these factors slow down the application process and lead to huge delays. In addition to these legal-political factors, there are also social and economic hardships that refugee families experience. In theory, they should have access to all public services such as health care and police protection, but in reality:

refugees are not a priority even when they are in danger. Some doctors or nurses in hospitals refuse to give them treatment and police seldom assist them. Public services like hospitals do not have enough money and staff for everyone so they often choose to treat South African citizens only, and not even all South African citizens. (Bekkai 2016)

To describe the attitudes of many South Africans towards refugee families it is helpful to use the 'emotional distance scale' developed by Overdiep (1985), which indicates how



Source: Overdiep (1985)

FIGURE 1: Emotional distance scale.

close or distant other people appear emotionally (see Figure 1). According to this model, the people who are emotionally the closest to me are my *friends* and my *enemies*. Slightly further away on this emotional scale (positively) are *colleagues* and (negatively) *opponents*; furthest away emotionally are *strangers*, who literally 'leave me cold'.

The experiences of refugee families mentioned above could be described as being treated as strangers – with apathy or indifference. This attitude of apathy is exacerbated by the use of terms like aliens, foreigners, illegals and (worst of all) *makwerekwere*.¹⁰ The real difficulties arise, however, when the 'stranger' images are replaced by 'enemy' images in Overdiep's model. Occasional outbursts of xenophobic violence against refugee and migrant families have occurred since May 2008, which have led to serious loss of life and income, but – perhaps worst of all – to loss of trust and respect between refugees and locals, and (together with the Marikana massacre of August 2012) to a loss of the dream of South Africa as a liberated and just 'rainbow nation'.

When refugee families are treated either as strangers or as enemies, it is always the children who suffer the most, whether in terms of exclusion from school attendance, health facilities or police protection. When trying to understand the context of refugee children in South Africa, we need to start by admitting that much of the information is simply not known and that there is widespread ignorance and apathy among South Africans about the situation of refugees, and in particular of refugee children. The first sense in which prevailing Christian theologies need to be disrupted, therefore, is to be confronted with the faces and lives of real refugee children. We need to heed the urgent reminder of the Chilean poet-diplomat, Gabriela Mistral (Nobel laureate in literature, 1945):

We are guilty of many errors and many faults,
but our worst crime is abandoning the children,
neglecting the fountain of life.
Many of the things we need can wait.
The child cannot.
Right now is the time his bones are being formed,
his blood is being made,
and his senses are being developed.
To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow',
his name is today. (Goodreads 2016)

¹⁰This is a derogatory term for foreigners, indicating that they speak 'strange' languages.

Martin Mande

The stories of refugee children caught up in South Africa's asylum seekers' system are largely hidden from the rest of us. There are significant variations in the socio-economic status and living conditions of refugee children in South Africa. This depends on which country they have come from and the reason they decided to come here. Nevertheless, research shows that, overall, asylum seekers and refugee children are worse off than their native-born peers. While many of these children are likely to be growing up in poverty and deprivation, they are often not identified in government statistics and policies related to child poverty. The words of Ogata (1994) about refugee children worldwide have particular relevance in our context:

Refugee children face far greater dangers to their safety and well-being than the average child. The sudden and violent onset of emergencies, the disruption of families and community structures as well as the acute shortage of resources with which most refugees are confronted, deeply affect the physical and psychological well-being of refugee children. It is a sad fact that infants and young children are often the earliest and most frequent victims of violence, disease and malnutrition which accompany population displacement and refugee outflows. In the aftermath of emergencies and in the search for solutions, the separation of families and familiar structures continue to affect adversely refugee children of all ages. Thus, helping refugee children to meet their physical and social needs often means providing support to their families and communities. (p. 1)

To look at the big picture for a moment, there are more refugees globally at present than at any time in history since World War II:

The number of international migrants – persons living in a country other than where they were born – reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, a 41 per cent increase compared to 2000 ... This figure includes almost 20 million refugees ... The new UN dataset 'Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2015 Revision', shows that the number of international migrants has grown faster than the world's population. As a result, the share of migrants in the global population reached 3.3 per cent in 2015, up from 2.8 per cent in 2000.¹¹

South Africa is one of the largest recipients of refugees and asylum seekers on the continent. Statistics released by the DHA for the 2014–2015 report year show that '71 914 new asylum seekers were received from January to December 2014. The majority of these cases have been adjudicated and either finalised or still pending at the appeal stage'.¹² In a recent statement, the DHA reported as follows:

62 159 new asylum applications were registered between January and December 2015. Over the last 10 years, a total of

11. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/01/244-million-international-migrants-living-abroad-worldwide-new-un-statistics-reveal/> (accessed 2 June 2016).

12. See http://www.dha.gov.za/files/Annual%20Reports/Annual_Report_2014_15.pdf What is concerning is the fact that of the 71 914 applications lodged, only 8629 were recognised as refugees, averaging 12% of total applications received during 2014. A total of 63 285 applications for asylum, or 88% of the total applications received during 2014, were rejected at the level of first instance adjudication.

1 082 669 asylum applications were registered. In 2015, the top ten countries that were sending refugees to South Africa were Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Nigeria, DRC, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malawi, Somalia, India and Ghana. (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2016)

Klippies Kritzinger

These are sobering statistics, giving us an impression of how enormous this challenge is. What we need, though, in order to bring about behavioural change in the community at large is more than statistics; we need transformative encounters, in which we hear the stories and come face to face with the human reality of refugee children. Then the statistic that children are more than half of any refugee population will become a reality to us. And we will come to see that they are *vulnerable* (susceptible to disease, malnutrition and physical injury), *dependent* (needing the support of adults) and *developing* (growing in developmental sequences) (UNHCR 1994:1).

We also need to be aware that refugee children seldom travel alone; they are usually accompanied by family members¹³:

The transition from total dependency at birth to the interdependency of adulthood is a process of development. Children are never on hold; developmental needs do not wait for an emergency phase of a refugee situation to end. Children do not develop in isolation: the family is essential in providing the sense of self-esteem, security and identity that is necessary for the child to successfully learn from, and fit into, the rest of society. (UNHCR 1994:13)

The two major challenges facing refugee families with children are: (1) their lives are seriously interrupted until they have received refugee status because there are huge delays in processing their applications; (2) lack of proper accommodation while they wait for that process to be completed. The effect of this on children without refugee status or temporary residence is that they are not allowed to attend state schools, which seriously impedes their intellectual development.

Another dimension of the refugee and migrant experience in South Africa is that government policy is not to separate refugees and other migrants from the broader South African community by establishing refugee camps. The ideal is a good one: newcomers in the community need to be absorbed and integrated as soon as possible, instead of being isolated and stigmatised by South Africans. The only problem with such a policy is that it assumes the good will of the broad South African community, without giving any support or direction for the integration of newcomers into society. In this way, many asylum seekers and other migrants 'fall through the cracks' of the system and probably become more vulnerable and stigmatised than would perhaps have happened through establishing temporary refugee camps. Many asylum seekers live in overcrowded apartments with relatives, friends or

13. The exception is young men who flee recruitment as child soldiers, as in the case of Martin and his friends.

fellow citizens from their countries of origin, while others gravitate towards informal settlements, where they eke out a living together with (and sometimes in competition with) local unemployed or underemployed families. In all these situations, refugee children are exposed and extremely vulnerable.

Ecclesial scrutiny

Klippies Kritzinger

Having briefly surveyed the situation of refugee children in South Africa, we turn our attention to the churches. What have they done in response? As indicated above, many churches are either uninformed or not interested, unless the public media raise awareness of specific situations. When that happens, as in the case of Aylan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in September 2015 on a Turkish beach, there is a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and emotion.¹⁴

Martin Mande

The dehumanising rhetoric adopted by many of our leaders and media sources has provoked many to fear, resulting in questions such as: How do we defend our borders? How do we improve our security? How do we prevent aliens from coming to live next to us? In that way refugees are seen as problems, not as people. The images of that Syrian child in the public and social media last year disrupted theology and raised concerns on how to do theology with refugee children, but the distance from our shores blunted its impact, preventing most of us from making a practical response. Nevertheless, the impact of that media event highlighted the importance of the media in creating awareness and fostering compassionate responses. However, I also heard the following response to this tragic event:

I cried when I saw that poor little drowned boy. I wanted to do something. I put a thing on Facebook about refugees being welcome and at that moment I would have done anything to stop those poor people, those children drowning. And I am sorry for them and all they've been through, I really am. But then they were saying at the church about how we ought to welcome refugees in our home, well, that's not up to us, is it? That's for the government and social services and all those people to do. I couldn't take one in. I don't have enough for my own family, never mind look after someone else. And they don't all deserve it, do they? We've already got a lot of migrants round here. And some of those round here, they really ought to be going home.

Klippies Kritzinger

This attitude is quite common among us as South African Christians. It raises four issues for me: (1) mere pity or sympathy is a weak basis for action; it often leads to a sense of powerlessness and apathy; (2) as South Africans we often expect too much from the government; (3) many of us are captives to our (middle-class) comforts and privileges; and

14. See, for example, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/aylan-kurdis-story-how-a-small-syrian-child-came-to-be-washed-up-on-a-beach-in-turkey-10484588.html>

(4) we often regard and treat people in terms of a value system that declares some to be worthy (deserving) of help and others not. This not only contradicts the human rights basis of our democracy but also two of the fundamental tenets of our Christian faith, namely that all people are created in God's image and that the poor and vulnerable deserve special care, respect and protection from believers.

Martin Mande

I was born in a country that was already used to war. Everyone knew not to answer a knock at night, for everyone had seen things that they would never want to see again. I fled my country with nothing in my hands, and yet I was helped by many church people along the way, on my long journey to South Africa. But one Sunday morning, when I approached one of the big churches in the east of the City of Tshwane for assistance, in very dirty clothes, one of the ushers manhandled me and pushed me badly, as if to say 'You are not allowed to enter the church or talk to the congregation'. He started yelling about people coming from other countries, and even called me *makwerekwere*.

Klippies Kritzinger

I am ashamed to hear of this experience that you had. We have to admit that many church members and congregations live self-centred lives, so that the church becomes a religious club for insiders, concentrating on buildings and programmes, rather than people. Fortunately, there are many exceptions, but they are often uncoordinated and underfunded. The point of this article is that an exposure to the voices and faces of refugee children should disrupt our comfortable church practices and theologies into a more human and more Christian response. To find more resources for such disruption, we need to turn to Scripture.

Interpreting the tradition

Martin Mande

The Holy Scriptures frequently voice the need to welcome the stranger. A plethora of biblical texts remind the Christian that a truly God-centred society is judged by the way it treats widows, orphans and strangers because it is these, the most vulnerable in our society, which are the measure of a truly just society. It is in these categories of people, who can offer us nothing, that we recognise the true generosity of God, who gives unconditionally. Yet our fear of these groups of people often leads us to ignore rather than engage in their plight. Their presence is often a nuisance to us and our existence; we prefer to ignore personal involvement with them and 'pray for them' instead.

To be a widow, an orphan or a stranger is a heavy burden to carry, and for that reason God's word legislates for their protection; but what if you had to bear the burden of belonging to two of these precarious categories? That is the situation in which I found myself as a single refugee child of 14 – effectively both a stranger and an orphan – fleeing from the war and terror in my home country.

Klippies Kritzinger

I am deeply moved by the double burden that you had to shoulder in your young life. My own childhood and youth was so much safer and more comfortable than yours, for which I am deeply grateful to God, but I want to add something to your comment on God's unconditional generosity towards poor and marginalised people. I believe that widows, orphans and strangers actually have a great deal to offer to the church and society, in the 'upside-down' wisdom of the Reign of God. So I wish to paraphrase and expand your comment as follows:

It is in these categories of people, who (in terms of our superior and self-centred value system) 'can offer us nothing', that we recognise the true generosity of God, who gives unconditionally. It is in the lives of these sisters and brothers, who as 'wounded healers' have so much to offer us, that we recognise the true justice and compassion of God, who raises up the lowly from the dust and transforms them through their suffering into agents of restoration, peace and justice.

I write this because I appreciate the credible and transformative activism that radiates from what you write and do. And I want to add that your perseverance as a youth through those trials and tribulations produced a wisdom and maturity in you that we desperately need in responding to the challenge of refugee children and their families.

I also think, in response to your input, that it is not only (or even primarily) *fear* that drives South Africans to ignore or resent the presence of refugee families and other migrants in our communities. That is why I don't believe that 'xenophobia' (*fear* of strangers) captures the full dynamics of the situation. There *is* an element of fear, but that is exercised primarily by men who feel threatened by other men who could become their competitors in the job market. I don't believe that anyone is *afraid* of widows, orphans and refugee children. Towards them we probably feel more of a burden of guilt or irritation because they make an appeal on our consciences through their vulnerability – and therefore we turn away and walk past them 'on the other side' (Lk 10:31–32).

What lies underneath both our fear of the powerful migrants and our avoidance of the vulnerable ones is a strong assertion that this is *our country*, in which 'foreigners' are not really welcome. This patriotic assertion is understandable in the light of 350 years of colonial dispossession and 46 years of Apartheid in South Africa, which has created deep alienation between black South Africans and their history, land and the economy. Because this alienation has (understandably) not been healed in a mere 22 years of democracy and political power, the large influx of migrants comes at an inopportune time, interrupting that painful process of retrieval, repossession and empowerment. That is perhaps the reason why much of the legitimate anger at the persistence of poverty, inequality, unemployment and white racism in South Africa is 'projected' or 'transferred' to African

migrants. But from a Christian point of view this is not morally legitimate, as understandable as it may be. We need to find biblical images and metaphors to guide us in this double process of healing within and among South Africans and healing with fellow Africans from the rest of the continent. So let us get back to the Scripture.

Martin Mande

In the light of my personal experience as a youth refugee, and now a humanitarian worker dealing with refugees from a religious perspective, I wish to cause theological unease and disruption by calling on religious leaders and pastors to move beyond a 'gentle Jesus' theology. I do this because our dominant theologies do not challenge or disrupt church members but leave them in their indifference and self-justifying paralysis in the face of the suffering of refugee children. As an alternative, I propose a theology that calls for social change, starting with Archbishop Oscar Romero's Christmas Eve homily in December 1979:

Today is the time to look for this child Jesus, but do not look for him in the beautiful images of nativity sets but look for him among the children lacking proper nutrition who have gone to sleep this evening with nothing to eat. Let us look for him among the poor newspaper boys who sleep in the doorways wrapped in today's paper. Let us look for him in the shoeshine boy who perhaps has earned enough to buy a small gift for his mother. Let us look for him in the newspaper boy who, because he did not sell enough papers, is severely reprimanded by his stepfather or stepmother. How sad is the history of these children. Yet Jesus takes on all of this tonight. (Romero Trust 216)

In Matthew 25:35 Jesus says: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me'. The king who will judge the world comes to us in vulnerable and needy strangers!

In addition to this biblical dimension, it is also important to look at church history. Our cities in South Africa grew as the result of an influx of people from elsewhere, who came here in search of peace, safety and a better life. Presently, our churches face the continuous arrival of refugees and migrants from other African countries, but many churches in South Africa were started or strengthened by migrants (missionaries) from elsewhere, for example, the Catholic Archdiocese of Johannesburg with its first migrants from Ireland reminds all communities that Saint Patrick himself was a refugee and a slave, someone who was trafficked for profit (cf. Robert 2009:144ff). He is the Patron of one of the parishes in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg that continues to welcome refugees and migrants, from African countries in particular.

Klippies Kritzinger

I am struck by Archbishop Romero's identification of the Christ child with hungry newspaper boys, sleeping on the street wrapped in a newspaper. It is a compelling image of the Incarnation, especially the idea that Jesus 'took on' – took upon himself – the suffering of the world's hungry and

vulnerable children. If this Christ lives in our hearts and is praised in our liturgies, our congregations can begin to recognise him in refugee children and begin to embrace them and their families into our communities.

In this regard I propose that we adopt the liturgical practice of the Coptic Orthodox Church to celebrate the arrival of Jesus and his family as refugees in Egypt. On the 1st of June each year they commemorate this event liturgically with a feast day.¹⁵ Because 20 June is World Refugee Day, congregations could use the whole of June – in addition to being Youth Month – to raise awareness of the plight of refugees, starting with a commemoration of Jesus as refugee child on the 1st of June (or the Sunday closest to it). There are numerous delightful Coptic icons depicting the ‘flight to Egypt’ that could serve as illustrative material in this regard.

The fact that it was in Africa where the holy family found welcome as refugees should be used to develop an African child theology of *philoxenia* (love of strangers), based on elements such as an Old Testament ethic of justice and hospitality to orphans, a Jesus-as-refugee-child¹⁶ Christology, and an inclusive *ubuntu-botho* ethic.¹⁷

I also agree with your reference to the use of church history to highlight the ubiquity of migration, but one could go even further back, to point out that migration is basic to the human condition. The statement by Kwame Appiah (2006) is worth reflecting on:

In geological terms, it has been a blink of an eye since human beings first left Africa, and there are few spots where we have found no habitation. The urge to migrate is no less ‘natural’ than the urge to settle. (p. xviii)

We should not frown on people who leave their ‘home countries’ and migrate elsewhere, as if that were inhuman or pathological; in fact, it is something inherently human. But not every form of migration is ethically acceptable: Colonial conquest and other forms of military occupation should be condemned and counteracted, along with ethnic cleansing, forced removals and human trafficking.

To come back to church history, it is necessary to remind members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches that John Calvin, the intellectual ‘founder’ of the Reformed tradition, was also a refugee, similar to St Patrick. He fled religious persecution in France and there were many refugees in the congregations he served in Geneva and Strasbourg (cf De Gruchy 2009:87–93). We need to ‘own’ and celebrate

15.The feast is called ‘The entry of the Lord into Egypt’. See e.g. <http://www.stabraam.org/the-coptic-faith/calendar-of-coptic-fasts-and-feasts/2016.html> (accessed 30 May 2016).

16.The portrayal of Jesus as a *baby* on the flight to Egypt needs to be corrected. The fact that Herod instructed all the boys under 2 years to be killed (Mt 2:16) suggests that the astrologers (*magoi*) from the East arrived about 2 years after the birth of Jesus. In terms of the Matthean narrative, therefore, Jesus was a toddler of around 2 years old when his family fled to Egypt, so that he could already sit on his father’s shoulders, as depicted in the one icon.

17.The literature on *ubuntu-botho* as an inclusive and relational communal ethic is vast. Hankela (2014) gives a good overview of the literature and wrestles with the nature and limits of *ubuntu*, particularly in relation to migration and xenophobia in South Africa.

this inherently migratory nature of humanity and – more specifically – of Christianity.

It was when ‘Hellenist’ believers were scattered from Jerusalem through persecution that they first started embarking seriously on their boundary-crossing intercultural witness and service (Acts 8:1–4). Hanciles (2003) comments:

Christianity is a migratory religion, and migration movements have been a functional element in its expansion ... From the outset, the spread of the Gospel was linked to migrant networks. (p. 149)

Throughout the centuries, there have been numerous instances of Christian traders, migrants and refugees who have taken the gospel with them as they moved to other countries or continents,¹⁸ or who have contributed to the renewal of Christian communities in their new homelands.¹⁹ Many stories have also been told of migrant workers who became Christians and then established churches ‘back home’ when they returned. In that sense, migration and mission have been deeply intertwined in Christian history from the very beginning.

Discernment for action

Klippies Kritzinger

What can Christian communities do to love and serve refugee children? I would start with a quote from Adam Kahane (2004:83f): ‘If you’re not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution’. This counterintuitive statement²⁰ describes one sense in which church practice and theology needs to be disrupted by coming face to face with refugees, particularly children. Kahane (2004) explains what this means:

We can never address a problem situation from a comfortable position of uninvolved innocence. If we want to help, we must first understand and acknowledge our role – by commission or omission – in creating the situation. (p. 84)

So the starting point for the congregations of ‘mainline’ South African churches is to acknowledge our sins of omission in not taking refugee children and their families seriously. This is related to the fact that refugee families live predominantly in inner city apartments and informal settlements, where only a few mainline churches are active. There are numerous Pentecostal-charismatic churches that have sprung up in those neighbourhoods, consisting mainly of migrant families but reaching out to locals as well. The challenge for mainline

18.With reference to Africa, Hanciles (2008) points out that:

the extraordinary tidal waves of human migration that have characterized the continent in the postcolonial era are one reason why Christianity is growing faster in Africa than anywhere else. Migrants travel with their religion ... (p. 218)

19.Ter Haar (1995) discusses the challenges presented to Dutch churches by the growing number of churches established by African immigrants. She interestingly suggests that the ‘I’ in ‘AICs’ should in the case of such African-initiated churches be changed to ‘International’ – to produce the name ‘African International Churches’ (Ter Haar 1995:30).

20.We call it counterintuitive because proverbial wisdom has it that ‘If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem’. Kahane (2004:83) attributes this insight to Bill Torbert.

churches is therefore to renounce their indifference towards those areas of the city perceived as 'dangerous' and to establish ecumenical collaboration with churches active in those communities, in order to work together for the welfare of children.

Martin Mande

In the engagement of churches with refugee children and their families, there are three phases: charity, development and integration. It is necessary to start with supplying immediate needs such as food, clothing, shelter and applications for refugee status. But as soon as possible one should move on to enable families to establish themselves and generate their own income. Then the gradual process of integration into a local community and neighbourhood can begin.

It is difficult for individuals and even congregations to get involved constructively in such projects if they do not have the specialised knowledge. So faith-based NGOs and dedicated agencies, such as Xaveri South Africa, for which I work, can play an important role in this regard.

Klippies Kritzinger

You rightly point out the importance of organised and coordinated actions. The powerless feeling of many Christians in the face of these huge social challenges are often caused not by lack of love or willingness but by lack of knowledge and the fear of making mistakes. The apathy of congregations needs to be disrupted by challenging them to become part of existing programmes among refugee and other migrant communities.

One way of creating such awareness is through liturgy. Perhaps the most striking recent example of this was the Mass that Pope Francis conducted on the Italian island of Lampedusa in July 2013, to commemorate the deaths of thousands of people who had died since 2011 in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Bianchi 2013). In his homily he referred to God's two questions ('Adam, where are you?' and 'Cain, where is your brother?'), to call on Christians to take responsibility for suffering refugees:

The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference. In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business! (Pope Francis 2013:2)

He added a third question:

Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it? Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? ... We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion – 'suffering with' others: the

globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep! (2013:3)

The impact of such a prophetic-priestly exercise should not be underestimated. Each congregation should discern how it can create public awareness of the plight of refugees and other migrants through sermons and liturgies, to express genuine compassion. One could ask cynically whether such words or rituals make any difference, but James Orbinsky's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1999 on behalf of *Medecins sans frontières* silences such cynicism: 'We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill'.²¹

One other practical aspect of mobilising Christian communities to engage with refugee children and their families is to work with government to implement the good policies that they have produced, but often fail to implement effectively. The Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Malusi Gigaba, spoke on Africa Day (25 May) in 2015 of the need to 'reframe the discourse around immigration in South Africa':

We must manage international migration in line with four principles. It must contribute to our national development, security, nation building and social cohesion, and finally, it must further integrate South Africa into the African community in particular, and into the global community of nations in general.

We are of the view that immigrants play an enormous positive and underappreciated role in South Africa. Yet, too much discussion in some quarters of our society comes from the standpoint that immigration is a burden to the South African economy, and society. It is curious that a person whose doctor is an immigrant, whose child is taught by an immigrant, who works alongside professionals who are immigrants, still does not acknowledge the positive contributions of immigrants in our society. Too often South Africans speak of Africans and Africa as the other, as if South Africans are not Africans, as if South Africa is not Africa.

Even the national question needs to evolve, to take in consideration the impact of international migration on our demographics. We used to think of South Africans as being either African, Coloured, Indian, or White. And those Africans belong to one of the various ethnic and language groups we are all familiar with. And yet today we have South Africans, naturalized or even born here, whose first language is Shona, Swahili, Lingala, Igbo, Portuguese, French, or even Mandarin. A nation that proudly proclaimed that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it', must be big enough, confident enough, to widen its understanding of who is a South African, to include more recent additions to our society. We must integrate fellow Africans into our communities. They must not feel like they merely live here, but are not at home here. (Department of Home Affairs 2015b)

After this speech, the DHA presented the first Mkhaya Migrants Awards to recognise the contributions of migrants to South African society. Minister Gigaba explained the awards as follows:

After the unfortunate incidents of violence against foreign nationals in January and April, we decided to bring this

²¹http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1999/msf-lecture.html (accessed 3 June 2016).

initiative forward. There is no better day to launch these awards than on Africa Day.

Such symbolic actions are commendable, with two reservations: (1) Are these merely political 'damage control' measures in the aftermath of xenophobic violence, or a principled commitment to facilitate the welcoming of newcomers into South African society? (2) For how long does one call new arrivals in South Africa 'migrants' – and give them awards for making a contribution? Could this very language not prevent their meaningful integration in the community as citizens?

In spite of these reservations, the views expressed by Minister Gigaba should be heartily endorsed by Christian churches, and they should do their part to realise this vision in local communities and to overcome the gap between government policy and xenophobic sentiments in communities. Churches should also challenge the DHA to overcome the huge gap between policy and implementation, due to persistent complaints by asylum seekers about red tape, long queues, bribery and a huge backlog. In politics, as in much else, the devil is literally in the detail, not in nice-sounding policies.²²

Spirituality

Klippies Kritzinger

The matter that lies at the heart of the churches' responses to these challenges is the spirituality out of which we relate to one another, and particularly to refugee children. What experience of the calling and sending God moves and sustains us to engage with them in a dignified way?

Martin Mande

The question how refugees are treated is a spiritual as well as a moral and political issue. Some Christian theology suggests that our treatment of 'outsiders' and 'strangers' reveals something about the state of our hearts and our relationship with God.

Klippies Kritzinger

We cannot separate our love for God from our relationship with other people. There is a memorable saying by Nicholai Berdyaev, a Russian philosopher: 'If I am hungry, that is a physical problem; if my neighbour is hungry, that is a spiritual problem' (in Brown 1988:111). But the real question is not how to get our theological statements right. It is how to address the 'spiritual problem' that hungry refugee children pose to us. This is where we need the prophetic disruption of a prophet like Isaiah, who criticised the pious religious practices of Israel in these words:

²²One example, voiced by Eballo Heri, an asylum seeker: 'I cannot understand, for example, why I have to go back to the same Reception Office where I got my first asylum seeker permit'. Bekkai (2016) comments:

Indeed, many refugees cannot afford to travel because although they can work on the permit they often cannot find jobs that pay well enough to cover the costs of travel in South Africa. Heri has been in South Africa for more than eleven years and he still only holds an asylum seeker permit, which needs to be renewed every 3–6 months.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. (Is. 58:6–8)

The will of God is not to be worshipped by people who oppress or ignore their workers or neighbours. To know God is to do justice (Jr. 22:16). Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar says that:

the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. (VGKSA 2016)

We need a courageous spirituality to do this, a spirituality in which doing justice is a way of life.

Martin Mande

The question is how does a child survive more than a decade on the run, alone in the dark corners of Africa? Why should a 16-year-old have to spend the next 20 years of his life running from people with guns who meant to harm him? How does such a young person find the courage to survive and the hope that someday he would know a better life?

I am a former Sanctuary seeker. It's something I don't usually write or speak about very often. It's not that I am embarrassed about my sanctuary-seeking past or lack a deep gratitude to the country that received me; I am and always will be grateful to this country for its compassionate heart and generosity of spirit ... but the non-disrupted theology has to be disrupted to become a warmer embrace. As a nation we must not only welcome more people but we should also be more welcoming as a people. My own life is a testimony that this country is more than able to do both:

Courage

Courage, to you I pay homage,

For without you what would I be today?

Courage, in all your forms I just want to thank you,

For you have made me to endure, to conquer, to tolerate, to accept, to pursue, to achieve, to adapt, to learn a new language and finally to accept my status: refugee.

Yes, it takes courage to be a refugee.

Conclusion

Klippies Kritzinger

Looking back at this article, I wish to reflect briefly on the method we have used. Firstly, its dialogical character. One could argue that all academic writing is dialogical, in the sense that an author enters into conversation with colleagues and acknowledges their views by means of references. However, when academics wish to engage in dialogue with community members who have not published their views or are unable to engage in an academic conversation, they resort

to qualitative research, using interviews or participant observation. This article attempted a different kind of dialogue, in which a community activist, who had experienced life as a refugee when he was a child, wrote down the first draft of the article and I (as an academic) responded to that, not by reformulating or co-opting his activist voice into an academic mode, but by juxtaposing our two voices. This dialogue could be seen as somewhat contrived and artificial, but it certainly disrupted my academic voice in a significant way. The power position that academic writing assumes often amounts to hiding behind footnotes and scholarly conventions to shield oneself from the raw challenges emerging from marginal and suffering communities. The kind of dialogue in this article does not eliminate that temptation, but it certainly acts as a deterrent against it. It also acts as a deterrent against the opposite temptation of speaking 'on behalf of' others, with the claim of being 'the voice of the voiceless'. Our dialogue can be described as a brief exercise in 'encounterology', as I outlined it with reference to interreligious encounters (Kritzinger 2008). In the context of this article, I will describe encounterology as:

a critical and creative reflection on encounters between academic theologians and activists (or children) – arising out of encounters between them and giving rise to ever more authentic and transformative encounters – on our way into the fullness of the Reign of God. (adapted from Kritzinger 2008:788f)

Secondly, flowing directly from the first, we need to reflect on the kind of language we used. It is not likely that I would have included a poem if I had written this article on my own, but when I found two poems Martin had written, I was drawn into quoting one myself. This changed the texture of the article in the direction of a more imaginative rationality, in which the shaping role of metaphor and narrative is acknowledged and respected and the dichotomies between objectivism and subjectivism or between academic and activist can be overcome, or at least reduced.²³ In my view, this does not represent a theology that is less scholarly, but certainly one that has been creatively disrupted.

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23. These ideas are influenced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:193).

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