

Poverty & xenophobia: State failures, social challenges

Bishop Paul Verryn

I just had a tour of Bottlebrush to see one of the sites of xenophobia. And another interesting meeting was at the airport, by coincidence, where an iXopo Methodist minister told me there were recent xenophobic attacks against the Chinese; they involved Zimbabweans and people from the DRC as attackers!

So this is an intricate and nuanced problem, not just straightforward xenophobia.

For example, I did not hear of any white being attacked. The attacks were on blacks.

There are many foreign national whites in SA, like myself, with German, Spanish, Dutch blood in my veins.

And there are some stinking rich foreign national blacks who were not caught in the crossfire.

So we're dealing with a specific class and race who found themselves at the short end of the stick.

Central Methodist Mission has been in the news quite a lot, including the Gauteng MEC saying we were being irresponsible.

That MEC, who was not reappointed, may not have known that SA has signed international conventions.

For example, if a police officer discovers a foreign national on the street and after questioning that foreign national, finds that that he/she needs help, the police officer must find help. There are vulnerable people there who need to be guided to a place of safety.

Now as we come to the year anniversary of xenophobia, we must ask serious questions. There were 100,000 displaced. There were 61 people killed. Of those 21 were South African nationals. Charges lodged at the police station went nowhere.

It raises questions about our judicial system, our SA police services, our Department of Human Settlements, our Constitution.

Ultimately we need to reverse our fundamental value system around poverty, especially the intolerance around this nation concerning the poor.

When one looks at this a little deeper, there's a rigorous discussion in the New Testament. Three people are given varying degrees of talents. The first person doubles their talents, the second doubles their talents, but the third buries their talent. The master is furious and says, take that talent and give it to someone else, and you go to hell, more or less.

I make this point about talents because if you come to Central Methodist, we've got accountants, bricklayers, qualified teachers with masters degrees, carpenters, plumbers, more than 30 people in the plastics professional, and an entire nation of skills sitting at Central.

In a country that desperately needs skilled people, for example, the astuteness of the Zimbabwean school teacher, we have these amazing

gifts. And we're busy burying them!

Given these skills, I hope by the end of our talk we don't have a mindset of the 'problem' of refugees and foreign nationals.

I think some of the main criminals are the employers. Someone comes to the building and says, 'We need 40 bricklayers. We want 40 who don't necessarily have papers.'

Then we find they work for a week, then the employers call in the police, who arrest the workers without papers, and the employers won't pay them. Or they get foreign nationals - thankful for anything - and they pay them R50, for a whole week's work.

What happens, as a result, is that South Africans think people are stealing their jobs at a very low rate.

The labour authorities are becoming involved in this, because foreign nationals have rights. The employer has created a part of the problem.

Another part of the problem is the politicians. I have never heard any of our three state presidents since last year, saying, here with these immigrants, we have a great opportunity to learn of our African roots. With people from all over Africa, we should be delighted for this cultural infusion. We should be opening the gates, collapsing colonial borders, and become a genuine rainbow nation that we boast about but implement so feebly. Our top politicians need to reframe this, not as a 'problem'.

As for Home Affairs, let me tell you that I feel awkward. I made friends with some of these people. I have to tell you good things and bad things. I like Mavuso Msimang (DG of Home Affairs) like my brother. He is empathetic, passionate, and understands the issues. So is the Deputy DG. But it is an unmitigated disgrace about what is happening in Home Affairs.

Crown Mines has queues of 1000; inefficiency breeds a culture of corruption - give me R300 and I'll take you to the front of a queue.

The Department of Home Affairs needs to hang its head in shame. We pay money for people to visit Home Affairs to get papers, they go the night before and sleep outside the gate, but they still don't get the refugee status, because only the first 30 were served.

Here is my vision. On the borders you have a beautiful room, serving tea, coffee, a meal. As people come into South Africa, they sense, 'We're welcome!' There is a scrutiny of their gifts and possibilities and potential, and people open up the doors, and make people feel welcome.

In our country, 95% of our people are religious. You know Islam: if anyone is in any state of poverty, your immediate responsibility is to help. Same for Christian and Jewish traditions.

We did not really get rid of apartheid. It is redirected.

The desperation I feel under these circumstances can be illustrated when I recall a phone call on a radio phone-in show recently threatening even more violence than last May.

Police sprayed water at 2am on a cold night on our people. We house 3000

people in Central Methodist. There isn't a space to walk. People are sleeping everywhere.

And we have two buildings right next to us: the Carlton Hotel, 23 floors, completely empty; and Innes Chambers, formerly occupied by rich lawyers and advocates, also empty.

This shows, the major issue of justice is the rich and poor.

Home Affairs just closed a camp in Acacia, and removed all the tents and burned what was left. Two weeks ago, *Medicins sans Frontier* took me to an old warehouse where 110 people from the xenophobic attacks are there. I have seldom seen squalor like this. The New South Africa.

I want to warn you, that xenophobia is alive and well. We need rigorous movement building to turn this in another direction.