CHAPTER 5

Introducing the Central Methodist Mission

In 2009 the Central Methodist Mission (CMM) was in many ways defined by the Refugee Ministry. The presence of the 2000–3000 dwellers who were sheltered in the building – international migrants from Zimbabwe and other African countries, and homeless South Africans – could be seen and felt both in the condition of the building and in the everyday life of the congregation. Several rooms, halls and corridors of the six-floor church building were occupied by dwellers. At night the building was literally packed with people who slept not only in various rooms but also on the stairs and in the corridors. The Refugee Ministry had brought thousands of people to sleep, cook and do their laundry in the church building, turning the CMM into “a shelter, a hospital, a school and anything and everything it needs to be for that person at that time”,1 or, as two interviewees called it, “a refugee camp”.2 This is the CMM that became my fieldwork site for the year of data collection.

Murray indicates parallels between the transformation that the CMM has gone through in the 2000s under the aegis of the Refugee Ministry led by Bishop Verryn with changes in the inner city at large, saying:

Once a solid bastion of white privilege and affluence, and not so long ago the setting for the glittering wedding of one of Nelson Mandela’s daughters, the church underwent a profound transformation that coincided with the socioeconomic decline of the inner city.3

Murray’s comment highlights aspects of life in urban South Africa that are important to take into consideration when thinking about the CMM. Firstly, although the dwellers’ living circumstances at the CMM in 2009 could have been described as extreme, they were by no means exceptional in their place and time, as Murray describes:

The Johannesburg inner city has become a temporary sanctuary for refugees fleeing war and political repression, and for undocumented migrants escaping famine, socioeconomic deprivation, and oppression in their

1 M2 4.4.2009.
3 Murray 2011, 158.
countries of origin. [...] With access to safe and decent housing an elusive dream, the poorest of the poor have crowded into decaying buildings that frequently lack electricity and running water; sometimes twenty-five people sharing a single room.\(^4\)

Thus, while the choices made by the Refugee Ministry did create exceptional worshipping circumstances for the congregation, the rough living conditions of the dwellers were not exceptional in the sphere of inner-city housing. Secondly, even though, as Murray states, the recent spatial transformation of the CMM was indeed remarkable, as interviewees’ comments will confirm, it was in many ways in line with the changes that had already begun at the CMM in the mid-1970s. The radical changes imposed by the Refugee Ministry on the outward circumstances of the church should, therefore, not hinder one from seeing continuities between the current situation and the past ethos of the CMM. Thus, before commencing an introduction of the CMM as it was in 2009, I begin with a brief examination of its history. From there I move on to discussion of the two faces of the CMM as it was in 2009: the Refugee Ministry and the local church or, in other words, the dwellers who lived in the church and the members of its congregation who came to worship there. As the relationship(s) between these two groups is the focus of interest in the following chapters, at the end of this chapter the stage is set for later analysis by looking into how members and dwellers themselves described the relationship(s).

**A Brief History of the CMM**

The CMM is only a couple of years younger than the city of Johannesburg so its history goes back to the late 1880s, although both the name and the exact address of the church have changed several times since then.\(^5\) It has been located in the current six-floor building at the corner of Smal and Prichard Streets since the mid-1960s. Historically, the CMM has had a central position in the Methodist Church of South Africa (MCSA) or, at least in its Central District. Venter reports that during the first half of the 20th century the church

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4 Murray 2011, 156.

5 Venter 1994, 116. Venter (1994, 117, 121, 127) notes that the CMM has been called: *President St Church* (1889–1949, located at the corner of President and Kruis Streets), *Central Hall* (1919–1966, located at the corner of Prichard and Kruis Streets), *Central Methodist Church* (1966–1985, located at the corner of Prichard and Smal Streets where it is still today) and *Central Methodist Mission* (1985-present).