Chapter 10

“Thinking Again”: The Presence of the Refugee as an Opportunity

Up to this point I have approached the members/dwellers dynamic from the perspective of the tensions that largely led to an absence of connection between the groups. It would, however, be one-sided not to address the fact that, besides causing tension, the presence of the dwellers at the CMM embodied a potential to foster understanding between the local and the foreign, the haves and the have-nots. Sarah, representing the Zimbabwean dwellers, described what this potential could mean:

And what I want to say to the South Africans, being xenophobic doesn’t make any sense at all. You cannot be a nation without other nations around. You cannot be people without other people around. If you see a house where there’s nobody who visits it, it means it’s not a nice home. And if you see people coming to your house, it means that’s a good place. They should count themselves lucky because God is still with them. So being xenophobic or hating somebody because he’s coming to my country or he’s coming to my home, they should think again. They should think again.¹

In other words, Sarah claimed that you can only exist in relation to other people, in relationships with the people who are around you. Being a nation requires other nations. Being a human being requires other human beings. In fact, Sarah was paraphrasing the famous ‘ubuntu proverb’: Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (a person is a person through other persons). According to the quotation, a nation – which could here also be understood as a group of people – is a nation through other nations. At the CMM, not only individuals but also different groups met (members/dwellers, Shonas/Ndebeles, Xhosas/others, Zimbabweans/South Africans, etc.). Sarah urges people to reflect on whether this meeting is hateful. As was often the case, she concentrates on the other group, the South Africans (They should think again!). However, her insights could be applied to both groups. And as this chapter will convey, there were members who, surrounded by the refugees, did “think again”. This chapter is about discovering what the “thinking again” meant and what caused it.

¹ DiS 20.11.2009.
Melody, also from the perspective of the dwellers, maintained that the Refugee Ministry had offered the members a valuable lesson about being a church. Despite the challenges and difficulty in embracing this lesson, and in embracing the dwellers, the congregation had been taught first-hand about issues that are “very sensitive...as far as God is concerned”. She said:

It's a very unique church. It has been made unique by the occupation of the refugees. I actually wanted to put myself in the shoes of the people that worship there and I discovered that these guys who worship here they really have learned something very big which we might not have got and that is going to make them, make it, you know, like as far as their religion and their godly life is concerned because they have learned to accept the poor and they have learned to cater for the poor – which is a very sensitive issue as far as God is concerned. And there, I think they’re going to beat any other church. That’s their prize and... You know, that one, that’s where they’re going to get a prize on. It’s very unique and it’s something that cannot be equalled by any other church. I don’t know. It’s different from when a church gathers together things to go out and give the poor. This is a situation where they actually have the poor inside and they know they are there and they’re interacting with them somehow and so on. They have been made very uncomfortable, but I think that they have given them a big lesson. I actually envy the kind of experience they have got because it has put them in a league of, on their own.2

So, despite the tension at the CMM – addressed elsewhere in the interview – Melody believed that in the end the congregation would benefit from the trouble to which the Refugee Ministry had exposed them, and grow as a church into “a league of their own”. She felt that the presence of the poor literally inside the church would necessarily bring about “thinking again”, even if she clearly did not expect the transformation to happen overnight. Besides looking at members’ thinking in general, this chapter examines the “thinking again” in relation to meanings attached to Christianity.

Motivated by these comments, I firstly look at positive encounters between dwellers and members and how these encounters moulded their understanding of the other group, and secondly, at the constructive impact of the Refugee Ministry on members’ Christian identity. In discussing the encounters, I concentrate on the experiences of the youth involved in the Teen Church. On the basis of my observations, the Teen Church was an exceptional space at the

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2 D4 19.4.2009.