Elina Hankela


Many books have been published on *ubuntu*, but a book that links the concepts of migration and ministry with *ubuntu* is unique. The book is the result of original research that was done by Dr Elina Hankela in the city centre of Johannesburg, and specifically at the Central Methodist Mission (CMM). In this research she worked ethnographically. But, being a trained systematic theologian (she did her PhD in Social Ethics) she was also able to unpack the theological dynamics at work in this Church and the liberationist vision of the church leader, Bishop Dr Paul Verryn.

The book is structured in three parts: Part 1 – Locating the Research Project; Part 2 – The *Ubuntu* Vision and Challenges in its Implementation; and Part 3 – Multiple Identities in the Construction of Boundaries and Bridges.

The structure of the book immediately conveys the epistemology with which the author operates, namely a contextual and bottom-up approach. She starts with a description of the context from various perspectives and, before imposing any theory, she listens to and narrates the story of the CMM. She accomplished this by living with and working with the migrants dwelling in the church as well as members and the officials of the church. This kind of research and writing is certainly not the comfortable way of observing from far and coming to conclusions in the safety of your study. She made huge sacrifices in order to participate in these people’s journeys. That is why she could produce a book of such integrity, which is so convincing in its outcome.

I found the location part very important and well done. She puts herself and her research firmly on the ground and within the context by describing and explaining the different relations. She writes about the methodological, theoretical, and social locations of the study. Like all research, this study is grounded in and on certain epistemological and methodological ideas. Begun as an ethnographic journey, it makes sense that the context is taken seriously and described as the primary location. She gives a very good overview of the social, economic and political situation in which the study is located. I find her style very inviting; she unpacks the rather multilayered context of the CMM and the refugee ministry in such a well-structured way that it becomes a window into this complex world of the city centre of Johannesburg.

One point of critique on the structure of Part 1 could be that it would have been more consistent with her bottom-up approach if she had described the “theoretical location” after all the other locations. I even have a question
about the concept of “theoretical location”. In this section she writes about ideas and traditions of interpretation concerning the concept of *ubuntu*. It would have been more convincing and it could have made more sense if she had not written about these “theories” in a linear way that reflects a rather decontextualised reading of literature. Rather, she could have followed a more circular approach by reflecting on different ideas as they were discovered first in the context and among the people – and from that perspective then reflected on literature.

In the second part the book takes us to the *ubuntu* vision, especially as it is understood and preached by the leader of the *cmc*, Dr Paul Verryn. After considering the vision, the reader is invited into the complexities of power struggles and the actual implementation of *ubuntu* in this specific context. In this section of the book the author again finds herself involved in the issue of “location”. This time she is attempting to locate Dr Verryn theologically. A large section of the book (100 pages, from 93–191) is used to describe and explain this church leader's theology. Although she begins by introducing the *cmm*, the sole focus is soon Verryn's understanding of theology. He emerges from this description as a compassionate and committed liberation theologian that never ceases to call on his congregation to take a stance against oppression and the degrading of people. Hankela succeeds in telling the story of Verryn and his theological convictions in such a way that it becomes compelling reading material. In conveying Verryn's message, it is as if the author becomes a preacher herself. She ends the section with a very important and convincing effort to connect Verryn's theology of humanity with *ubuntu* thinking.

Towards the end of the second part of the book, the reader is drawn into a power struggle and leadership issues within the *cmm*. When reading this I wondered whether this lengthy discussion about the inner politics of the Methodist Church in Johannesburg was really necessary. It gave the author the opportunity to discuss theories about power relations and leadership, but it could perhaps have been shorter. The other thing I wondered about was the overwhelming focus on Verryn himself. The book sometimes tends to become a book on Bishop Paul Verryn. He is, of course, the anchor person of this whole ministry, but I got the feeling that the author is so positively inclined towards him that she doesn't attempt to engage critically with him, his theology, and his approach.

In the third and last part of the book she addresses certain very real problems regarding the refugee ministry and the opening of the *cmm* to accommodate residents from Zimbabwe. These include problems like xenophobia and the practical issues of the overcrowding of the church building with the accom-