

THE RESPONSE OF CHURCHES TO THE MAY 2008 XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

by Sizwe Phakathi



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"Jesus was once a refugee. We were giving to God – a vital part of our ministry"

(Reverend Moloj, Randburg Methodist Church)

"We felt, as God's servants and ambassadors of Christ, where we take our stand – we felt we had to be that catalyst and really come in there with an attitude of peace and assisting government ..."

(Pastor Dennis, Rosebank Union Church)

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South African and African churches have long since been involved in fighting injustice worldwide. A poignant example of this was the role churches played in South Africa's liberation struggle. In response to the May 2008 xenophobic attacks, churches, in coalition with other civil society organisations, responded in a variety of ways which included providing shelter, mobilising volunteers, raising funds and garnering supplies. This case study examines the response of the Gauteng-based Christian churches to the xenophobic violence from the perspective of pastors and church members who were directly involved. The case study did not investigate the response of other faith-based organisations such as African, Jewish and Muslim churches.¹ This does not suggest that these churches did not respond to the xenophobic violence and further research is needed to study their response.

In conclusion, the case study recommends that there is a need for the South African government to partner with churches and other faith-based organisations. This should be done to address service delivery concerns and to create cohesive, caring and enabling communities in order for sustainable development to take place.

¹ Ashwin Desai's case study highlights the manner in which the Gift of the Givers (GOG) partnered with Islamic faith-based organisations and the Central Methodist Church in down town Johannesburg.

Drawing on the findings of the study, the table below sets out the issue/problem/context identified and the concomitant recommendations:

Problems & recommendations

A number of churches responded to the xenophobic violence other than those appearing on the list compiled by 702 Talk Radio and the Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (CSV).

- Conduct further research to develop a comprehensive database of other faith-based and civil society organisations that responded to the xenophobic violence. This list should include the African churches, for example the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), that also responded to the violence.

Poor service delivery and corruption contributed to the eruption of xenophobic violence.

- Improve service delivery and act against corrupt officials in the affected communities.

Development of intervention strategies and policies aimed at preventing the recurrence of xenophobic attacks.

- Involve faith-based organisations and draw on their knowledge, experience and strategies in helping the displaced victims.

Churches are doing commendable work in various informal settlements and townships through their outreach programmes. Most of these programmes are geared towards creating employment opportunities and alleviating poverty.

- There is a need for government to work closely with the religious sector in the fight against xenophobia, poverty, unemployment, crime and HIV/Aids.

Despite the interaction between churches and governments departments, NGOs, CBOs and other civil society organisations, they tended to work in silos. Hence, their response was poorly coordinated, lacked direction, and did not result in the forming of lasting partnerships.

- There is a need for faith-based organisations to coordinate their activities, develop partnerships and empower each other.

Lack of funding prevents a number of churches, especially the smaller ones, from responding effectively to the social and economic challenges faced by poor and vulnerable communities.

- Big churches, like Rhema, and other faith-based organisations (such as the Gift of the Givers (GOG) and the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC)), can assist small churches with a number of community development projects which might include fund-raising and forming partnerships with government, business, NGOs and CBOs.

The violence of May 2008 was by far the most devastating event of its kind since apartheid ended in 1994. Although not exclusively, a considerable number of foreign nationals were attacked and killed. They lost their belongings as their houses were burnt and property looted. Media reports revealed that by the end of May 2008, 62 people had been killed and thousands of people displaced.² Although the violence manifested itself in xenophobic attacks, the underlying causes of the violence go beyond xenophobic tendencies and also include poor service delivery, high levels of unemployment, poverty, corruption and competition for resources and/or opportunities.³

The violence first emerged in Alexandra⁴ in Gauteng and spread widely to other informal settlements and townships surrounding the urban centres of Johannesburg (Gauteng), Cape Town (Western Cape) and Durban (KwaZulu Natal). By August 2008, the number of displaced people in the three

² Mail and Guardian, "Toll from Xenophobic Attacks Rises", 31 May 2008. See also CRAI's (2009) report entitled: "Tolerating Intolerance: Xenophobic Violence in South Africa", Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative (CRAI).

³ CSV (2008). Understanding the Current Xenophobic Attacks and How South African can Move Forward. Presentation made at the Parliamentary Seminar on Migration and Xenophobia, 20 June.

⁴ There were however reports that the xenophobic violence started brewing in one of the poor communities in Pretoria.

provinces had reached 8, 556 in 53 sites.⁵ The violence was largely concentrated in Gauteng with 4, 340 displaced people in ten sites, followed by Western Cape with 3, 958 refugees in 40 sites and KwaZulu Natal with 258 people in three sites.⁶

As will be discussed later in this report, churches in South Africa and Africa have a long history of fighting injustice, as was evident in South Africa's liberation struggle. On their own, and in coalition with other civil society organisations, churches responded swiftly to the xenophobic attacks and in some cases were involved in high-profile interventions. It is largely from media reports that one has to gauge churches' response to the violence as not much is known from empirical research about the manner in which churches provided premises for shelter, mobilised volunteers, raised funds and collected supplies.

Terms of reference: the response of faith-based structures and communities

This case study examines **the nature and extent of the response of Christian churches** to the xenophobic violence.

This is done largely from the perspectives of church pastors and congregants who actively and directly assisted the victims of xenophobic violence. The case study seeks to answer the following questions:

- › How did churches carry out the activities and secure the resources they provided to the victims of the xenophobic violence?
- › What was their key motivation – general solidarity, or was there something specific about the xenophobic violence that drove/inspired churches?
- › How did churches work in coalition with government departments and other civil society organisations? Why did they do so? How do they feel the coalitions worked? What lessons did they learn?
- › What was the nature of the relationship between churches and other civil society organisations during the period of crisis?
- › What type of long-term intervention strategies did faith-based organisations develop to ensure the reintegration of foreigners in the society?

It is envisaged that this case study will assist in understanding the nature and extent of the role of the church as a constituent of civil society, and thereby contribute to efforts to enhance its future role.

⁵ CRAI (2009).

⁶ *Ibid.* (See also the report of the United Nations Office of Coordinating Humanitarian Affairs Regional Office (UNOCHA) for Southern Africa entitled: "Violence Against Foreign Nationals in South Africa's Centre of Safe Shelter and Displaced Population: Totals by Province," as at 12 August 2008).

Methodology

Mini-desktop research was conducted in order to identify the churches that responded to the xenophobic violence. This entailed a review of media and preliminary research reports on the xenophobic violence of 2008. A comprehensive list of civil society organisations that assisted the victims of the xenophobic violence was downloaded from various websites, including that of 702 Talk Radio.⁷ The list comprised 54 civil society organisations that assisted the victims of the xenophobic violence; and of these, 21 were churches.⁸ A database of churches that responded to the xenophobic violence was subsequently developed and included the physical locations of the churches and contact details of church members who actively and directly assisted the victims. Table 1 below presents a list of churches that assisted the victims.

The study followed a purposive sampling design that specifically included churches that directly responded to the attacks against foreigners. As noted earlier, people of interest here were pastors and congregants who had direct knowledge of the nature and extent to which their churches responded to the xenophobic violence.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for data collection. The churches that participated in the study were contacted through phone calls and e-mails. Invitation letters explaining the purpose of research were sent to the respondents before conducting interviews. From a list of 21 churches (see Table 1 below) only eight churches based in Gauteng participated in the study as the study operated under strict time constraints. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2009 at the following church offices:

1. Randburg Methodist Church
2. Northfield Methodist Church
3. 7th Day Adventist Church
4. His People Church
5. Rosebank Union Church
6. Bedford Chapel
7. Lonehill Methodist
8. Rhema Church

The interviews, each between 30 and 60 minutes in length, were recorded using a digital recorder and were subsequently transcribed.

⁷ An abbreviated site report compiled by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) revealed that five churches assisted the refugees at Cosmo Christian Centre. These included Cosmo Christian Centre, Weltevreden Park NG Church, Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church and Fountainebleau Community Church.

⁸ The list was dominated by Christian churches. It is important to note that the list is not exhaustive. A considerable number of other churches and organisations did respond to the xenophobic violence.

Organisation	Location
Central Methodist Church	79 Pritchard Street, Johannesburg
Randburg Methodist Church	127 Bram Fischer Road, Randburg
Bedfordview Methodist Church	Corner Van Buuren and de Wet Streets, Bedfordview
NG Church Megalieskruin, Pretoria	Corner Pretorius and Kroonarend Streets, Pretoria
7 th Day Adventist Church, Berea	Barnato Street, Berea, Johannesburg
Bosmont Methodist Church	16 Mopel Street, Bosmont
Northfield Methodist Church	Corner Webb Street and Aerodome Drive, Airfield, Benoni
Rosebank Union Church	Corner St. Andrews and William Nicole Drive, Hyde Park
Bedford Chapel	4 Bedford Road, Bedfordview
Lonehill Methodist Church	Block A, Kirstenhof Office Park, Witkoppen Road, Lonehill
His People Church	20A 7 th Avenue, Parktown North
Rhema Church	Corner Rabie and Hans Schoeman Streets, Randburg
St. Thomas Anglican	Corner 8 th Street and 3 rd Avenue, Linden
The Village Safe Haven	11 Downing Street, Buccleuch
Calvary Methodist Church	Corner 7 th Avenue, Harry Galaun Drive, Midrand
Metro Evangelical Services	16 Kaptein Street, 5 th Floor, Old Hillbrow Theatre, Hillbrow
The Family Church	Corner 1 st Avenue and 3 rd Street, Linden
Trinity Methodist Church	Corner 5 th Avenue and Milner Avenue, Linden
Northcliff Union Church	Corner Dawn Drive and Pandoring Road, Northcliff
St. Dunstons Cathedral	103 Woburn Avenue, Benoni
Germiston Methodist Church	Germiston

Table 1: List of churches that assisted victims of the xenophobic violence

The limitations of the study

Qualitative fieldwork is often time consuming

and the research is largely dependent on the availability of respondents.

As previously stated, due to the strict time constraints under which the study operated, it was not possible to include a significant number of the Christian churches that responded to the xenophobic violence, and the findings of this study are based on those churches the researcher was able to contact and interview in time. Furthermore, the respondents referred the researcher to a number of additional church members with firsthand experience of helping the displaced victims, but the researcher could also not interview these individuals due to time constraints. Although the study sought to solicit the views of prominent leaders in the church fraternity, such as Bishop Paul Verryn of the Central Methodist Church and Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Church, attempts to secure appointments with these individuals only came to fruition when this case study report was already being compiled.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is divided into seven sections:

The first section provides a background discussion of the role of churches in South Africa's liberation struggle. This is followed by an overview of findings. The third section examines and discusses the involvement of Christian churches in the response to the violence, as well as the nature of their intervention. This is followed by a discussion of the underlying causes of the xenophobic attacks from the viewpoints of the churches who took part in the research. The fifth section seeks to understand the churches' view of the response of the South African government to the xenophobic violence, while the sixth section examines the nature of the interactions between churches and other civil society organisations. The final section comments on the significance of the churches' response to the violence.

The following key findings were identified:

- ▶ Churches and other faith-based organisations played a significant role in protecting the displaced victims. Had it not been for churches, the xenophobic violence of 2008 would have been far worse.
- ▶ Despite the notable response of the churches, their interventions were neither coordinated nor had adequate direction.
- ▶ Although churches interacted with a number of government departments, faith-based and civil society organisations, no lasting partnerships were developed.
- ▶ The magnitude of the churches' response is illustrative of the contribution that faith-based and civil society organisations can make to the betterment of the lives of the poor and vulnerable in post-apartheid South Africa.
- ▶ Churches have a number of outreach programmes targeting poor communities. Through these programmes, churches are addressing critical development challenges such as poverty, unemployment, skills development and HIV/Aids.

- › Despite a lack of funding, churches are playing a significant role in addressing service delivery challenges.
- › In the light of these findings, this case study report recommends that the South African government should partner with churches and other faith-based organisations in order to combat violent attacks against foreign nationals and to build cohesive, caring and enabling communities in order for sustainable development to take place. In all these efforts the government should respect the theological position that the churches' hold to serve people irrespective of nationality and race.

The role of the church in the liberation struggle

The literature on liberation theology indicates that the churches, on their own, and in coalition with social, student and working class movements, had varied responses to colonialism and apartheid.⁹ In many African countries, the role of churches in the liberation movement was most evident and effective towards the end of the tenure of oppressive political regimes, i.e. the late 1980s.¹⁰ During this period,

“ Africa experienced the beginning of a second liberation, as the peoples of Africa tried to throw of the political systems that had increasingly oppressed and beggared them. The struggle was not the same everywhere, but one of its common features was the role played by the churches.”¹¹

Tingle (1992) notes that in apartheid South Africa the church was a 'site of struggle'. According to Tingle (1992:135), by the mid-1980s the ANC and the SACP had come to the view that “because so many people in South Africa are Christians, the liberation struggle could only be completed successfully if they could gain Church support.” As much as the ANC realised the significance of Church support, churches supported the anti-apartheid struggle on theological principles and their stance towards violence, political and economic justice, and education for democracy.¹²

Furthermore, the literature reveals that in some African countries the churches did not only influence the liberation struggle but also played a critical role in the consolidation of democracy. For instance,

“ for years, in Kenya, the most articulate criticism of President Moi came from individual Anglican bishops, and later from the National Council of Churches of Kenya. In Malawi, the whole process of opposition to President Banda's despotic rule was begun by the 1992 Lenten pastoral of the

⁹ See Villa-Vicencio (1987), Gifford (1995), Walshe (1995), Desmond (2000), De Grutchy (2005). Of course, some white churches found it difficult to openly condemn the apartheid government while others colluded with the apartheid government in entrenching and perpetuating apartheid in their congregations (De Grutchy 2005).

¹⁰ Gifford (1995).

¹¹ Ibid., p.1

¹² Walshe (1995), Villa-Vicencio (2009).

*Catholic bishops. In Madagascar, the Council of Churches was the core of the Forces Vives that led to the ousting of President Ratsiraka in 1992. And in Zambia the churches were among the most prominent local bodies involved in the transition to democracy – at particular times of crisis playing a decisive role in preventing deadlock.*¹³

In South Africa, the churches played an important role in the transition to democracy. For instance, in the early 1990s, in response to the violence that was engulfing the country the churches undertook a major peace initiative through joint meetings with then President de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and other politicians. This resulted in a call for a ‘Summit on Violence’. Church organisations, such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), regional church councils, Diakonia, Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) and the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), worked tirelessly in supporting, comforting and bringing hope to affected and bereaved communities. Furthermore, the church leaders, despite keeping a low profile, played an important part in Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA).¹⁴

The role of the SACC and its allies was evident when it launched the National Peace Accord on 14 September 1991. It is argued that the purpose of the Accord was to offset the

climate of violence that threatened to engulf the country and to destroy any incipient consensus on setting up a Transitional Executive Council and the election of a constituent assembly. Signed by the de Klerk government, the ANC, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), trade unions, religious and civic organisations, the Accord was essentially a code of conduct designed to ensure freedom of conscience, of expression and of association. These were seen to be prerequisites for the establishment of a multi-party democracy and a process of reconstruction and socio-economic development.

Furthermore, South African churches played a central role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, providing counselling to victims of gross human rights violations, ensuring effective community engagement, coordinating meetings, arranging publicity and taking statements. According to Van der Merwe (2003), the response of churches to the TRC demonstrated their legitimacy as a political actor with real power to promote social change.

In acknowledging the significance of the role of churches in the creation of a just and caring society, it is argued that:

The TRC would have been quite a different phenomenon. While the conceptualisation of the TRC legislation and the drafting of the [TRC] Act

¹³ Gifford (1991:1-2).

¹⁴ Walshe (1995).

were essentially political processes driven by pragmatic political concerns, the lobbying activities of churches and other NGOs did bring about some key adaptations in the final [TRC] legislation.¹⁵

There has been concern from some quarters that since South Africa's democratisation in 1994 the religious sector has not been actively involved in strengthening democracy. In its campaigns for the 2009 elections, the ANC called on churches to partner with government to address the social and economic challenges the country faces and to build a cohesive and caring society. The following remarks made by President Zuma in his speech to Rhema Church is a case in point:

The ANC practically derived its moral vision from the church amongst other sources. That also explains the key role played by the religious sector in the struggle for freedom in our country. In the post-2009 election administration, we will work for a continued partnership with the faith-based sector to give practical meaning to the ANC's moral vision, based on our country's Constitution. Our moral vision embodies the values of a just and caring society. We need the support of the church and all faith-based organisations, so that together, we can release our people from the slavery of poverty and its manifestations. Government should open its doors to enable interaction with faith-based organisations on policy and implementation. There are many programmes that require collaboration with faith-based organisations.¹⁶

Following a long a process of consultation, on 11 August 2009 President Zuma officially endorsed the formation of the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC) led by Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Church. Writing on the ANC's website, the ANC's Mathole Motshekga had this to say:

The NILC will become a true engine of service delivery and resist the temptation of reducing itself into an unproductive talk shop. Religious infrastructure will now also be utilised for public education and social development and places of worship will now be used as community spaces during the week to address illiteracy and promote educational programmes for the common good for all. In pursuit of partnership for reconstruction, development and progress called for by the President [Zuma] during his inaugural address, we believe that the NILC is well placed to be the key driver for social education and moral regeneration for sustainable development. We wish to join the President in welcoming the NILC as a non-partisan interfaith structure which is rooted amongst the

¹⁵ Van der Merwe (2003:270).

¹⁶ Address by ANC President Jacob Zuma at the Rhema Church Prayer Service in Randburg, Johannesburg, 15 March 2009.

people and represented by substructures at provincial, regional, local and ward levels. We believe that the NILC will be the best custodian for Moral Regeneration Movement programmes.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the perception of the lack of church involvement in the political life of the country since 1994, this case study illustrates the churches' response to the xenophobic violence of 2008, and presents it as one of the many activities that the religious sector is involved in in poor and vulnerable communities.

The response of churches and nature of their intervention

It is important to note that the churches responded to the xenophobic violence on theological and humanitarian principles:

Jesus was once a refugee. We were giving to God – a vital part of our ministry. Other countries hosted South Africans during apartheid. (Reverend Moloji, Randburg Methodist Church)

In all humility, I think the [churches'] response was phenomenal, I think it would have left a void. That's my opinion. And that is just a fact. I think we need each other to handle a crisis or a situation like that. And it's not only handing out food. We felt we were catalysts in debriefing and ... the tension that was being built up. And we felt just [naturally], not taking sides, we were neutral and we had to play that role, not taking sides and putting more oil on the fire of government not doing this, we, this and that and that. And we had to deal with that antagonism and aggression. But we felt, as God's servants and ambassadors of Christ, where we take our stand – we felt we had to be that catalyst and really come in there with an attitude of peace and assisting government in debriefing and defusing the situation because it was not only the food and the physical needs. There were other enormous issues that we had to engage. But we took our position as apolitical. And I want to put that very strongly – that there was no way that we were in any way trying to propagate or promote any sort of political arena. We were there to be apolitical and serve ... And I think we've succeeded in that. (Pastor Dennis, Rosebank Union Church)

¹⁷ Matshekga, M. (2009). "State to Deliver Through Churches," www.anc.org.za, downloaded on the 20th November 2009.

The xenophobic violence came to churches' attention through radio stations, newspapers and by word of mouth:

Initially the first report we heard was via the media or the press report ... but also we are living in the area close to Alex, me and the other senior pastor of the church. So we saw some of the police's action, fire fighters of Alex and the people who come from our church also informed us about the violence ... (Pastor Moodley, His People Church)

I think we became aware of social instability [a few] weeks before. We anticipated something wasn't right. We were involved in a feeding scheme on the corner of Main Road and Witkopp drive with ... a very transient group of people; predominantly men ... we began to see a lot of these men are migrant workers ... working on building sites. And we began to see a disturbance in that community. We didn't feel it was a normal instability – that there was something else that was starting to brew. We started to pick up a few uncomfortable social situations in Diepsloot. Some people were running away from their shacks and houses. They were appealing for the church to come and [rescue] them ... (Reverend Jacqui, Lonehill Methodist Church)

Like everybody else, we heard about it on the radio, read about it in the newspaper. Here we have people who live in the informal settlements that were most affected. So people talked about it in the church ... the Councillor got involved, and she and the camera people of Randburg started to enquire where they could bring practical support for these victims, a couple of days I was drawn into it. The Councillor got involved [in] sending e-mails, the facilities in Randburg [Methodist Church] were available for any person wanting to use them. (Reverend Moloji, Randburg Methodist Church)

The respondents broadly concurred that the radio stations, particularly 702 Talk Radio and Radio Pulpit, played a significant role in linking up churches and victims of the xenophobic violence:

... 702 [Talk Radio] was quite crucial in that they established – like a website. They established a link on their website for anyone who wanted to get involved ... we were sort of asked to coordinate that. So what would happen is that any church or individual who wanted to help would go to the 702 website and would give their details there. And then we acted as a basis for people who wanted to bring in food and clothing. (Pastor Alan McCauley, Rhema Church)

The churches were drop-off and collection points for donated goods. The response of churches was largely led by big churches – those with large congregations and storage facilities:

“ We basically became a collection point ... We did not say we were collecting just for victims of xenophobic violence. We said we were collecting for the poor ... So we became a collection point. We did a lot of dividing, sorting and we took out food, we took out clothes ... (Reverend Jacqui, Lonehill Methodist Church) ”

Pastor Alan of Rhema Church shared the same view:

“ Here at the church, we acted like a reception point for donations of food, clothing, etc. ”

The churches acquired the resources they provided to victims of xenophobic attacks mainly through donations in kind and financial contributions. Donations in kind included the following: clothes, toiletries, mielie meal, soup packets, vegetables, tinned food, long-life milk, baby food, nappies, first aid kits, sanitary towels, medical supplies, blankets, paper plates, cups and plastic cutlery. The following remark made by Pastor Moodley highlights how comprehensive the response of certain churches was:

“ The first few days we observed the situation, waiting to see what the government was doing or responding to the situation, how things were going to turn out. And how the police were handling and responding to things. We found out that there was not much done when we visited some of the police stations like when we visited Alex, Jeppe, Bramley and Cleveland. We went to Bramley the next day and found two police officers trying to cook for more than two hundred people. It was a nightmare because the officers were there by 5am in the morning trying to get the food ready. People were trying to get to work, some went to work without food and there wasn't enough clothing available. Our church then initially decided to assist by providing more food and resources to the police station. We adopted Bramley police station as our main focus. For the first few days we focused our energies there. We had a call out to all our membership of the church. To bring supplies, none perishables food stuff, bring blankets and clothing. We also called out for volunteers to come and assist. To go into the Bramley police station and see if they can assist or lend a hand. When we went there we found out that it was just a big mess, huge chaos. Then, in consultation with the station commander in charge, we fixed lights, because there wasn't proper lighting there. Bought

stuff and fixed the police station. We bought pots, pans and gas cookers to make sure that we can cook food adequately. We hired out more toilets because they were not enough for everyone. There weren't enough clothing, [and we] bought mattresses because the guys were sleeping on plastics, the grass was wet because it was winter time. And as it rained, the water was coming into the tent and the ground was wet, their clothing and mattresses got wet and damp. There was a lady who owned a blanket factory who provided us with blankets to give to everyone. We collected a lot of clothing, so initially the plan was to meet their basic needs.

Pastor Moodley went on to say:

Two weeks after we moved into Bramley police station, [we] looked into the family units ... Ladies and kids were moved into a centre in the middle of Joburg, and were quiet happy ... We didn't want the families to be broken especially when they were going through so much violence and attacks. A lot of times it was difficult for families to find each other. [We] found a temporary shelter from our members to house them and provide them with the basics needs ... We set up teams of guys who would cook for them. We did a lot of Bible studies, worshipped and a lot of stuff. We brought in doctors to do some medical assessment and medication and some stuff. A few cases were detected – some [displaced people] had TB [tuberculosis] and were taken to hospital and admitted. There was also a lady who was eight months pregnant and during the time they were displaced, she gave birth. We made sure that kids don't get malaria and no one was getting sick.

Pastor Moodley's remarks do not only highlight the magnitude of the response of His People Church, but also the extent to which the well-being of the refugees was at risk.

A number of organisations and individuals donated money through bank deposits. As Reverend Moloi of Randburg Methodist Church pointed out that the church received a R50, 000 donation from one of the local businesses. Churches also collected supplies and raised funds from their congregations:

We appealed to the congregation in terms of food and clothing and stuff like that. (Pastor Alan McCauley, Rhema Church)

People contributed a lot of foodstuff and clothing, including blankets. The funds came to R6, 000/R7, 000. (Pastor John, Northfield Methodist Church)

We made an appeal to the church and managed to raise R341,000 within two weeks. Within the church we had a lot of business people who helped with the funding. Others just gave according to their hearts' desires. It depended upon the individuals how much they wanted to give. But finally we raised the finances that were needed. We did have some other people supporting us from the USA [United States of America]. Those are the people we work with from time to time. (Pastor Moodley, His People Church)

Furthermore, certain churches were approached by international donor organisations to apply for funding. This was particularly the case at Rhema Church:

We were also approached by the Australian Embassy [with] whom we had no contact before, but they approached us and said they have some funds available if we applied for it ... which we did and got funding from them [Australian Embassy]. I can't remember how much it was. I would be guessing, I do not have my file with me. But I would imagine it was in the region of R100,000 ... Impressively significant. We then took that and coordinated the help from there. So it was quite good. (Pastor Alan McCauley, Rhema Church)

The research could not establish the exact amount of money raised by churches. Although churches kept records and informed their congregations of the amount collected, the respondents were unable to give an accurate assessment and referred the researcher to church officials who directly dealt with financial contributions.

The cause of violence: xenophobia or poor service delivery?

The violence of May 2008 has largely been attributed to xenophobia as a result of the number of foreigners that were attacked and killed. However, a different view is that the violence was a result of a lack of service delivery in particular townships and informal settlements. A third view, which combines the above holds that the violence was a result of both xenophobia and disillusionment with lack of service delivery in the affected communities. To what extent does the empirical evidence confirm the above-mentioned claims?

When asked about the cause of the violence, respondents were of the view that the violence was a result of a lack of service delivery. The following remark illustrates the point:

Well, from some of the interviews we [His People Church] conducted in the community of Alex, and from some of the xenophobic refugee camps, this violence was caused by lack of service delivery. And from our understanding and the consensus we received from the people in the community, was that people were upset with the government and the service delivery levels in the government. As you know that the violence started in Alex and the people that work for us in our homes, indicated that they were not happy with lack of service delivery, lack of housing, lack of infrastructure. They were feeling that the houses that belong to them, the jobs that they deserve, were taken by these non-South African residence or those who are now permanent residents of South Africa. And that was the basis of this xenophobic violence. South Africans residents were trying to get rid of the refugees – to push them out of the country, hoping they will go back to their own countries – and that there will be more facilities for South Africans. Quiet a lot of people said that a lack of service delivery was the cause of this violence. (Pastor Moodley, His People Church)

One congregant at Randburg Methodist Church said:

We received reports that the corruption in Alex was the reason why this violence erupted. They were saying that guys from Zimbabwe or other countries were paying R50 to get a house which was meant for them. And that was the key thing that contributed to the whole situation.

Bulelani of 7th Day Adventist Church in Berea remarked as follows:

To be honest enough ... people were angry. So it happened in their angriness ... the foreigners were the nearest object to kick. It was a battle between the people and the government, and the government was scared of the people ... I believe that's what happened.

Pastor Dennis of Rosebank Union Church attributed the violence to poverty, unemployment and jealousy:

... I would say poverty ... people seeing other people having the skills and being able to make some money. It could be jealousy ... people taking away jobs or whatever.

The church's view of the government's response

Media and preliminary reports criticised the South African government for not responding swiftly to the violence. Due to the scale of the churches' response, it was thought to be appropriate that the research solicit the views of the churches on government's actions during that time. The following anecdotal evidence indicates that respondents were not impressed with the manner in which the South African government responded to the violence:

“ The government's response was very slow because of the political situation in our country. They did not know how to deal with the situation in Zimbabwe ... The government's judgement was clouded by political issues. Initially, the response was very slow. We were not very happy about that. And the police were the ones carrying the heavy load because that was the only place the refugees could go to. Working with government departments proved to us that there was little coordination amongst them [government departments] ... local government was more hands on ... It was too little too late ... (Pastor Moodley, His People Church) ”

Pastor Alan McCauley of Rhema Church had this to say:

“ My general view is that the government did not respond adequately and timeously ... So I am not over critical of the government. I would say that the handling of the whole thing wasn't great. ”

Sylvia of Randburg Methodist Church commented as follows:

“ They [government] were not aware how vast the violence and human suffering was. They [government] were far removed from the ground. ”

Pastor John of Northfield Methodist Church shared the same view:

“ Government's response was pretty poor in the case of Benoni. There was actually no one running the show, giving direction and finding out what was happening or to take control of the situation. It was an impossible kind of situation. We were unimpressed but they [government] did give out some funds to hire the portable toilets, and they also paid for the security company that was supposed to be providing security at the [Benoni] town hall. ”

As much as the respondents criticised government's response to the xenophobic violence, they did acknowledge and appreciate the services various government departments provided in the refugee camps, as Bulelani of 7th Day Adventist Church in Berea pointed out:

// The government are human beings like us, they did their best, and it was a big challenge for them ... If it was not because of the government people were going to die, the government did its part but maybe not as much as we expected, but they did their part. //

Some of the respondents maintained that the South African government was caught off guard and did not know how best to respond to the widespread attacks against foreigners. The respondents held that the lack of disaster management programmes affected the government's response. When asked how the South African government should have responded to the xenophobic violence, Pastor Moodley of His People Church remarked as follows:¹⁸

// The government concentrated more on politics and neglected what the people need. Instead of helping out, they were debating about the stand they should take. The response should be: let's look at the immediate needs of the people. Provide food, clothing and blankets. They should have focused on the humanitarian rather than politics. The president only commented after two weeks after the violence had erupted ... From what we've seen from the xenophobic behaviour, the structures are there but they didn't want to deal with the problem at hand or maybe they didn't want to deal with it as quickly as they were supposed to. //

Interaction with other civil society organisations

The churches that participated in this study mostly interacted with other civil society organisations, government departments and other stakeholders in the refugee camps. For instance, according to Reverend Jacqui, their church [Lonehill Methodist Church]:

// ... worked in Lanseria on the freeway. We worked in downtown [Johannesburg]. We worked in Germiston and Primrose. We worked with the Methodist church in Diepsloot. I mean all the churches responded. Our entire circuit responded which [was] really about seven or eight Methodist churches, and we worked closely with government. We tried to work with government as closely as possible. And we worked with the metro police. We went down to [the] metro police. We set up a feeding depot with [the] metro police. //

¹⁸ A remark that was generally shared by other churches researched.

One government department that the churches closely interacted with was the South African Police Service (SAPS). This was especially so when the churches distributed goods and provided food in the refugee camps. The Northfield Methodist Church in particular developed a good working relationship with the police. This church, through one of its close networks called Cops for Christ, worked with the police to provide security at the Benoni Town Hall as rumour had it that the Town Hall would be set on fire. The church responded swiftly by providing manpower at night to ensure the safety of the refugees.

The research revealed the spontaneous and informal interaction between the churches and other civil society organisations. Most of this interaction took place in the refugee camps. The churches researched rarely worked in coalition with other faith-based organisations such as Muslim and Jewish churches and the Christian churches tended to interact amongst themselves.

The research findings indicate that no lasting partnerships were developed between churches, government departments and other civil society organisations. The respondents broadly agreed that the development of lasting coalitions between faith-based organisations, government departments and other civil society organisations is critically important for the effective integration of refugees and to address the broader social and economic challenges of the poor and vulnerable. As Pastor Alan McCualey of Rhema Church pointed out:

“ The churches or the faith-based organisations have major advantages. Firstly; they have no political agenda. Now obviously there might be – you know – a political slant with a particular church or whatever. But generally there is no political agenda. So generally we’re seen as mutual observers in any situation. So we have got an advantage. The second advantage is that in any community you will find some kind of a church in that community – irrespective of the racial makeup of that community, the social make up, economic makeup. There is always a church, or a mosque or whatever in that community. So in that sense we are already in all the communities. It’s not a case that we have to go into a community, we are already there. Not necessarily as Rhema ... We already have buildings in the communities and facilities in the communities. So for the government to deliver services to different communities, it makes sense to use the churches. The church is already there. The government does not need to go and build an office and put a staff member ... They can use the churches. They can partner with the churches and say: okay, can we use your building to put an office and we will help pay the salary of a person who can liaise with the community, something like that. So I think we’ve got a huge role to play. And then the other thing ... the churches sometimes have resources that the government may not have. It depends on which area, which church – generally a church has got volunteers. They can get the congregation to volunteer. They [the churches] might have financial resources that they can put towards a particular project. So I think there is a really huge role to play. ”

Pastor John of Northfield Methodist Church shared these sentiments:

What could be done is that government could utilise things that are already in place via churches.

The respondents were of the view that the response of the churches was indicative of what the religious sector can do not only for foreigner nationals but for all God's people. As much as the respondents advocated for government's recognition of the role of churches, they cautioned that the church-state relationship should not be politicised. Pastor Alan McCauley of Rhema made the following remark in light of the recently formed National Interfaith Leaders Council¹⁹ (NILC) discussed earlier in this report:

I think it [the NILC] is a good thing, with one qualification. I think that there still must be enough distance between this interfaith grouping [NILC] and the government so that the interfaith grouping can challenge and criticise the government when it needs to. I think there is a slight danger if they get too close to each other ... you know the government might think you can't criticise us, you are with us how can you criticise us. So there must always be that space because the church must always be able to criticise the government ...

The significance of the response of churches

The research findings presented in this report illustrate the significant role that the churches played in protecting the lives of displaced foreign nationals. In the context of an inadequate response from the national government, the South African churches responded swiftly to the crisis. As such, churches supplement inadequate disaster management structures. Prior to the establishment of refugee camps, many of the foreign nationals ran to churches for shelter, food and clothing. When police stations were flooded by displaced foreign nationals, churches came to the rescue.

A considerable number of individuals, businesses, government departments and civil society organisations donated goods and money via churches. Churches, through their congregations, provided manpower and transport to distribute donated goods to the refugee camps. In the refugee camps the churches did not only respond to bread-and-butter issues, but furthermore assisted with the provision of medical supplies, doctors, counselling and emotional support by drawing on their congregations and close networks. This was especially necessary as a number of illnesses were

¹⁹ The National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC) is a group of senior religious leaders from different faith-based organisations led by Pastor Ray McCauley of Rhema Ministries. This is an action-based structure established "in response to President Jacob Zuma's call for the religious community to partner with Government to establish a cohesive and caring society including an enabling environment for sustainable development" (see www.anc.org.za, "Religious Leaders Unite to Form the National Interfaith Leaders Council", Statement issued by Dr John Lamola, Secretariat Head of the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC), downloaded on the 28th September 2009).

detected in the camps, and some women gave birth while in the camps. Another specific example of the provision of medical assistance was at the Bramley police station where His People Church brought in doctors to provide medical assessments and medication. In Germiston City Hall, Bedford Chapel worked closely with Doctors without Borders to protect the well-being of displaced people. In Benoni Town Hall, Northfield Methodist Church organised security personnel. Other churches, such as Rosebank Union Church, issued bibles to the victims of the xenophobic violence.

The majority of the churches interviewed were not impressed with government's response to the xenophobic violence, especially in the early stages. Government's response was largely viewed as slow and inadequate. Respondents held that had the national government responded swiftly, many lives would have been saved. Furthermore, churches were not impressed with the leadership provided by the national and local government, and this was one of the challenges confronted by churches in the refugee camps as poor leadership affected communication and the coordination of activities in the refugee camps. As Pastor Dennis of Rosebank Union Church remarked:

“ I think what could have been done better is communication ... at least an official talking to us [churches]. What they [government officials] want from us and what they do not want and how are we going to do that together. I think there was a lack there ... I think they [government] needed to be more hands on. If only they could have allocated ... one managerial official ... [to] work with us and give direction of where we needed to go. ”

The magnitude of the churches' response indicates the ability of faith-based and civil society organisations to address the challenges of the poor and vulnerable. The irony is that as much as the churches interacted with government departments and other faith-based and civil society organisations, lasting partnerships between these organisations were not developed.

The extent of the response of churches and other faith-based organisations is significant to the development of intervention strategies aimed at addressing xenophobia in the affected communities and in South Africa in general. This case study illustrated that the churches have a number of existing outreach programmes in various informal settlements and townships through which socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and HIV/Aids are addressed. The following remark illustrates the point further:

“ We are involved in outreach programmes in the townships. We have projects on HIV/Aids, feeding schemes, pre-school ... we are involved in projects that focus on job creation and employment creation initiatives. We try and create jobs to alleviate poverty. (Pastor John, Northfield Methodist Church) ”

The interview with Pastor Alan McCauley of Rhema Church revealed that Rhema has a number of social services, or what they call 'community centres', in various communities such as Soweto, Alexandra, Tembisa and Braamfontein. These community centres have social workers, soup kitchens

and offer work, skills development and training programmes. One project that Pastor Alan McCauley thinks is exciting is the Mellon Housing Initiative²⁰, of which Rhema Church is part. The Pastor had this to say about the origins of the Mellon Housing Initiative:

“ The Mellon Housing Initiative, just to summarise ... is the brainchild of an Irish businessman, an entrepreneur who came to South Africa a number of years ago ... he came as a tourist and noticed the poverty. He was staying in Cape Town ... in a fancy hotel. He noticed the poverty and got this crazy idea to do something about it. So the next time he came back on a holiday he brought a couple of his friends from Ireland with him - business friends. And they decided to build a house. Instead of just having a holiday they built a house for a person that was living in a shack. And this over the years now ... has progressed ... last year they had 2,500 volunteers from Ireland coming for a week to build houses in Cape Town. Anyway, we partnered with them because they are in Gauteng ... now. So we partnered with them, we had what we call ... we would take volunteers from the church to build houses in Tembisa. So we are going for the third one in a couple of weeks' time. But for us we are very excited about this. And we can see it really taking off, developing. Look, Mellon Housing has built 10,000 houses. ”

In Pastor Alan McCauley's view, the significance of such a community development programme is that:

“ If you build someone a house it changes their whole life, their health, their education and potential. The potential of conflict is reduced dramatically if people feel they have a stake in the community, they feel they are part of the community. You know what they do as well is that they do not only necessarily build the houses in the area, but they would also add to that by building some kind of community component. Like a library for the school or a clinic or something like that. So it holistically uplifts the community. So that is the initiative that we are gonna focus on now to make a difference ... For me that is one of the ways to really make a difference. ”

²⁰ The aim of the Mellon Housing Initiative is to help the deeply impoverished in South Africa to achieve the basic human right of a decent place to live. It is a house building charity that aims to replace shacks with decent, sustainable and affordable housing for families living in the townships. In partnership with the local, city and national authorities, Mellon Housing Initiative provides vital training and employment to township residents, helping them to help themselves. This charity has set the target of building over 45,000 homes by 2010 – moving 250,000 South Africans out of shacks and into quality, sustainable homes. See www.townshiptrust.org.za

It is important to note that the churches responded to the violence in different ways. As noted earlier, much of the response was driven by big churches. The small churches did their bit under the umbrella of the big churches. The research highlighted the lack of funding as a critical challenge for a number churches, especially the small ones:

“ One of the greatest challenges facing the church is funding. So, perhaps, if they [government] take a closer look at what faith-based organisations and churches are doing – if they are playing a role in changing society for the better, and if that is the case, the government should assist us [churches] by funding projects ... the government could look into those [faith-based] organisations and recognise what they are doing. Praise the projects that have been done on merit [and say] we are happy you guys are doing a great work and it is improving our country (Pastor John, Northfield Methodist Church). ”

This case study report presented and discussed the nature and extent of the response of Christian churches to the xenophobic violence of May 2008. The role of the church in the anti-apartheid struggle was discussed to highlight the role played by the church in the creation of a just and caring South Africa. Christian churches, on their own, and in coalition with other civil society organisations, assisted the displaced victims in various ways. A number of people, organisations and communities responded to the xenophobic attacks through churches. Churches primarily acted as reception and collection points of goods and money that was donated and were therefore a significant disaster management structure during the period of crisis. The research findings suggest that had it not been for the churches in coalition with other faith-based organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and ordinary South Africans, the effects of the xenophobic violence would have been far worse. In the refugee camps there were concerns regarding the protection, security and adequate nutrition of especially women and children. Churches, through their congregations and networks, provided food, clothing, medical supplies and doctors to look after the health of the displaced victims.

This case study has shown that the underlying cause of the violence of 2008 cannot solely be attributed to xenophobia. The residents in the affected informal settlements and townships were disillusioned with a lack of service delivery. One respondent held that the xenophobic violence was a “war” between disillusioned citizens and the post-apartheid government.

Furthermore, others have claimed that the foreign nationals were attacked because the perpetrators felt that they were taking jobs and businesses meant for South Africans. This is not surprising given the high levels of unemployment and poverty in the informal settlements and townships, where many of the foreign nationals reside. The foreign nationals furthermore tend to be entrepreneurial and provide very cheap labour compared to South Africans. It therefore appears that the violence of May 2008 was a result of a combination of factors, but manifested itself in attacks on, and killings of foreigners. Recognising and addressing these factors is critically important if the refugees are to be (re)integrated effectively in the affected South African communities.

As much as the response of Christian churches was significant, the lack of coordination and direction prevented the formation of lasting partnership between faith-based organisations, government departments and other civil society organisations. This is disappointing given the knowledge and experience gained in helping the displaced victims in various camps. This knowledge and experience is crucial for the development and implementation of intervention strategies aimed at preventing the recurrence of xenophobic violence in the affected communities and South Africa as a whole.

Moreover, the response of churches demonstrates what faith-based and civil society organisations are capable of in times of crisis. The response of the civil society organisations to the xenophobic violence was by far the most striking civil society intervention since the demise of apartheid in 1994. The response of the churches to the xenophobic violence has shown what faith-based and civil society organisations can do in developing cohesive and caring communities in post-apartheid South Africa. Churches are doing commendable work in various informal settlements and townships through their outreach programmes.

Most of these programmes are geared towards creating employment opportunities and alleviating poverty in poor and vulnerable communities. However, the lack of funding prevents a number of churches, especially small churches, from responding effectively to the social and economic challenges of the poor and vulnerable. There is a need for government to work closely with the religious sector in the fight against xenophobia and other challenges faced by society such as poverty, unemployment, crime and HIV/Aids.

In light of the research findings, and in order to strengthen the position of faith-based organisations in society, this case study recommends that these organisations better coordinate their activities, develop partnerships and empower each other. Big churches, such as Rhema and other faith-based organisation, such as the Gift of the Givers (GOG), can help smaller churches in a number of community development projects including fund-raising and forming partnerships with government, business, NGOs and CBOs. It is hoped that the establishment of the National Interfaith Leaders Council (NILC) will enable the religious sector to combat xenophobia and address service delivery concerns not only in the affected informal settlements and townships, but in South Africa as a whole.

- ▶ Reverend Moloji, Randburg Methodist Church, Randburg (23 July 2009)
- ▶ Sylvia, Randburg Methodist Church, Randburg (23 July 2009)
- ▶ Pastor John, Northfield Methodist Church (29 July 2009)
- ▶ Bulelani, 7th Day Adventist Church, Berea (29 July 2009)
- ▶ Pastor Moodley, His People Church, Parktown North (30 July 2009)
- ▶ Pastor Dennis, Rosebank Union Church, Hyde Park (26 August 2009)
- ▶ Pastor Stephen, Bedford Chapel, Bedfordview (27 August 2009)
- ▶ Reverend Jacqui, Lonehill Methodist Church, Lonehill (21 September 2009)
- ▶ Pastor Alan McCauley, Rhema Church, Randburg (22 September 2009)

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