

A SAMARITAN IN SOWETO



It's 9pm on a hot Soweto night and Methodist minister Paul Verryn is visiting a squatter community on the outskirts of the township.

He goes to each tin shack in turn, meeting the people, hearing their complaints. They lost all their possessions when they fled from conflict elsewhere in the township. One young woman greets him joyfully: "I know you. I was a marshal at Winnie Mandela's trial and I know you from the church."

The Mandela trial. Verryn is more than tired of the subject but it won't go away. The trial, as well as the years of accusation that he sexually molested young boys at the Methodist manse in Orlando West, continue to haunt him. He is still pestered by journalists, plagued by memories, dogged by other people's doubts.

"I think (the trial) made me realise just how vulnerable I am," he says. "Now that it is over it feels like a reprieve from insanity - that's the depth at which I felt this thing. But I hope that it has given me a deeper perception of the difficult journey some people have to take and the ability to empathise more effectively with people who are struggling."

He frequently has the opportunity to test this. At 10 am, after his meeting with the squatters, he is called to the home of a nearby resident suffering from delusions. The violence around her has made her see the heads of her children nailed up above the door. She cries out at the crucifixion of her activist neighbour. She says she needs to live on a hill in a white house made of straw.

As Verryn is trying to console her, his pager goes off: once a week he is on call for the Peace Action Monitoring Group that keeps tabs on the violence in the townships. Before answering the call, he prays with the woman and promises to return. The alert to which he then responds concerns a Sowetan who fears she is about to be attacked. By the time it is clear this is a false alarm, it is after 11pm and

When WINNIE MANDELA was charged with being an accessory to the kidnapping of four boys, her defence accused a white Soweto priest of pederasty. She was convicted. Since the trial, PAUL VERRYN has been rebuilding his life.



TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY LESLEY LAWSON

way past the time a sensible person would sit down to dinner.



ABOVE: PREPARING TO GIVE COMMUNION TO A BED-RIDDEN PARISHIONER. VERRYN VISITS EACH OF ABOUT 70 SUCH "SHUT-INS" ONCE A QUARTER.

PREVIOUS PAGE: AT A CHRISTENING OF 12 BABIES IN THE ORLANDO NORTH CHURCH. VERRYN LISTENS TO THE FATHER FOR THE BABY'S NAME.

LENNIUM

For Verryn, however, this is an average evening. Combining political work with his ministry means a double shift most days of the week but it gives essential meaning to his faith. "To wrestle with doubt and disbelief and cynicism and to engage yourself in the incongruencies of people's lives next to faith... If we say we have faith, what does it mean to the poor or the sick?"

Verryn, 40, has been politically active since his ministry in the eastern Cape in the early 1980s. Although his congregation there was white and upper class, general political conditions thrust him into detainee support work. "It was seeing Mkhushi Jack... him showing me the places where he had been tortured, where they stuck pins down his nails."

His involvement with the Detainees' Parents Support Committee was a decisive point in Verryn's life. Above all he knew it was the work God wanted him to do.

For the last four years Verryn has lived and worked from the controversial manse in Orlando West. Here he is responsible for five congregations and about 2 500 people. His move here threw him into culture shock and has probably changed him forever.

"I think it was an existential crisis. Did I really have to abandon my roots to embrace this new community, or was there a marriage between the two that could give integrity to my life? I think it's a journey all South Africans are afraid of, a road we are all going to have to walk."

At the manse there are always people wanting him - for advice, for help, for money.

"God is good," laughs a girl as his car stops in the driveway.

"Why?" he asks. "Father, I have been waiting for you for hours and I was just about to leave."

There are many people and few physical resources. On a typical afternoon a funeral and a wedding interleave in the same church - with Verryn officiating at both. "This calls for a costume change," he warns, and he is still flipping the red stole around his neck as he starts the wedding ceremony. But not to worry, one of the bridesmaids also arrives late. This Saturday looks like it's going to be another without

food or drink until late into the night.

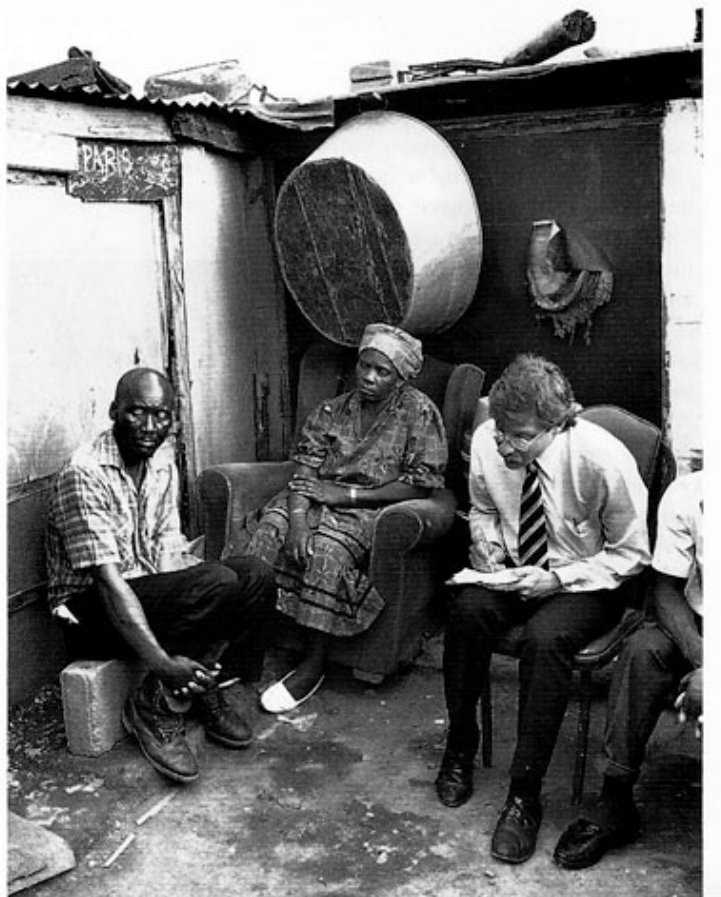
Verryn lives hard, which causes his friends concern, but he is happy enough. "People give me energy. And I can't think of a better profession. I get educated about legal matters, theological matters. I find out about economic policies. I am involved in planning buildings. I have the privilege of being with people in their most intimate, holy moments. It's not a nine-to-five job, it's more like a lifestyle."

One of his favourite tasks is to give Communion to the old, the sick and the disabled who cannot attend church. Several times a month he visits their homes, accompanied by his biblewoman, 87-year-old Martha Matsinya. They find one pensioner locked into the back room in a cocoon of filthy sheets; they wait while she searches for the key to the living-room so that she can take Communion off a fine tablecloth. At another house, a woman lies close to death on a pink silk coverlet; the



ABOVE RIGHT: IN THE SCHOOLROOM THEY USE AS A CHURCH, VERRYN CALLS OUT TO ONE OF THE ELDERS TO JOIN HIS COLLEAGUES IN COMMUNION. THE ELDERS IN TURN HELP GIVE COMMUNION TO THE REST OF THE CONGREGATION. DIVIDING HIS TIME BETWEEN FIVE CONGREGATIONS, VERRYN MINISTERS IN TWO TO FOUR SERVICES EVERY SUNDAY. LAY PREACHERS FILL IN FOR HIM IN HIS ABSENCE.

RIGHT: VERRYN COLLECTS EVIDENCE ABOUT ALLEGED POLICE BRUTALITY FROM A SQUATTER COMMITTEE IN ALEXANDRA TOWNSHIP, OUTSIDE JOHANNESBURG. HE HAS BEEN ASSISTING SEVERAL PEOPLE INJURED IN POLICE ACTION IN THEIR EFFORTS TO OBTAIN COMPENSATION.



family take Communion with her, probably for the last time.

The work offers him a full experience of *ubuntu*, the essential humanism of African culture. "The extended family, which is still fairly well in place, is for me a real gift, that ability to care for both young and old. One of the sad things about the white community is that loneliness is a common visitor."

Verryn's diary is thick with engagements for weeks ahead but it is often disrupted. One morning he is called by a parishioner whose daughter has been killed during the massacre of a Dobsonville family by unknown gunmen. Verryn suspends work to take grieving relatives to the mortuary.

There is hardly a family in Verryn's congregation that has not been harmed by the violence. He worries that people are reaching breaking point. "Psychologically and emotionally the community is exhausted, it's threadbare, and it's lost its tolerance. I think the sustaining features of *ubuntu* are hope, integrity, dignity and tolerance; when those start fraying at the edges you actually feel as if you are starting to lose the fundamental cement of this construction."

The fear is all around. At 6.30am last Christmas Verryn's sermon preparations were interrupted by the boys of the house. While he was out the previous night a neighbour caused some trouble in the church. The boys feel unsafe – there is no fence to the manse, no bars on the windows, no proper locks on the doors – and they want permission to carry weapons.

"Even if you have an arsenal of AK-47s," says Verryn, "you will not be able to protect yourself. Over my dead body will we have guns in the manse." Later Verryn recalls that his refusal to allow weapons was an ongoing issue with former manse resident Xoliswa Falati, convicted with Winnie Mandela in the kidnap and assault saga.

Verryn is concerned that parts of the black community are in the grip of a mad bloodlust – the outcome of years of degradation and abuse. "It is as if there is the smell of a rotting carcass in our nostrils and we've gone out of control."

It was undoubtedly this same bloodlust which led to the murder of Stompie Moeketsi Seipei at the hands of members of the Mandela Football Club. And it was

certainly a threadbare and intolerant psychology which led to Verryn's humiliation at the hands of Mrs Mandela and her legal team. Their case played to the general climate of homophobia which exists among both blacks and whites.

It was publicly decided that Verryn was a homosexual; from there it was a short step to smearing him as a pederast. To make the mud stick, his accusers attempted to paint a Jekyll-and-Hyde picture of his life. A month after her trial, Winnie Mandela told a magazine: "What kind of beast is this who wears a collar on Sunday and goes to preach to parents of these children, and preaches the word of God even to some of these children? At night he becomes something else ... We are supposed to be murderers and kidnappers – all rubbish which is meant to shield this man. This whole thing stinks of such filth."

The judge pointed out that Verryn was not on trial, nor had he had a chance to defend himself against the allegations. But what chance is there of self-defence against a character assassination that relies on the existence of an evil shadow self? Verryn himself has refused to try.

There are many reasons for his silence. One is a wish not to hurt the homosexual community by a blunt repudiation. Even stronger, however, is his need to protect what very little privacy is permitted him by the nature of his work. His parishioners have access to him at all times and his house

BELOW: VERRYN WITH DAPHNE MASHILE, A COLLEAGUE FROM THE FORMER DETAINEES' PARENTS SUPPORT COMMITTEE. IT IS 11.30PM AND THEY HAVE JUST RETURNED TO DAPHNE'S HOME AFTER VISITING A NEARBY SQUATTER CAMP. THEY ARE HAVING TEA AS VERRYN'S PEACE ACTION MONITORING PAGER BEEPS.

OPPOSITE: IN HIS BEDROOM AT 6.30AM, WITH THE AID OF THE BIBLE, THE CATHOLIC MISSAL, HYMNBOOKS AND LECTIONARY, VERRYN PREPARES THE TWO SERMONS HE IS TO GIVE THAT DAY.





is permanently filled with all manner of refugees. In some months, as in that fateful December of 1988 when Stompie Seipei was kidnapped from the manse and murdered, the small house is seriously overcrowded. Like most township houses, every bed including Verryn's (before the trial, not after) is shared, and there are sleeping bodies on the floor.

For Verryn, his sexual identity is one small part of his life that is truly private and he will defend that privacy at any cost. This position, and the fact that he is single, are the cause of years of calumny.

Verryn's way of dealing with the crisis was simply to carry on with his work, and to see him today with his parishioners is to know that between him and them there is no impediment. "People supported me and they held my sanity together," Verryn says of the bad times. "In my time of almost disintegration there were people who actually wept with my pain and prayed for me, and for my safety."

The trials of Paul Verryn are about the triumph of ordinary people – over the corruptness of the system, over the corrupting of its victims. Verryn's summation of it, as of his experience of Soweto life, applies as easily to South Africa. "The potential that truly rests in the wider community, the ability to love when the

ABOVE: SIPHO NOHE, A CHURCH YOUTH LEADER, DISCUSSES HIS HOLIDAY PLANS WITH VERRYN IN THE MANSE OFFICE IN SOWETO.

OPPOSITE: AT A MEETING OF THE ORLANDO EAST SUNDAY SCHOOL COMMITTEE, VERRYN LAUGHINGLY RESPONDS TO A MEMBER WHO REMINDS HIM THAT HE PROMISED TO WEAR SHORTS TO THE NEXT SUNDAY SCHOOL OUTING. TYPICALLY, VERRYN HAS DIARISED A YEAR OF APPOINTMENTS WITH THIS COMMITTEE.

odds are so profoundly against you – and with such integrity and power as I have seen in my people – this indicates to me that the fundamental goodness of ordinary people has not been corrupted."

In 1991 Winnie Mandela, Xoliswa Falati and two others were charged with kidnapping and assaulting four youths from the Soweto manse of Methodist minister Paul Verryn. The trial was a sequel to that of Mandela Football Club leader Jerry Richardson, who had been found guilty of murdering the youngest of the four boys, Stompie Moeketsi Seipei.

In the second trial, the defence relied on allegations that the boys had been removed from the manse to prevent them from being sexually abused by Verryn.

In the Mandela case, Mr Justice Stegman found her and Falati guilty on four counts of kidnapping and four counts of being an accessory after the fact to assault with the intent to do bodily harm. The judge made no finding on the allegations against Verryn, which issue he described as collateral to the trial, but he postulated "the existence of an ambitious personal group" which had their own reasons to want Verryn replaced by another minister.

Mandela and Falati were each sentenced to six years' imprisonment and are currently on bail awaiting the outcome of an appeal. John Morgan, who drove the vehicle used in the kidnapping, was sentenced to one year in prison. Falati's daughter Nompume-lelo was discharged. Four others who faced similar charges, as well as a key State witness, disappeared.

In recent months, following a series of disclosures in several newspapers, police reopened investigations into an alleged connection between Mrs Mandela and the murders of Stompie Seipei and, shortly after, Soweto doctor Dr Abu-Baker Asvat. The doctor is alleged to have examined Stompie before the boy's death and warned that he might die at any time, then later

refused to participate in a cover-up.

Witnesses who initially substantiated alibis offered by Mrs Mandela at her trial, another potential witness who was allegedly spirited out of the country to prevent him from testifying, as well as evidence from the convicted killers of Dr Asvat which could not be introduced at the Mandela trial, now offer new versions of the events in question – versions which implicate Mrs Mandela and show that the charges levelled by her against Paul

Verryn were simply a plot to discredit him. The findings of this latest investigation will be forwarded to the Attorney-General for a decision on further prosecutions.

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