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ETHEKWINI Living Legends


November 2022

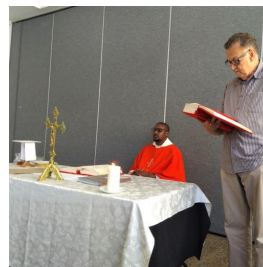
Learning from other Metros
Learning from the Homeless
The power of live theatre
Remembering those who have passed



Learning lessons from CPT



Taking the homeless to the theatre



A memorial Mass for the dead

NATIONAL HOMELESS CONVERSATION #1 - HEARING FROM OTHER CITIES

The National Homeless Network emerged from the first 'National Conversation about Homelessness' which was convened in Pretoria in 2017. One of the key goals of the Network is to provide a forum for sharing experiences and best practices among different cities. The value of this was clearly demonstrated during lockdown in 2020 (when the Network connected via Zoom every week), and it continues to be shown through our regular forums.

For the first time since 2019, we were able to have a big national face-to-face conference and it was the turn of the Johannesburg network to host. They worked closely with their Municipality who assisted by providing a venue and some of the logistics (though that did mean that there were more political speeches than have happened at these gatherings in the past!). There were 170 people signed up, clearly a lot of them from Gauteng (Jo'burg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni) but also from further afield with delegates from Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg and the eight of us who travelled from Durban.

We heard two very insightful stories from Johannesburg. One was of a successful court injunction brought against the Municipality when they tried to move a group of homeless people without following due process. The court ordered that compensation be paid to the homeless for the loss of their belongings and also cautioned the city against using such illegal methods in future. SA courts continue to be a defence of the ordinary citizen against the over-reach of Government.

At the same time, it was also good to hear an example of co-operation with local government. The Johannesburg Inner City Partnership is focused on improving the CBD. They described to us some of the ways in which they were working with the homeless, seeing them as part of the solution and not simply as the problem. The irony was how similar this was to the public-private initiative that we spent months planning with eThekweni earlier this year, only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Perhaps the saddest learning for the Durban group was to discover that – having led the country during lockdown – we are now falling further and further behind. Most other Metros, and some Provinces, now have properly formulated policies on homelessness. Apparently, one is being prepared for Durban: let us hope that they actually consult the people who understand the problem and not just the ones who tell politicians what they want to hear.

The process of shared learning continued afterwards with Hassan Khan, the CEO of The Haven (pictured above on the left) which runs 15 shelters in partnership with Provincial government in the Western Cape. He was travelling through Durban and Pietermaritzburg and agreed to deliver an informative session in each city with the local networks. It is great to know there is such a wealth of knowledge and experience to access.

Photo: Kelly Kropman (far right in white), the attorney who successfully led the Albert Farm case against the city of Johannesburg, leads a workshop at the National Conversation.



NATIONAL HOMELESS CONVERSATION #2 - HEARING FROM THE HOMELESS

One feature that was really different about the 2022 Conversation was the significant and active participation by homeless people themselves who accounted for about one third of those present.

Many of them had come from a city-run shelter – appropriately located opposite the Constitutional Court: the approach of the shelter shows that they understand, for everyone to enjoy the rights promised by the Constitution, active steps need to be taken. The shelter does not just provide a safe (and comfortable) building for someone to sleep in, but also a programme led by trained social workers to help the person reintegrate into society. As one of the participants said: “We are not in the shelter because we are happy in the shelter; we are in the shelter because we want to build something for our own lives.”

A highlight was a ‘fishbowl’ exercise in which 50 homeless people sat in a big circle to talk to each other; the rest of us – NGOs workers, Government officials, church leaders, members of the public, academics – sat in a wider circle so we could listen in without disturbing them.

What was so impressive was the desire of the homeless men and women present to build up each other and also to challenge each other. One talked about how important it had been for him to learn to be at peace with himself. Another – from the LGBTQI community – stressed how much it mattered that they as homeless people were accepting of each other and not judgemental. Another talked about the importance of constantly asserting for himself what he could do rather than focusing on what he could not. A perfect example of this was a young woman who had been homeless: she explained how a social worker had helped her understand what her potential was and that she was

now herself training to be a social worker.

Our Durban delegation included three people who have themselves been homeless: the testimonies they shared were especially powerful. Eric Makalo – well known because of his book-selling at the Botanic Gardens – is really committed to instilling a culture of reading. He talked about how he had turned his life around and encouraged the other homeless people present to read books to improve their lives. “It’s all about the power of the mind. You can’t just blame the government for everything. Instead you have to invest in yourself. I have learnt not to waste my time, my money or my thoughts. That way I can progress every day.”

Mxolisy Mavimbela, another bookseller, was also passionate. “What can I lose to become positive, guys? All of us have dreams, even Street guys have dreams. NGOs can provide services but if we don’t change our mindsets nothing is changed.”

For many people, this fishbowl exercise was the highlight of the National Conversation. We are very grateful for all who participated. We plan to host similar opportunities at the DHC for homeless people to speak out for themselves in a safe and supportive way.

Photo: the two circles that were part of the 'Fishbowl' exercise.



THE POWER OF THEATRE TO CREATE EMPATHY

We have demonstrated before the enormous power of theatre to educate, to move and to inspire. Over the years, we have been privileged to work with award-winning playwright Neil Coppen to develop two plays at the DHC, one about street drug users (Ulwebu) and one about migrant women in Durban (The Last Country).

We were therefore thrilled to hear that Neil and his group – Empatheatre – were recently invited to present their work about the destruction of the oceans Lalela Ulwandle (‘Listen to the Sea’) at the United Nations Climate Change conference (COP 27) in Sharm el Sheikh. We can be proud that Durban-based theatre makers are taking on the world.

Before heading off to Egypt, Empatheatre presented their play Isidlamlilo ‘The Fire Eater’ at the Sneddon theatre at UKZN and they invited us to bring a group of 30 homeless people to watch the performance. This was a one-woman show starring Mpume Mthombeni who is an incredibly well known face in South Africa because of her appearance on various TV soap operas.

Mpume has been involved in all the works created by Empatheatre at the DHC and also took the trouble to be a public ambassador for us when we launched the National Homeless Manifesto during the 2021 Municipal Elections. Her performance is a tour-de-force as an older woman reflecting back on her life and her controversial involvement in the violence of the liberation struggle.

Four of the homeless people who attended shared their thoughts afterwards: Andile Charles, Ali Qunu, Louis James and Talent Mbatha Zaheer. Most of them had not been to a theatre before and they were really thrilled at the sense of occasion (see photo above). They were excited to see a woman who they knew from TV now playing such a different part. "But it's not like TV," they said. "In the theatre it is more like a person is actually telling you their story." "The woman at the centre was so strong. It really gave me an idea to think more about how women are important not just to their children but to their husbands."

They were struck by the part of the story where people are taking revenge on each other and how afterwards only one man came back to apologise. "It makes me realise that even if we grow together, we sometimes still do bad things to each other." They were also amused by the part of the storyline that tells about her battles with the Department of Home Affairs (who claim she is dead!). They had all had their own experiences with government officials who are not interested in their problems and just send them round in circles (as described in last month's newsletter).

Zama Mthimkhulu, our young social work auxiliary who also attended, was especially moved to see the power of this older Zulu woman. "I loved her voice, how she speaks. It just made me understand that a woman has the power to speak. She reminded me of so many strong women I know."

Overall, it was a 10 out of 10 from everyone. And some of the guys were so inspired that they asked if one day they would get a chance to perform themselves. "We have so many talents among us!"

Photo: Mpume Mthombeni is the 'Fire Eater'. (Photo by Val Adamson)



REMEMBERING THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US

It is the custom for Catholic Christians especially during November to remember those who have died and offer prayers for them. Every year, we host a special Mass at the DHC in which we pray for our 'beloved departed'. The Mass this year was celebrated by Fr Proud Jonathan Mukamba from Zimbabwe who is in charge of the Mariannhill Mission Press - the oldest printing house in KZN (see photo above).

Of course, we are especially mindful of Paddy Kearney (the fourth anniversary of whose death has just been marked) and also +Hurley himself. We also remember those who in life were key supporters of the DHC: Patrons, staff members, volunteers. We have a book which lists our donors so we can pray for those who have passed on, especially ones who have left us legacies so

that they continue to support us even after their deaths. Staff members are also invited to write down the names of their deceased loved ones if they want them included as well.

But we also make a point of remembering service users who have died. Sometimes we know their names - sometimes we do not; sometimes they are mourned by the people around them, sometimes they die alone. But we are sure that they are known to and loved by God and pray that they are now enjoying peace. This brings to mind words from the traditional Christmas service of Nine Lessons and Carols: "let us remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light".

We try to keep the 'In Memoriam' page on our website up to date but please let us know if there are names missing.

One particular person to remember this year is Rampersad Barath, known affectionately by the honorific for a Hindu priest "Pandit". He died on Paddy's anniversary (23 November) aged only 67. In his striking priestly robes, he was a well-known figure at the DHC and loyally attended a whole range of different interfaith functions that we have held over the years. He took over from Paddy some of the inter-faith work of 'Religions for Peace' and the KZN Interfaith Council. And he very kindly volunteered to be one of the pastors in the interfaith chaplaincy team that we set up for the emergency homeless shelters during COVID lockdown.

It is less well known though how often he would come in quietly on his own to help prepare food for the homeless. Our director recalls: "As a devout Hindu, Pandit was a strict vegetarian, and so I was surprised to see him one day helping prepare a meat dish. Worried that we had compromised his religious sensibilities, I checked with him and was so struck by his reply: 'What matters most is not what my needs are but what the needs are of the homeless'."

It has been inspiring to know such a religiously profound and inspiring man and we offer our sympathies to his family and the members of his Hindu community for whom he was a guru.

Photo: Pandit Barath (dressed in white) with Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist representatives to welcome the new Catholic Archbishop in 2021.



The Day of Reconciliation (16 Dec) will soon be open us and we will be reinstating our big public Meal of Reconciliation - a chance for Durbanites from all parts of society to come together and share a meal. Mark it in your diary or e-mail us for more details.

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