

The background of the entire page is a dark, high-contrast photograph. It shows the silhouettes of several people, likely in a church setting, standing in front of a wall with a prominent grid or window pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with the subjects mostly in shadow, creating a somber and contemplative mood.

justice
and the
church

Xenophobia *and the church*

A THREE-PART SERIES

Part Two

WE CANNOT LOVE PEOPLE WE REFUSE TO SEE

Her name is Milako Kulinji. She is eight years old. In June 2026, photojournalist Tommy Trenchard photographed her sitting on a swing in a Durban park that had been transformed into a makeshift displacement camp. Thousands of Malawians had fled their homes in the preceding weeks as anti-foreigner protests swept through KwaZulu-Natal. Seven thousand would eventually be repatriated. Milako's family was among those waiting, displaced and frightened, in a public park in a city they had called home.

She is a child on a swing. **She is also a question the Church cannot avoid.**



Photo: Tommy Trenchard -
Daily Maverick



Photo: James Oatway -
Sunday Times/Rex USA

Eleven years before Milako sat on that swing, on the morning of 18 April 2015, Emmanuel Sithole was walking down a street in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, when four men surrounded him. He pleaded for mercy. In an attack that lasted 28 seconds, they beat him with a wrench and stabbed him repeatedly. Sunday Times photojournalist James Oatway captured it on camera. He and journalist Beauregard Tromp rushed Sithole to a clinic, then to Edenvale Hospital. The stab wound had pierced his heart. Emmanuel Sithole, a Mozambican national who ran a small business in Alexandra, was pronounced dead shortly after 9am.

Two faces, eleven years apart. The same wound. The same question: what will the Church do with what it sees?

But before the Church can act, it must learn to read its city. And reading the city requires more than sympathy. It requires understanding.

Statistics Can Inform Us, But They Cannot Transform Us

The numbers surrounding xenophobia in South Africa are sobering and necessary. Between 2008 and 2022, hundreds of documented episodes of what scholars and journalists increasingly call Afrophobia left dozens dead, thousands displaced and billions of rands in property destroyed. South Africa hosts over 270,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, with the actual number of undocumented migrants running considerably higher. In 2026, anti-foreigner groups issued a 30 June deadline demanding that undocumented migrants leave the country, triggering marches across Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal and sending thousands of Malawians, Mozambicans and Zimbabweans fleeing to repatriation centres.

Statistics like these matter. They tell us this is not an isolated fever that passes. They tell us we are dealing with a pattern, a systemic wound that recurs with regularity and with devastating human cost.

But statistics carry a danger. When we speak only in numbers, we reduce people to data points. We discuss migrant populations and displacement figures and forget that behind every number is a name, a story, a family that packed what it could carry and moved through the night.

Every statistic is an image bearer.

The Church must hold both things: the discipline of knowing the data and the insistence on never letting the data replace the person. Numbers inform our understanding. But only encounter produces the compassion that becomes action.

Reading the City: Why Xenophobia Happens Here

To understand xenophobia in South Africa is to understand a country where legitimate grievance, distorted identity and political failure have collided with catastrophic consequences.

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies on earth. More than thirty years after the formal end of apartheid, the wealth gap between the richest and poorest South Africans has barely narrowed. Youth unemployment exceeds sixty percent in many communities. Basic services, water, electricity, sanitation, housing, remain painfully inconsistent in townships that were designed by apartheid and have been largely abandoned by democracy.

Into this context, millions of migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, the DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia, Malawi and elsewhere have arrived seeking survival. For communities that feel themselves forgotten by the state, the presence of the newcomer is experienced not as a neighbour arriving but as a competitor threatening what little remains. The foreign national who opens a spaza shop, secures employment or builds shelter becomes the embodiment of a frustration that has nowhere legitimate to go.

This is the mechanism of scapegoating. And it is as old as humanity.

Distrust in institutions deepens the crisis. When people believe that the police will not protect them, that politicians will not serve them, and that the law will not provide for them, they revert to group loyalty and collective violence as the only available forms of power. Fear becomes the operating system. And fear, when it cannot find its true target, finds a softer one.

A WORD TO THOSE WHO ARE NOT XENOPHOBIC

There is a temptation, for those of us who would never participate in such violence, to stand at a distance and pronounce judgment on those who do. To say, quietly or loudly: those people are sinful. I am not like them.

Jesus told a parable about exactly that posture. In Luke 18, a Pharisee stands in the temple and thanks God that he is not like other people: swindlers, evildoers, adulterers, or even tax collectors. He is fasting. He is tithing. He is, by his own account, righteous. And Jesus says he went home unjustified. It was the tax collector, the one who could not even lift his eyes, who simply said "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," who left in right standing with God.

The Church leader who reads about xenophobic violence and feels only outrage and distance is at risk of the Pharisee's error. The people setting fire to spaza shops are not a different species. They are men and women made in the image of God, shaped by decades of poverty, political betrayal, institutional failure and dashed hope. They live in communities where the social contract has been broken so many times that collective violence has become, for some, the only remaining language of protest.

That does not excuse violence. It never excuses violence. But it should produce in us not judgment but grief, not superiority but intercession, not distance but the humble prayer of the tax collector: God, have mercy on us. We are all, in different ways, products of broken systems. And we are all in need of grace.

A CRISIS OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

What makes South Africa's xenophobia particularly tragic is its irony. During the apartheid years, the continent opened its arms to South Africa.

Zambia hosted the ANC in Lusaka. Tanzania sheltered exiles. Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola and others paid an enormous price for their solidarity with the liberation struggle, enduring South African military raids and destabilisation campaigns. The continent gave South Africa its freedom.

And now South Africa is driving their children from its streets.

Steve Biko, whose Black Consciousness philosophy sought to restore the dignity and identity of black South Africans, understood that true liberation was not simply political but psychological. The colonised mind, he argued, is one that has internalised its own inferiority and displaced its rage onto those nearest. Xenophobia is, in one reading, exactly this: a community so hollowed out by economic exclusion and political betrayal that it turns on those who remind it of its own powerlessness.

Desmond Tutu saw this clearly. Ubuntu, that animating philosophy of African relational personhood, "I am because we are," is not simply a social ethic. It is a theological one. It insists that human identity is constituted in relationship. When we attack the stranger, we do not only wound them. We diminish ourselves. We fracture the very web of humanity that makes us who we are.



Desmond Tutu

**My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be
human together.**



Pan-African thought, from Kwame Nkrumah to Frantz Fanon to Nelson Mandela, held that the liberation of any part of Africa was incomplete without the liberation of all of it. Mandela said on his release from prison that South Africa's freedom was inseparable from the freedom of the continent. He understood that African unity was not sentiment. It was survival.

Xenophobia, then, is not only a violation of human dignity. It is a betrayal of Africa's own deepest traditions. It is ubuntu turned inside out. The Church in South Africa must name this with clarity and without apology.

Afrophobia, for that is the more precise term, since the violence is primarily directed at other Africans, is a crisis of identity. A people who know who they are do not need to destroy another to feel secure. And a community formed by the Gospel knows exactly who it is: beloved, chosen, justified and therefore free to love without threat.

Seeing Through Gospel Eyes

Jesus lived in a world of ethnic hostility, imperial power and deeply entrenched social hierarchy. And in that world, he did something subversive in almost every encounter: he restored dignity to those from whom it had been stripped.

Consider who he stopped for. The Samaritan woman at the well, regarded as doubly disqualified by ethnicity and gender: Jesus asked her for water and gave her living water in return. Zacchaeus, the tax collector collaborating with the empire and despised by his own community: Jesus called him down from his tree and invited himself to dinner. The leper, ritually unclean and legally required to announce his own contamination with every step: Jesus reached out and touched him before he healed him. The pattern is consistent and deliberate. Jesus does not merely tolerate the marginalised. He seeks them. He crosses social boundaries to find them. He insists, by his actions, that the categories society uses to exclude people are not the categories by which God sees them.



“Hospitality begins with curiosity. Relationship dismantles fear.”

Justice Journey. Common Good

This is the lens through which the Church must learn to see its city. Not through the eyes of competition or threat or category, but through the eyes of Jesus, who saw in every person, regardless of origin or status or documentation, a human being worthy of presence, dignity and welcome.

The Church is uniquely positioned to become the community where strangers become neighbours. Not because it has the resources of the state, or the platforms of civil society, but because it has something neither possesses: a theology of welcome rooted in the extravagant hospitality of God himself.

Every church building is a potential embassy of the Kingdom. Every meal shared across a cultural border is a sign of the new humanity. Every name learned, every story heard, every life witnessed is an act of resistance against the dehumanisation that violence requires.

We cannot love people we refuse to see. But the Church, formed by the Gospel and animated by the Spirit, can learn to see. And in seeing, to love. And in loving, to move.

In Part Three

In the third article, we ask the most urgent question: what does this mean on Monday morning, whether you lead a church or simply belong to one?