



# An integrated African pastoral care approach to unaccompanied refugee minors based on Verryn's Child interventions

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**Dates:**

Received: 27 Mar. 2019

Accepted: 19 June 2019

Published: 17 Oct. 2019

**How to cite this article:**

Chisale, S.S., 2019, 'An integrated African pastoral care approach to unaccompanied refugee minors based on Verryn's Child interventions', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5478. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5478>

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The African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' has been compromised and exposed by the migration of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) from Zimbabwe to South Africa. Written from African women's perspective, this article explores the response and approach of Bishop Paul Verryn to URMs. The article theologises Verryn's response to URMs in conversation with African values, themes or sayings that relate to childcare, mainly from a Zimbabwean Ndebele context, and through the lens of the African saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'. In the findings, three crucial socio-ecclesial themes emerge from Verryn's response which I refer to as the three Cs, namely, collaboration, consultation and contextuality. These are discussed through the lens of African women's theology in relation to African values of childcare and its implications for pastoral care in a context of displaced children, and accompanied or unaccompanied minors (child migrants).

**Keywords:** African Values; Pastoral Care; Practical Theology; Migration; Unaccompanied Refugee Minors; Paul Verryn; African Women's Theology; Central Methodist Church; Zimbabwe; South Africa.

## Introduction

African values and norms encourage everyone to participate in the raising and nurturing of children. However, the migration of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) from Zimbabwe to South Africa between 2007 and 2013 exposed the way in which the African values and norms of childcare have been infiltrated by western values that promote individualism. I deliberately use URMs rather than unaccompanied child or migrant minors because these have different meanings in migration policy. A migrant is someone who has a choice to move from one country to another, while a refugee is someone who is forced to flee life-threatening situations such as violence, persecution and war (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2007). Refugees are protected by the law, such as entitlement to basic rights equivalent to citizens, and cannot be deported (UNHCR 2007). Zimbabwean children were forced to flee the prevailing political and economic instability in that country, where the government was persecuting those who supported the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Children who were forced to flee from Zimbabwe migrated to South Africa to seek for refuge; however, they experienced various forms of emotional and physical pain prior to, during and after migration. The visible challenges these children experienced include a lack of parental or adult care and guidance, which exposed them to various risks such as rape, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection, crime, murder, xenophobia, human trafficking and the many other ills to which unaccompanied children are vulnerable (SABC Special Assignment March 2009). According to the literature and the media, South African migration policy ignores URMs despite their vulnerability to all forms of abuse and violence (SABC Special Assignment March 2009; cf. Mahati 2011; Save the Children 2010). Furthermore, some of this violence was instituted by security agents such as police and home affairs personnel (Hlobo 2010:79–80).

The status of Zimbabwean unaccompanied children in South Africa is complicated because Zimbabwe is known as a democratic and independent state in Southern Africa. Accordingly, the instability in that country did not qualify it to be categorised as political or as a civil war. As a result, children from Zimbabwe were referred to either as 'child economic migrants' or 'child migrant education seekers', rather than URMs (Chisale 2014:51). This is because the majority of children who migrated to South Africa unaccompanied confirmed that they had migrated to South Africa to earn money to help support their siblings back at home (Fritsch, Johnson & Juska 2010:623–624; cf. Ingrid 2007), as well as in search of education (Chisale 2014:173).

**Note:** Doing Theology with Children: Exploring Emancipatory Methodologies, sub-edited by Stephan de Beer (UP Centre for Contextual Ministry) and Hannelie Yates (North-West University).

This migration was initially not taken seriously by either the church or the state in South Africa's Gauteng province. Stakeholders showed some concerns when the URM<sup>1</sup>s, who had flocked to the Central Methodist Church<sup>1</sup> in the inner city of Johannesburg, attracted vast media and public attention. Human rights activists criticised and condemned the move by the then Bishop Paul Verryn to accommodate URM<sup>1</sup>s in a church building. Verryn's response to his critics was theological, as he confirmed that he was motivated by his belief in 'human agency and respect for human dignity over human law' (Chisale 2016:3; Hankela 2014). This called for urgent relevant theological reflection because Verryn's response suggests that URM<sup>1</sup>s' suffering is a socio-ecclesial<sup>2</sup> challenge. Their suffering exposes the disarray and disconnect that exists between the social and the faith domains. These domains, as they pertain to URM<sup>1</sup>s, are crucial to my theologising because URM<sup>1</sup>s are both social and spiritual beings and this defines their existence in the migration discourse. Their relationship with society and God intersects because they survive through social and spiritual dependence which is the crux of African philosophy. Theologising in this article refers to theorising Verryn's response towards URM<sup>1</sup>s from a contextual theological perspective.

African philosophy and ethics stress the communal values that protect the dignity of humanity. The plight of URM<sup>1</sup>s from other countries, particularly Zimbabwe, in South Africa suggests that these communal values, particularly childcaring and nurturing, are deteriorating, if not disappearing. It seems that African children no longer enjoy communal care as everyone is busy with their own biological family affairs. Magezi (2018) confirms this, as he argues that:

[T]he traditional family life shaped around kinship and community is vanishing, if it has not already vanished, with the new life planned around employment and income because of its economic value. (p. 5)

This suggests that the suffering of children that leads them to migration is a result of the death of African indigenous kinship and communal childcaring.

This article draws and builds from the fieldwork I conducted for my doctoral research project during the period 2011–2014 (see Chisale 2014). The study followed a qualitative approach based on an exploratory design and was conducted with URM<sup>1</sup>s, their caregivers and Reverend Paul Verryn. Data for the article were drawn from semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observations with Paul Verryn, which examined his response to the migrant community in South Africa, particularly URM<sup>1</sup>s. Written from African women's theology, the aim of this article is to critically discuss how Reverend Verryn's response to URM<sup>1</sup>s was a call and a 'silent' cry for the resuscitating of significant life-affirming African values of childcaring that may inform pastoral care for African URM<sup>1</sup>s. The article is divided into four sections. I start off by presenting African women's

1. I use Central Methodist Church interchangeably with Central Methodist Mission.

2. By socio-ecclesial, I mean the integration of social and theological issues.

theology as the theological approach of the article and its relevance in campaigning for life-affirming African values of childcaring in a context of migration. Secondly, I explore Reverend Verryn's response towards URM<sup>1</sup>s which highlights a cry for the recovery of life-affirming African values in relation to childcaring in contexts of migration. Thirdly, on the basis of Reverend Verryn's response, I tease out the socio-ecclesial themes that suggest a call for African values in the context of migration from an African women's theological approach. Fourthly, I theologise the socio-ecclesial themes that emerge from Reverend Verryn's response in connection with African values of childcare and the significance of this for the pastoral care ministry in a context of migration. Lastly, I offer concluding remarks.

## African women's theology approach and African values for childcare

African women's theology is a theory that was developed by African female theologians, particularly those who subscribe to feminist theology. This theology was developed by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and then conceptualised by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle), who in an effort to address the gender disparities in society published extensively on the experiences of African women in religion and culture, and disparities in culture and church (Phiri 2003). According to Phiri (2003):

African women did not have their own theology that addressed issues that affect African women in the context of Africa. This concern by African women theologians did not occur because they blamed feminist theology, but they acknowledged the importance of feminist theology in making them realize the need for their own theology that speaks to their context. (p. 4)

Although African women theologians did not conduct extensive research on migration and children, the theory is nevertheless relevant in addressing issues of childcare in African contexts. African women understand that the well-being of the community and the extended family is one of the key responsibilities accorded to them by the ancestors (Kasomo & Masemo 2011:158). In African communities, women are expected to take responsibility for the well-being of all children and the elderly, including those belonging to the extended family.

As a result, every woman is a mother to every child in the community and is a daughter to every elderly person in the community. Moreover, as such, every man is a father to every child and a son to the elderly according to African women theologians' understanding of community (Kasomo & Masemo 2011). African women theologians prioritise the significance of family and community by searching for the positive, life-affirming aspects of culture, thereby decolonising African indigenous ways of life such as caring for children and the community. Oduyoye (1995:88) asserts that 'rather than talking about the problem, African women are acting against the problem. They make relentless efforts to recall, practice and enhance the dignity found in their traditions'. African women's theology is significant in

its criticism of the suffering of URMs as a result of a lack of parental or adult care and guidance because for them, childcare is a community role (Amos 2013). Their critique of patriarchal, oppressive cultural and religious traditions is a starting point for examining the suffering of URMs, as caused by the weakening of communal parenting or adult guidance fundamental to African communities. They critique social and religious teachings that seek to dehumanise the vulnerable and marginalised such as URMs. The suffering of children in African communities is seen as community's failure. As a result, African women's theology critiques systems that perpetuate the suffering of all vulnerable community members, including women, children, the elderly and those who live with disabilities.

The proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' is challenged by the suffering of URMs in South Africa. The absence of adults or guardians accompanying children in contexts of migration contradicts African women's theologies that promote communality, where *ubuntu* is a source of genuine care. African women theologians resonate with other African philosophers in campaigning for *ubuntu* principles. They argue that Africans are highly community-oriented and sensitive to the needs of others and the well-being of the whole community (Kasomo & Maseno 2011; Oduyoye 2001:17; Tamale 2006). According to African values, children come into the world utterly dependent on the community for biological survival and consequent development. This requires the recovery of *ubuntu* which seems to be disappearing and overwhelmed by western existential values.

This is also promoted by the Child Theology Movement (CTM) in Africa. This movement's objective is to do theology with a child in the midst (White 2019:20). The focus of child theology in Africa therefore resonates with African women's theology because theologising begins from the lived experiences of childhood, just as African women theologians begin their theologising from their lived experiences of womanhood. Thus, African women theologians weave childhood theology into their theology of motherhood (Oduyoye 1999; Siwila 2015).

This explicitly reveals that child theology in Africa is incomplete as much as African women's theology is incomplete when it excludes other vulnerable communities. Mercer says, feminist theology rejects theologies that welcome children while contributing to the further oppression of women (Mercer 2005:17) and other vulnerable groups. As a result, this study acknowledges the significance of child theology in theologising the lived experiences of children. For this reason, on the one hand, I borrow the CTM's methodology of using Scripture to validate my theological argument. Child Theology Movement theologians use Scripture to draw out themes to seek for theological validation in building a strong argument on the significance of children in theology (Willmer & White 2013). On the other hand, I use African women's theologies who use both Scripture and culture to construct theologies that are relevant to their lived experiences.

## Reverend Verryn's response to unaccompanied refugee minors and the campaign for life-affirming communal care

Reverend Verryn was referred to by URMs as Bishop Verryn. He became a public figure widely known by URMs and the rest of the refugee community as their only saviour in South Africa. The CMC in Johannesburg provided shelter to thousands of refugees including almost above 56 URMs (Skelton 2010). The exodus of foreigners and refugees to the church started during the 2008 xenophobic attacks. In an effort to protect them, Reverend Verryn who was the Bishop of the Central Methodist Mission that time went against all odds to provide shelter for them in the church building. With the help of different organisations, communities and individuals who volunteered their services, Reverend Verryn used the church building to provide a home to thousands of homeless refugees from other African countries and internally displaced South Africans in Johannesburg. In an interview that was conducted by Janet Smith from *The Star* newspaper, Reverend Verryn confirms that the church became a referral place for people who needed home-based care after hospitalisation. In addition, the South African Police Services and Social Development referred those who needed shelter and home-based care services to the church (Smith 2015). According to the *Curatrix AD Litem's Report* by Anne Skelton, some refugees, particularly URMs, were in need of counselling services and healthcare because they were diagnosed with different illnesses such as HIV, tuberculosis, pneumonia and bilharzia (Skelton 2010:38). These challenges called for the invoking of communal care. Verryn became the guardian of URMs in the church building. He provided counselling and referred those who were serious to health professionals who volunteered their services, such as Doctors without Borders or *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that had opened intervention projects for refugees in the inner city of Johannesburg. He played the parental role to those who were vulnerable by campaigning and facilitating for a better well-being. Unaccompanied refugee minors confirmed that they had heard about Reverend Verryn before they came to South Africa and that their goal in coming to the country was to seek his assistance (Skelton 2010). Thus, data show that Verryn's response to URMs included the following actions.

### Work with Doctors without Borders and counsellors

Verryn confirmed that URMs have experienced and witnessed much worse things than any ordinary child or person would have experienced. After such experiences, many URMs required health and counselling services, which Verryn with the help of MSF and other NGOs provided. In in-depth interviews Verryn confirmed that the MSF had been helpful in dealing with the general refugee population and URMs in particular. Verryn had the following to say:

MSF and other organisations played a critical role in trying to restore children to their normal beings. What these children

experienced and saw in the process of migration is unthinkable and worse than you and I have ever seen, they were broken, wronged and violated in the worst ways possible. So, with the help of MSF and other volunteer organisations we worked hard towards healing and restoration of these children. Some of them are now enrolled in universities and some are still in school. All this is critical towards their holistic healing and restoration. (In-depth interview with Reverend Paul Verryn, 14 June 2012)

Verryn, as an ordained minister, prioritised communal and holistic healing. He did not provide URMs with soup and bread but, according to the above statement, rather focused on channelling the services of the entire community of service providers so that the child's whole being could be restored and healed. Unaccompanied refugee minors require more than just charity, and they require empathy and *pathos* (passion, pain and deep feeling) (Lartey 2018:np) that will steer them along the path to holistic healing and restoration.

### The move from the church building to the Soweto community centre

Tensions and disputes emerged between the CMC in the Johannesburg CBD and the Gauteng government, which accused the then Bishop Paul Verryn of refusing to cooperate with social workers who sought to move URMs to proper homes and shelters. This then forced the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), Aids Law Project (ALP), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) and Bishop Verryn to apply to the court to have a legal curator appointed. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa consequently distanced itself from Verryn's move to apply to the court, arguing that he had acted unilaterally in launching the application (Kuljian 2013). This distancing of the church from Bishop Verryn did not stop him from taking the side of the children with the help of those who cared for the children's well-being. According to Verryn,

[A]fter Dr Anne Skelton, a children's rights lawyer, was appointed by the South Gauteng High Court to represent 56 URMs who resided in the church (CMC), this came as a relief for me. Dr Skelton was the best candidate to legally represent the best interests of the children in negotiations with government and investigate the best options available ... we cooperated in all that she suggested, she put in place structures, checks and balances that helped us a lot, she helped us here put things into order ... after her recommendations we then decided to move children to Soweto our community centre. (In-depth interview with Reverend Paul Verryn, 14 June 2012)

Moving the URMs from the church building to the Soweto community centre was an effort to protect them and to implement the international children's laws that South Africa is signatory to – that places the rights of displaced children within a family unit or alternative care settings. South Africa is signatory to all UN international instruments and AU instruments for protecting the rights of children. South Africa as a sovereign country has its own instruments that the country uses to protect children, including the South African Constitution. Thus, Verryn's response in moving children from the church building to Soweto

community centre did not contradict any of the instruments. According to Chisale (2016), Verryn

weaved these instruments in his pastoral care approach towards URMs' dignity. He carefully linked his response to the country's constitution and defended his response to refugees, not only from a biblical perspective, but from a constitutional and human rights perspective too. (p. 4)

African children are protected by traditional norms and values, and every caregiver is expected to conform to these norms and values. Verryn's knowledge of the international, regional and national legal instruments meant to protect children is an asset every child caregiver should possess.

These broader instruments are in line with the child's traditional cultural norms and values because they were not developed in a vacuum but with the diversity of culture and humanity in mind. The inclusion of Skelton, a legal expert on children's rights, reveals the communal aspect of child protection and caregiving in African contexts. Thus, sayings like 'it takes a village to raise a child' emerge from Verryn's response to URMs. This saying was developed by African communities to protect children's dignity and agency and underlines the importance of community members consulting each other on how best to care for a child. Children are commonly viewed as the future of the community. All decisions made by Verryn were taken in consultation with other stakeholders and the refugee community; hence, he always refers to 'us' rather than 'I'. As a result, invoking and elevating the *ubuntu* concept of communality, that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human is a human because of other humans) or John Mbiti's statement, I am because we are and since we are therefore I am (1978), seems to have informed Verryn's response, where everyone has a role to play in each other's well-being and in the well-being of children. There is an African proverb that says, 'life is about consultations and seeking for guidance as there is no one-person who can have all the wisdom in the world'. Everyone has something to share in the community's well-being and hence the emphasis on the communality principle.

For Verryn, respect for human dignity was fundamental in his response; thus, he creatively fused African values with an insistence to also use legal instruments. Both legal instruments and African values emphasise that human dignity is the foundation for human respect and concern because of the divine relationship humanity has with God. Human beings are created in God's image and likeness (Gn 1-26-27). Responding and protecting refugees, particularly URMs, is with respect to the image of God in the highest order. The image is revealed by Godself as incarnate, crucified, resurrected and ascended to heaven in a glorified body. This embodiedness is a crucial theological element in the declaration of human rights for all irrespective of migration status. Thus, for me, corresponding *ubuntu* and legal human rights frameworks implicitly and explicitly develop a safe space for human inclusion and inform socio-ecclesial patterns of care. Perceiving human beings this way

enhances pastoral care praxis that respect the person's rights as godly over human law.

### Recruiting volunteer caregivers from Zimbabwe

According to Verryn, the significance of parenthood is crucial. Acknowledging that he came from a different context from that of URMs, and he recruited the services of volunteers who shared the same cultural background as these children. He said:

I am white ... and I am also a man, to be honest there are some things that I do not know and understand, particularly the Zimbabweans' cultural traditions and norms critical in childcare, so these children need continuity, they need someone who understands their tradition, culture and all sort of things that children are socialised to in their Zimbabwean communities ... remember they will grow up and go back to their communities, so we must make sure that they will not be foreigners in their communities ... thus with the help of National Association for Childcare Workers (NACCW) we recruited volunteers among the refugees from Zimbabwe to be care givers for URMs and training was provided by NACCW. (In-depth interview with Reverend Paul Verryn 14 June 2012)

Verryn acknowledged that the child caregivers that he recruited were experienced caregivers as most of them were mothers, fathers, teachers or nurses; furthermore, the association assisted in strengthening their caregiving skills. He significantly acknowledges that caregiving is not foreign in indigenous Africa because motherhood and fatherhood skills include caregiving in different ways. Indigenous Africans have been extending caregiving to vulnerable and needy children and adults as long as such people existed. Notably, Verryn acknowledges that URMs should be prepared for integration in their communities because they will not spend their whole lives as URMs. This resonates with Shumbahini (2008:87), who explains that children in residential care should be prepared to exit and face the future, as they will not spend the rest of their lives in such care. Significantly, Verryn acknowledged that although he had the children's best interests at heart, he did not know everything about the children's traditions, culture, norms and values which are important in the child's development. He acknowledged the significance of involving those who knew the children's traditions in their caregiving. The aim was to avoid confusing children with contradicting traditions to those they were born into. This resonates with Margaret Mead's adolescent development theory in terms of which social institutions and cultural factors are important in the development and stability of adolescents in culturally diverse contexts (1928:235).

### Verryn's socio-ecclesial themes in a context of children's migration

In this part of the article, socio-ecclesial themes or critical practical theological themes that suggest a call for African values of childcare in a context of migration are highlighted. African women theologians' campaign for life-affirming theologies by sifting what is liberating from what is oppressive.

This informs my discussion of Verryn's socio-ecclesial themes where rather than identifying and discussing the gaps and weakness of his ministry for URMs, I highlight positive themes that are life-affirming and discuss them in connection to life-affirming African values of childcare. African values of childcare apply to both accompanied and unaccompanied child migrants. Socio-ecclesial themes such as collaboration, consultation and contextuality in childcaring emerge from Verryn's response to URMs. I refer to these themes as the three Cs of childcaring.

### Collaboration

It is clear that extending care to children cannot be an individual effort. Displaced children are broken and injured both inside and outside. For healing to take place, Verryn applied the communal approach where all who have resources to help are welcome. For holistic healing, Reverend Verryn solicited the services of MSF and other stakeholders. African values cherish communality which, according to Hankela (2015:372), is 'inclusionary humanity'. Communality invokes communal care which is a principle of *ubuntu* in the African context. It includes good human relations, kindness towards one another and reflection on language and proverbs in raising and nurturing children. The dependence of a child on adults and community suggests that a child unites the community in his or her needs. The community has a say in what is best for the child and the community's responsibility is to listen and respond to both the verbal and silent voices of the child. Swart and Yates (2012) campaign for the hermeneutics of listening to children in the process of practical theology interpretation. They argue that:

[L]istening to children in the process of practical theological interpretation will offer newly found opportunities for Christian theology and the church to contribute to the well-being of children as a local, national, continental and global public concern. Listening to children's voices does not only address questions about social justice, the participation rights of children and children's position as active agents in society; the act of listening to children is also about the survival and development of children, caring for them and protecting them from living conditions that dehumanise them – a way of promoting the human dignity of children as the image of God in each human being. And last but not least, it is also about communicating and being in relationships with children in order to realise supportive and companionable interactions in adult-child spaces. (Swart & Yates 2012:1)

Listening to both silent and loud voices of children requires proper collective efforts from stakeholders.

Collaboration in extending care to children is encouraged by the reality that interpreting children's lives and listening to their voices is interwoven with the relationships and ethics of the community. This is because children's socialisation takes place in a community where traditions and values are embedded, passed on and practised. African women theologians argue that every community has a role to play in the fight for 'justice, peace, healing and wholeness for all'

(Ackermann 1991:107; Kasomo & Masemo 2011). This encourages collaboration among all African networks and structures, not excluding the traditional networks, in the well-being of the community. The Ndelele from Zimbabwe say, *isandla esisodwa asimvikeli umtwana* (a single hand cannot nurse a child). As a result, everyone in a community should collaborate in raising and taking care of the child. A healthy community that works together in raising children is noticeable by the state of the children. African women theologians argue that collaborating and networking is an important aspect in the survival of the women and their children (Kasomo 2010). According to Phiri (2008:76), African women's theology is inclusive and collaborative, as she argues that among the four 'ethos' or 'ethoses' of being inclusive, their 'overt efforts to promote collaboration with African male theologians has gone a long way to show that the Circle is built firmly on the concept of community'. Collaboration enhances the communality of childcare and promotes and instils equal ethos in children. Collaboration in caring for children promotes their physical well-being, cognitive and linguistic skills, and social and emotional development. Collaboration in the care for children focuses on the activities that target the child's holistic being. This is made possible by the broader community teaching moral conduct to the children in socio-ecclesial spaces.

## Consultation

In responding to the needs of children, Reverend Verryn consulted all stakeholders because he acknowledged the significance of listening to diverse voices in what is the best for the child. The African communal aspect of childcaring values the community's knowledge in this regard. Childcare in African contexts is deeply rooted in liminal personality. As a result, Africans value the elderly's wisdom on how to raise and nurture children. In African communities, the elderly are the custodians of indigenous knowledge (Keane 2017) and their knowledge of life is an asset for the community's well-being. Verryn's consultations with other stakeholders including legal experts on children's rights resonate with the African world view that values other people's knowledge, particularly the elderly's wisdom, in childcare. In African contexts, children are mothered and fathered by all community members; thus, in the African world view, every child belongs to the community. Accordingly, any adult is expected to discipline and correct a child.

For Africans, a holistic life is realised through consultation and sayings such as *Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili* (ask from those who formerly walked on that road or ask the way from those who know it for guidance). African communities value networks and the knowledge and wisdom of the elders. Childcare is always guided by the elders who have knowledge on how to care for children. The role played by Skelton in putting checks and balances in place for URMs under the care of Verryn runs parallel to the African world view that encourages young parents to ask for advice and learn from the wisdom of elders in the community. In highlighting the significance of consultation, African women theologians

engage in consultation in the search for the positive aspects of culture that are life-affirming and subsequently promote these in their theologising (Kasomo & Masemo 2011:159–161). African women's theology was developed and conceptualised through consultation and workshops with the ecumenical community, together with African women theologians and other stakeholders. Consultation and petitioning are key to Africans who live and exist in between religious and social communities. Caring for children follows all-inclusive consultation to cover all important aspects of childhood.

## Contextuality

The continuation of a child's culture was significant for Reverend Verryn, who argued that children's cultural traditions and norms are critical in childcare and should be embraced. This, according to Verryn, allows a child to experience cultural and existential continuity. For a child to experience cultural continuity, caregivers should have knowledge of children's cultural traditions and norms. Contextually relevant caregiving does not overlook children's family background and their traditional and cultural norms, for these form part of a child's being.

Thus, recruiting caregivers who understand children's traditions and culture is crucial. Verryn's care model of recruiting African refugees from the same contexts as the children reclaims African ways of caregiving. The child should not be separated from his or her traditional and cultural world views because those form part of his or her social and faith reality. Although children have migrated and left their communities, it is an uncontested truth that later in life, they will want to go back to their family land and claim their 'ontological reality'.

In South Africa, there is a docu-reality show aired on television by the South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC), where South Africans attempt to trace their lost relatives in a programme called *Khumbul' ekhaya* (remember home). This is an effort to reunite and reconcile families who have been separated by feuds, adverse circumstances or migration. This programme is broadcast at 21:00 every Wednesday. There is also a docu-reality programme on absent fathers on Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) channel 161, where people can trace their genetic background. The presenter of the docu-reality show journeys with the person seeking answers and identifies paternity using DNA. These docu-reality shows highlight that for black African people, identity and belonging have spiritual meanings. These shows highlight that the search for lost relatives or tracing one's genetic background is very often prompted by a predicament which may be addressed by correcting wrongs, which includes searching for a lost relative or connecting with one's genetic background.

Verryn's recruitment of refugees from Zimbabwe who share a traditional and cultural background with URMs is an effort to curb the identity crises that may develop in the future,

forcing children to go on a journey to search for answers. Chisale (2016:7) maintains that Verryn's contextualised approach to URMs adopted a radical interpretation of scripture, where instead of 'applying Scripture to URMs' context, Bishop Verryn considers Scripture and URMs' *socio-ecclesial* experiences in tandem' (emphasis added). This allowed scripture to be contextual and respond to the reality of URMs informing their socio-ecclesial life. African women theologians emphasise the contextuality of scripture in the realities of African women and children. They emphasise an awareness of the patriarchal biases present and embedded within the scriptures, religion and culture while calling on the reader to acknowledge and be aware of time and context (Kanyoro 2002).

## Theologising African values of childcare and implications for pastoral care

The primary aim of this article is to theologise African values of childcare with the aim of informing a pastoral care approach for children in a context of migration. I use the three Cs that emerged from Reverend Paul Verryn's response to URMs to argue for a pastoral care approach informed by African values of childcare. I do this by searching for African themes on childcare that parallel Reverend Verryn's response to URMs. I am informed by African women's imaginative theology with regard to promoting life-affirming cultural values for the well-being and liberation of the child. The purpose is to contribute to the African knowledge systems that protect the child's identity and dignity, while remaining authentic to the gospel, by extending relevant and contextual pastoral care that embraces the three Cs (collaboration, consultation and contextuality) in both a social and ecclesial space.

### Theologising collaboration in childcare

In Africa, a child is the responsibility of the extended family, which includes the entire social and religious community. In early pregnancy when the child is unknown to the community, she or he belongs to her or his nuclear family but once the pregnancy becomes visible, it is nurtured by the entire community, who unite in feeding the cravings of the pregnancy through the birth of the baby (Chisale 2018). African values of childcare require the community to form a partnership that supports the child from pregnancy, birth, through their developmental stages (Amos 2013). Collaboration is essential to a child's well-being, with everyone contributing wherever they can to make sure that the child enjoys a full life. Baby Jesus is a good example, where his safety from King Herod, who wanted to kill him (Mt 2:13–23), was the result of a collaborative effort. Collaboratively, baby Jesus was protected by the Angel of the Lord (Mt 2:13), his parents and some of the Egyptians and Jews who may have known that he (Jesus) was the son who was wanted by King Herod and that he was in Egypt seeking for refuge. The Gospel of Matthew clearly narrates that Jesus spent part of his childhood years as a

refugee up to until the death of King Herod (Mt 2:19–21). This could be the reason that Jesus was more concerned about children during his ministry on earth.

In promoting collaboration in caring for children, Jesus in his ministry challenges the world to provide for the 'least of these' and in as much as the world does that for them, they will be providing for Christ (Mt 25:31ff.).

In a migration context, who could be the 'least of these' other than Jesus the child and URMs? This gospel supports the African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child', where a communal and collaborative effort is a prerequisite for caring and providing 'for the least of these'. African sayings and proverbs are such as *Umntwana ngowethu sonke* (Zimbabwean Ndebele proverb translated as 'A child belongs to the whole community') which means that whether or not a child has biological parent(s), his or her upbringing is a community's responsibility.

The other Zimbabwean Ndebele proverb, *Ngowakho esese sibelethweni* (translated as 'A child is yours when still in your womb'), means that concern for children's well-being is a responsibility of all community members, not only the biological parents. The cutting and burying of the umbilical code (*inkaba*), the placenta and some of the hair of a newborn baby in the community symbolise communal interdependence in childcare and nurturing depicted by the unbroken circle and the web of life in African communities (Chisale 2018). A leading feminist pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore (1996) presents a helpful perspective of communal caregiving with her image of the 'living human web'. The living human web encompasses different forms of interconnections that link an individual, families, faith and social communities and so on. She uses the living human web image to critique individualistic pastoral therapeutic approaches. Her perspective of pastoral care resonates with African values of caregiving and life that are expressed in African languages, proverbs, rituals and symbols that reflect the character of God incarnate. God incarnate through his presence, gracious and compassionate concern, and care for the vulnerable and the 'least of these', pronounced that children as the 'least of these' have a special place and role in the Kingdom of God (Catholic Education South Australia 2015:6). As the significant beings in the Kingdom of God, they challenge the world to unite in protecting and caring for them; by doing this, the world will be doing it for God incarnate.

### Theologising consultation in childcare

*Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili* is an African saying that promotes consulting elders about 'everything'. This saying informs the values of childcare where those who are becoming parents for the first time are expected to seek guidance from those with knowledge of parenthood. Lartey (2003:65) explains the principle of guiding as 'enabling people through faith and love, to draw out that which lies within them. This is not to deny the sharing of information and offering of ideas and views'. The Christian approach to guiding children is

embedded in the Bible, which should be consulted in this regard. There are many occasions when Jesus taught his followers about children in the Bible (Dillen 2011). He clearly used a child as a point of departure by placing her or him in the middle of theological argument of why is it important to extend care to a child, for example, he warned against causing the little ones to sin (Mt 18:6; Mk 9:42; Lk 17:2); taught that the Kingdom of God belongs to children (Mt 19:14; Mk 10:14; Lk 18:16) and a child is an image and symbol of true greatness (Mk 9:33–37). According to Malherbe (2004:4), Jesus in his ministry devoted special time to children. As a result, His teachings and actions towards children make the Bible significant in childcare discussions. As much as Africans seek wisdom from the elderly in childcaring, Christians seek that wisdom from Jesus in the Bible. This highlights that consultation and petitioning are important for knowledge to flow smoothly and pass from one generation to another. In African contexts, consultation allows those seeking knowledge to benefit from real-life illustrations. Thus, the extended family and community in Africa are significant because they widen the base for consultation and illustration if needed.

Theologically, consultation is significant because the work of the Holy Trinity (Triune God) is communitarian in consultation with each other. The Christian community consults the Trinitarian God in the daily praxis of the Church. Grobbelaar (2016:147) asserts that '[c]reated in the image of God, the implication is that we share in the relationality of the Trinity. Therefore, it is our calling to reflect the relationality of God in all we do'.

Relationality makes consultation on childcare viable because of the strength of the bond that exists in the community. An African context of childcare consultation removes the barriers that exist between those who seek knowledge and those with knowledge by allowing for dialogue on the best possible ways a child can be nurtured. Consultation exposes 'blind spots' that may exist in childcare and allows the long lost African indigenous ways of childcare to be resuscitated to create a moral society, with respectful and responsible children who will grow up to be moral, respectful and responsible adults.

### Theologising contextuality in childcare

African theologians, particularly pastoral care scholars, have emphasised the significance of understanding the pastoral care seeker's world view before responding to the care seeker (Lartey 2003; Ma Mpolo 1990:12). There are increasing voices that argue that pastoral caregivers should be culturally sensitive; this emerges from Verryn's response as he argues that he does not know the culture of URMs; hence, he solicits the skills and knowledge of adult refugees from Zimbabwe. African values of childcare preserve consistency in caring for children. Adolescent theorists such as Mead (1928:234–235) argue that cultural stability in a society that is free of conflicting values, expectations and shameful taboos provides a well-balanced lifestyle for children and

adolescents. The relevance and contextuality of childcare are crucial for URMs because they are human beings who exist, have existed and will continue to exist in a community with norms and values in their present and past and shall return to a community with norms and values in the future. Theologians emphasise reading and interpreting the Bible in such a way that two realities, such as experiences of history recorded in scripture and present experiences, may be integrated in critical dialogue (Bevans 2009:9). Botha (2013:107) uses the pastoral cycle to criticise a contextual theology that draws a straight line between Scripture and lived experiences because such theology is unable to inform a proper theological reflection in a context of migration. Theology that is not contextual to its recipients is useless and lifeless. Thus, some African theologians argue that for theology to be contextual and responsive to African people, it should be 'cooked in an African pot' (Fiedler, Gundani & Mijoga 1997).

In the African context, childcare considers many factors, including the history, present and future of a child. The community and extended family play a significant role as they participate in shaping and nurturing children through storytelling, song, dance, rituals and symbols. These preserve the memory of past events and the experiences of life in a way that helps to shape children's lives. A child's behaviour is formed and influenced by the family, the extended family and the community. In Africa, there are indigenous sayings that are used to inform childcare. The sayings are *isikhumba sigoqwa sisemanzi* (one can only fold an animal's skin when it is still wet), *ithole likhula lamanono alo* (a calf grows with its habits; in other words, infant behaviour informs adolescent and adult behaviour) and *umthwente uhlaba usamila* ('a thorn tree pricks when it's still geminating' or as meaning an infant's behaviour is directly linked to his or her adolescent and adult behaviour) (see Chisale 2014:202). These African sayings are used to guide the adult community in socialising children, which is contextually relevant for the future of the child and they are explicitly linked to nature and agriculture because Africa is predominantly rural and agrarian.

Jesus was born in an agrarian Jewish community, and as a result, he often used nature in his parables to teach about the Kingdom of God because these were contextually relevant to that community. In addition, the community understood nature and agrarian context because they were farmers, shepherds, traditional women and men.

Theologically, the contextualisation of Scripture or the Biblical story of Jesus is important because Christians are not all agrarian and Jewish; thus, Jesus' Jewish culture as recorded in Scripture should be interpreted in a way that takes seriously the lives of children and is in touch with their reality as black African children from traditional communities. Bevans (2002:70) affirms that the aim of contextualising Scripture is to express God's presence in culture, among people, history and action. For the gospel to be relevant to URMs, Verryn gave



agency to their history, present and future, which shaped the contextual response to the caregiving extended to them.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the significance of resuscitating African values of childcare to inform pastoral care for children within African contexts. Using the then Bishop Paul Verryn's response to URMs, three Cs, that is, *collaboration*, *consultation* and *contextuality*, emerged as the crucial themes of childcare.

These themes were discussed in connection with African values of childcare, which inform the commonly repeated proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'. The crux of this article is that Verryn's response in terms of *collaboration*, *consultation* and *contextuality* resuscitates this proverb and encourages communal caregiving for URMs in socio-ecclesial spaces. His response is conceptualised in the article to inform pastoral care within a context of children's displacement or migration (accompanied and unaccompanied). In theologising the themes, African themes or sayings on childcare, mainly from a Zimbabwean Ndebele perspective that parallels Reverend Verryn's response to URMs, were highlighted and discussed. The aim of this was to contribute to African knowledge systems that protect children's identity and dignity while remaining authentic to the gospel by extending relevant and contextual pastoral care that embraces the three Cs (collaboration, consultation and contextuality).

## Acknowledgements

This research builds up from the research conducted for the doctoral study that forms part of postdoctoral research, participating in the research project, 'Gender Studies and Practical Theology Theory Formation', directed by Prof. Dr Yolanda Dreyer, Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria.

## Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

S.S.C. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

There are no underlying ethical considerations; this article comes from the doctoral research of the author conducted in 2012–2014.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Discussions in this article draw on existing data from author's own work, which is duly acknowledged.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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