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## Book Review: Home of the Brave: A Review of *Sanctuary: How an Inner-City Church Spilled onto a Sidewalk* by Christa Kuljian

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*HOME OF THE BRAVE: A REVIEW OF SANCTUARY: HOW AN INNER-CITY  
CHURCH SPILLED ONTO A SIDEWALK BY CHRISTA KULJIAN<sup>1</sup>*

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Seeking sanctuary during difficult times is a concept that is not unfamiliar to human history.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the notion that those in need can find refuge in places of worship and that those who harm persons in places of worship will invite divine retribution has continued through the ages. Human sanctuaries therefore provide people with a space where they are protected and cared for until such time as they can protect and care for themselves.

From 2001 until the present, the Central Methodist Church in the centre of Johannesburg has acted as such a sanctuary for immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Zimbabwe and other African countries embroiled in civil conflicts or governed by oppressive regimes. It is not widely known that this sanctuary exists; what sacrifices those who seek its services have made; how the difficult choices of those who administer the sanctuary have been taken; and how the tensions which ripple into the broader community have been managed but Christa Kuljian's insightful account of the history of this sanctuary does just that. By tracking its history through eye-witness accounts, interviews, and through her attendance at the weekly Friday night refugees meetings held within the sanctuary, Kuljian exposes the hidden truths which exist below the surface of our society and which permeate into our daily lives. These truths expose the South African mind-set, and they test the moral fibre of our society.

From the arrival of the first wave of guests at the Sanctuary in 2001 to the xenophobic violence which rocked South Africa in May 2008 and to present times, Kuljian's reflection takes the reader through the history of the Sanctuary in both the

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<sup>1</sup> Christa Kuljian *Sanctuary: How an Inner-City Church Spilled onto a Sidewalk* (2013) Jacana: Auckland Park.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136).

apartheid and democratic eras and highlights the willingness and courage of both Peter Story and Paul Verryn to right the wrongs of their respective times. In doing so, it draws parallels between the struggle for equality amongst South Africans during apartheid and the struggle that South Africans currently face in treating all persons, irrespective of ethnicity and nationality, equally. It shows how NGOs such as the Legal Resources Centre, Lawyers for Human Rights and Medicins Sans Frontierers come together in times of need and how the broader community may not always be quick to accept the good deeds of others when those deeds affect them adversely in the short term.

Most importantly, it follows the author as she meets the individuals most affected by the decisions of others and as she comes to terms with what can and sometimes can't be done to help those in need. *Sanctuary* examines the social context within which the law should, but often does not, operate and questions how we can, through co-operation with our neighbours, avoid the situations that lead to social conflict through dialogue and perseverance.

The Sanctuary has become a home of the brave in a land more free than others. It has become a home to those who personify the individual struggles that can accompany life on this continent. In a note that Kuljian writes documenting a meeting at the Sanctuary during August 2010 she refers to Divine Love, an immigrant from Zimbabwe, who has transformed from an aspirant young artist sketching 'birds and eagles' to an unstable, traumatised man with a history of violence brandishing a toy-machine gun fashioned from some wire. She questions 'how Divine Love would find his way in this harsh world, and whether anyone really cared.'<sup>3</sup> But, through *Sanctuary*, Kuljian finds her answer – human nature compels us to care and although we may not be able to give everyone everything that we believe they may be entitled to, there are people who will, at least, give people in need a sanctuary and where possible, a fresh start.

In her concluding note, Kuljian states that 'Paul Verryn estimates that about 30 000 people have passed through [the] Central Methodist [Church] over the past decade'<sup>4</sup> – almost all sleeping amongst the church pews. She notes further that: '...many of them had moved on, getting jobs as teachers, plumbers, construction workers, welders,

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<sup>3</sup> Op cit note 1 above at pages 123 – 124.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid at page 330.

journalists, archivists, computer technicians, lecturers, counsellors and medical practitioners.’ This was all made possible by one man who brought the right people together. ‘That’s Paul...wherever he goes he will house those who are vulnerable. That’s the way he is.’<sup>5</sup>

The story of the Sanctuary will live on. By examining individuals it shows us how the collective should act. It teaches us what the human spirit can and does achieve every day. It teaches us how each and every one of us can effect change.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid at page 331.