

# Assessment of barriers that prevent the integration of UNHCR and church responses to migration: An ecclesiological perspective



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This article perceived the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a United Nations agency whose mandate is to safeguard refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. However, in discharging this mandate, the UNHCR involves many stakeholders, including churches. In focusing on the church, this article identified a number of barriers to the UNHCR-church integration in responding to the challenges faced by migrants, particularly refugees. In view of this background, this article aimed to provide a critical assessment of the barriers that prevent the integration of the UNHCR and church responses to migration, and consequently, offer recommendations from an ecclesiological perspective. As a literature-based study, this article reviewed literature on the proposed issue and discovered multiple barriers that hamper the UNHCR-church integration in responding to the challenges faced by migrants with a particular focus on refugees. Such barriers include legal, theological, financial, power inequality and the rotation of the UNHCR members. This article advanced recommendations to address the identified barriers; thus, enhance the UNHCR-church integration in responding to the challenges that refugees and other migrants are confronted with.

**Contribution:** The contribution of the article lay in identifying and discussing the barriers that hamper the UNHCR-church integration in responding to migration challenges, and making the ecclesiological recommendations that ensued from that discussion.

**Keywords:** church; migrants' challenges; refugees; UNHCR; barriers; ecclesiological perspective; migration crisis.

## Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a United Nations agency that is mandated to safeguard the human rights of refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people (UNHCR 2011a:1–13; cf. 2011b). It is important to note that, amongst many other things, the UNHCR interventions include assistance with voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country (UNHCR 2011a:1–13; cf. 2011b). However, in executing its responsibilities of protecting refugees, the UNHCR involves many stakeholders such as refugee communities, civil society actors, government entities, non-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies (i.e. United Nations Development Programme) and churches to ensure effective interventions<sup>1</sup> (UNHCR 2019:1).

Magezi (2021) conducted an article titled *Exploring possibilities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) integration with churches in refugee response*. The objective of this research was to understand how the UNHCR integrated or involved churches in its intervention approaches to the refugee crisis, as some churches had evidently become community bulwarks and safe havens for refugees. This study also disclosed that the extent to which the UNHCR involves or integrates the church in its response to the refugee crisis is limited in many and different ways. The limited integration of churches in responses to the refugee crisis is substantiated by the fact that the UNHCR only had its first formal dialogue and partnership with the church in December 2012 as a deeper appreciation of the role played by religion and spirituality in the lives

1. I am aware that, although the UNHCR is a key player in the field of responding to the refugee crisis, it is not the only player and, in some contexts, not the most important one. For example, in most European countries, the key players are the relevant government departments (Skleparis 2017:1–25). Although the government departments are key in responding to the refugee crisis in European countries, it is worth noting that in *The migration crisis? Facts, challenges and possible solutions*, Metcalfe-Hough (2015) indicates that the European government departments are criticised for being inadequately resourced to provide housing, education, health and other welfare services to refugees and other migrants. This means that, although the respective European government departments are critical in responding to the refugee crisis in Europe, their solitary responses are still inadequate.

of those the United Nations agency serves (UNHCR 2014:6). However, the UNHCR (2014:6ff) and Magezi (2021) indicate that there are many limitations that hinder the UNHCR from fully incorporating the church into its approaches and interventions to the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, no scholar has attempted to discuss the barriers that hamper the UNHCR and the church from fully integrating each other in their respective responses to the refugee crisis. For instance, Magezi's article (2021) only mentions the existence of the barriers without identifying and discussing them.

In view of the foregoing discussion, this article seeks to critically identify and discuss the key sticking issues that could be viewed as the barriers to the UNHCR-church integration<sup>2</sup> in responding to migration crises. To accomplish this objective, this article will engage with literature that is relevant to the proposed subject. The first section will critically identify and discuss the possible barriers to the UNHCR-church integration in addressing the challenges encountered by migrants, particularly refugees. The last section of this article is devoted to recommending possible solutions to mitigate the challenges that hinder the UNHCR and the church from forging an effective partnership in ameliorating the global refugee crisis.

It goes without saying that the theoretical framework that underpins this article is ecclesial in nature. Consequently, the article discusses the church as an integral institution of society. By virtue of the crucial role that the church plays in society, this article submits that it is an important stakeholder in managing and alleviating the challenges that are related to migration and refugee issues. Thus, given that faith-based institutions such as churches have a long history of providing hospitality to refugees and other displaced people, the UNHCR would be doing itself a huge favour by roping the church into its programmes globally. Stark (1996) emphatically indicates the care ministry of the church predates the founding of the UNHCR by far. Thus, as a collective entity, the Modern Church should adopt and intensify the same theological thrust of care that was practised by the Early Church.

## Barriers to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-church integration in responding to migration crises

### Lack of clear migration theologies to guide church migrant ministries

Magezi (2018:305–321) and Adedibu (2016:263) indicate that some churches do not have clear theologies of migration to drive their internal and external migrant ministries.<sup>3</sup>

2. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (1828:n.p.), integration means 'to form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole, to incorporate into a larger unit or to unite with something else'. With this in mind, the word *integration* is used in reference to corporation between the UNHCR and the church in responding to refugees' and migrants' challenges as a unit.

3. The term *internal migrant ministry* refers to the ministry that caters for the well-being of migrants within the church, whilst *external migrant ministry* refers to the ministry that is dedicated to migrants outside the church (Magezi 2018:305–321).

Consequently, such churches do not effectively partake in responding to refugee challenges. Magezi's qualitative study (2018:314–316), which surveyed 12 churches in Gauteng Province in South Africa, reveals that the theological rationales that drive the structured and unstructured migrant<sup>4</sup> ministries of some South African churches are limited in many and different ways. Firstly, some church leaders in South Africa premise and justify their theological rationales for their structured and unstructured migrant ministries on less relevant biblical texts (Magezi 2018:314–316). Secondly, some current South African churches do not have structured migrant ministries due to their arguably skewed theological rationales (Magezi 2018:316–320).

Likewise, Adedibu's research (2016), which examined the responses of European-based African Pentecostal churches to the Syrian refugee crisis, alludes to the identified challenge. The study explored the involvement of, amongst others, the Church of England, the Methodist and Catholic churches in responding to the refugee crisis in Europe (despite the declining influence of Christianity in Europe). However, the African Pentecostal churches in Europe were criticised for responding to the crisis by welcoming their kith and kin from Africa at the expense of migrants, particularly refugees from other continents or countries (Adedibu 2016:263, 276). Stated differently, the African Pentecostal churches in the identified host communities seem not to be eager to embrace strangers from outside their faith communities (Adedibu 2016:273, 275). Together with Adedibu (2016:278), it is argued that this problem can be considered as an inward looking rather than an inward-outward-looking theology. The latter theology looks out for the needs of refugees both in and beyond church spaces. Regardless of how the African Pentecostal churches in Europe justify their practices, this article argues that their responses reflect poor theology.

It is also argued, in agreement with Adedibu (2016:279), that the African Pentecostal churches in Europe should look after all needy people, regardless of their religious faith and ethnic backgrounds, to obey the extensive biblical teaching of God. In substantiation, the above school of thought is also expressed in the 2010 Lausanne Movement that was held in Cape Town as the Evangelical Churches Call and Commitment to Confession of Faith and Action, which declared that:

We encourage Christians in host nations which have immigrant communities of other religious backgrounds to bear counter-cultural witness to the love of Christ in deed and word, by obeying the extensive biblical commands to love the stranger, defend the cause of the foreigner, visit the prisoner, practise hospitality, build friendships, invite into our homes, and provide help and services (Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 24:17; Ruth 2; Job 29:16; Matthew 25:35–36; Luke 10:25–37; 14:12–14; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2–3; 1 Peter 4:9). (n.p.)

Given these theological convictions, it is argued that lack of a properly worked out theology of migration presents an institutional challenge for the church, as not all churches are

4. For in-depth understanding of structured and unstructured church migrant ministries, one should read Magezi (2018:305–321).

committed to responding effectively to the challenges faced by migrants, particularly refugees. Therefore, these various theological positions on migration within the church as an institution make it difficult for the UNHCR to fully integrate some churches in its responses to refugee crises.

### Legal barriers

There is an emerging assertion that prospects of meaningful cooperation between the UNHCR and some churches are hampered by some church leaders' lack of understanding of the legal issues that pertain to migrants, particularly refugees (Goodall 2015:17–18). For instance, due to monetary limitations, some churches fail to offer shelter to homeless migrants; therefore, individual congregants resort to accommodating them in their private homes, whilst other churches turn church buildings into safe havens for refugees (Goodall 2015:17–18).

However, one of the key challenges is that some of the migrants, particularly refugees, who are hosted in private homes and church premises, would have entered the host countries illegally and would be at the risk of being deported should the government authorities know about their whereabouts (Goodall 2015:17–18). In other instances, at the Johannesburg Central Methodist Church in South Africa, Bishop Paul Verryn was accused of breaking city by-laws by accommodating illegal migrants – some of whom ended up getting involved in criminal activities (Mail & Guardian 2010).

In other words, by sheltering vulnerable illegal migrants who should be deported, some churches inadvertently break state laws. Consequently, some of these churches are raided by the police, who arrest all the illegal migrants and facilitate their deportation (Goodall 2015). In the view of this article, the implication of the aforesaid issue is that some churches or church leaders lack understanding of the law or wilfully disregard the government structures when dealing with migration issues as exemplified by the case of Bishop Paul Verryn of the Methodist Church in South Africa (Mail & Guardian 2010).

It can be argued that the situation as discussed above, presents a barrier that possibly hinders the UNHCR from effectively integrating churches in its response to refugees' challenges. The church is expected to align its migrant ministries with the migration laws and structures of the country and the UNHCR. At this juncture, it is acknowledged that many churches are preoccupied with the primary concern of providing material or physical support to vulnerable migrants, particularly refugees. However, the provision of such support should be complemented by mechanisms for verifying the immigration statuses of the migrants, so that those who would be in the country illegally could be referred to relevant government structures for further assistance.

The view of this article is that the church can effectively implement the immigration status verification process by working in conjunction with the UNHCR, as the agency has

the requisite legal expertise. It is therefore important for the UNHCR to come on board and capacitate the church to align with the relevant migration laws and procedures when responding to refugees' challenges. The need to capacitate the church is highlighted in the first formal partnership note of 2012 between faith communities and the UNHCR (2014), which underscores that:

UNHCR staff reported that partnering with local faith communities can become a source of frustration and misunderstanding when the latter lack familiarity with the Office's processes and procedures, including its strategic priorities and notions of risk and vulnerability, or when they may simply not have the desire to serve as 'implementing partners'. (p. 9)

### Financial limitations

The church's efforts to address migrants' needs were always inadequate because of resource limitations. In qualitative research conducted in South Africa, Magezi (2018:278ff) reveals that lack of funding is one of the major problems that hinder the church's efforts to meet the physical needs of the migrants. Some churches in Africa, particularly in South Africa, are doing their best to address the legal documentation challenges of migrants as well as providing them with cooked meals or food parcels (Magezi 2018:278ff.). Nevertheless, such interventions are constrained by limited finance (Magezi 2018:278ff.). As a result of such constraints, the church struggles to provide migrants with shelter, let alone afford to help them with permit application and renewal fees or transport money to get to their respective destinations (Magezi 2018:278ff.).

One can argue now that the Johannesburg Central Methodist Church, led by Paul Verryn, is a good example of the churches that lacked funding to provide migrants, particularly refugees, with appropriate shelter (Mail & Guardian 2010). Because of financial challenges, Bishop Verryn turned the church building into a sanctuary for refugees. Individual Christians also resorted to using their respective homes to house refugees, because the church alone could not support that ministry (Mail & Guardian 2010). The latter solution can potentially harm church members as they open their doors to unknown strangers (i.e. church members may not know everything about the refugees' backgrounds and characters).

A considerable number of scholars such as Verasamy (2020:n.p.), Burger (2020), Afolaranmi (2020:169), Msibi (2020) and Boorstein (2020:n.p.) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has financially affected the churches in Africa and beyond. This interlinks with Mbunge's assertion (2020:1809) that the pandemic has negatively affected the economies of many countries, including South Africa, due to 'the closure of international borders, global demand meltdown, supply disruptions, [and the] dramatic scaling down of human and industrial activities during lockdown'. Haleem and Javaid (2020:1) concur with Mbunge (2020) and note that 'COVID-19 has rapidly affected our day to day life, businesses, [and] disrupted the world trade and movements'. The drastic

changes that were instituted to manage the spread of COVID-19 resulted in millions of South Africans, both in the formal and informal economic sectors, losing their jobs and income (Khambule 2021:380-396). By July 2020, three million South Africans had lost their jobs (Tswanya 2020:n.p.; Businesstech 2020:n.p.). Businesstech (2020) further cautions that South Africans should not expect the jobs that were lost due to the pandemic to bounce back soon:

The second wave of the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) covering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on the South African jobs market shows that none of the approximately 3 million lost jobs since the onset of the pandemic had returned by June. Between February and April 2020, the wave 1 Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) data indicates that the percentage of those not employed increased from 43% to 53% (13.7 million people to 16.5 million). Wave 2 data shows that the number has not changed from April to June, despite the easing of lockdown. The evidence to date suggests that these losses may be long lasting. (n.p.)

Having established the preceding, I concur with Boorstein's assertion (2020:n.p.) that church finances were adversely affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, given that some Christians were amongst the people who lost jobs or had their salaries reduced, as companies strove to survive the effects of the pandemic. Consequently, some of the affected members were not able to contribute their weekly offerings, which play a key role in advancing the work of the church (Boorstein 2020:n.p.). This is supported by Msibi (2020) who states that, when the national lockdown came into effect, church finances became unstable.

To operate effectively, most churches rely on donations, Sunday collections and tithe. However, due to the lockdown and its attendant effects, these sources of revenue became scarce. To worsen the situation, Burger (2020) states that many churches are in a financial crisis and cannot afford to pay utility, ministry and salary bills, because they have not been getting adequate donations, as the donors themselves have also been adversely impacted by the pandemic. In the South African context, Verasamy (2020:n.p.) reports that, although Reverend Thembelani who heads the Mamelodi Baptist Church was confident that the church would be able to adapt to the new normal, the income of the church decreased significantly since the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown. Some Mamelodi Baptist Church's care ministries such as the provision of shelter to people from an informal settlement whose shacks been swept away by the floods in December 2020, were negatively impacted by the dwindling revenues.

There is a growing concern that many churches will not survive the financial impact of COVID-19 (Boorstein 2020:n.p.). Echoing the foregoing concerns, Verasamy (2020:n.p.) predicts thus that 'The longer the lockdown takes, the worse it's going to be for us. Some churches have even started saying that they cannot pay pastors' salaries.' In line with Verasamy (2020), Burger (2020) states that many churches are in financial crises, because they have not been getting

adequate donations to cover bills and staff salaries. Indeed, this clearly indicates that the outbreak of COVID-19 has had such a negative impact on the church's finances that some African churches had to resort to using digital platforms to ask for donations (Msibi 2020).

In recognition of the discussion considered at this point, one can argue that the church's incapacity to address the material needs of vulnerable people such as the migrants within church and non-church spaces, was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, the pandemic further hampered the UNHCR's efforts towards integrating the church in its responses to migration challenges, because, due to financial limitations, most churches cannot afford to meet the material needs of migrants, particularly refugees, within and outside their church spaces. One is justified to encourage the church to collaborate with various stakeholders that have financial capacity to address the physical and documentation needs of the migrants, particularly refugees.

### **Unequal power relations between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the church**

There is also another emerging factor of power inequality between large organisations such as the UNHCR and the church. This inequality is expressed in the assessment of the UNHCR partnership note with faith, which states that 'One factor is the inherent inequality of power between a large international [organisation] and a small local institution' (UNHCR 2014:9). In this case, the UNHCR is considered as a large international organisation, whilst churches are considered as small local institutions. Some of the interventions that the UNHCR is mandated to perform, include assistance with voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country and many more others (UNHCR 2011a:1-13). The UNHCR as a large international organisation has adequate financial resources to ensure the protection of forcibly displaced people across the globe (UNHCR 2016).

Based on the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, the UNHCR is an international organisation that promotes the basic human rights of refugees and ensures that they will only be returned to their countries of origin whenever the conditions become stable again (UNHCR 2016). It also helps with integrating refugees in the states of asylum or resettling them in third countries (UNHCR 2016). As indicated before, the UNHCR is able to carry out such tasks, because it has the financial muscle. The agency is financed through voluntary contributions from individual governments and the European Union (UNHCR 2021:n.p.). The latter contributes 86% to the budget of the UNHCR, while individuals and the private sector account for 10% (UNHCR 2021:n.p.).

Furthermore, while the UNHCR has an international legal mandate to protect refugees, the church does not possess such legal power (UNHCR 2014:9). The church can only discharge its responses and approaches to the refugee crisis

with restraint, as it has to submit to and be guided by the rules and regulations of refugee protection that are enshrined in the various conventions of the UNHCR (2014:9). However, besides the lack of legal power, many churches do not have the financial and human resources to follow the requirements and procedures of the UNHCR in addressing refugee issues.

In terms of human resources, the church seldom affords to hire experts who understand the legal frameworks, procedures and guidelines of the UNHCR in addressing the refugee challenges. It can be submitted that, when the church and other faith-based organisations fail to follow the right legal procedures and regulations when responding to refugee challenges, there is a temptation to label them as blatantly uncompliant (UNHCR 2014:9). Yet, in most instances, churches are not wilfully defiant, but they lack the legal expertise and financial capacity to execute their responses to the refugee crisis (Magezi 2018:242, 279–283, 325). Thus, this scenario hinders the establishment of effective partnerships between the UNHCR and the church.

In recognising the church as an effective partner, the UNHCR should understand the existing imbalance of power between itself and the church. In this way the former will be able to support the latter with appropriate expertise to capacitate migrant ministries with the legal frameworks as well as the guidelines and requirements of the refugee agency. This would enable the UNHCR and the church to establish a long-term working relationship.

At the same time, the church should always understand that, as it responds to refugee crises, it should be cognisant of its limited human and financial resources and legal understanding of related UNHCR procedures and requirements. Therefore, it should consistently seek capacitation from the UNHCR to enhance its intervention as an effective UNHCR partner. This article contends that all migration-related challenges beg for the development of a more formal relationship and positive cooperation between the church and the UNHCR, which is not currently the case (UNHCR 2014).

### **Rotation of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees members hampers the progress of positive cooperation**

It is important to note that the UNHCR has a clear mandatory mobility policy, which is also termed *staff rotation*, for its international professional staff (UNHCR 2015:16). The rotation of staff bolsters the capacity of the UNHCR to deliver on its mandate, because it warrants the international disposal of professional workforce to respond to the needs of migrants, particularly refugees (UNHCR 2015:16). This also means that staff members have the opportunity to rotate in places or areas with 'difficult living and working conditions'. The UNHCR (2015) describes this system of staff rotation, which is indispensable in the execution of its directive, as follows:

... [I]t ensures the availability of staff worldwide to respond to the needs of people of concern, even in duty stations with

difficult living and working conditions. Operationally, the rotation system brings added complexity to the responsibility of managing, caring for and supporting UNHCR staff, yet it is contingent upon a degree of burden sharing among staff. This People Strategy first commits to ensure that rotation is implemented in a fair and transparent manner. In addition, it will seek to implement rotation in a way that builds skills and experiences that are supportive of career development and is aligned with evolving [*organisational*] needs. (p. 16)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2014), in *Partnership Note on faith-based organisations, local faith communities and faith leaders* analysed the challenges that it is facing in its partnership with the churches in responding to migration crisis. Here, UNHCR notes that the churches indicated the issue of staff rotation as a serious challenge to the positive corporation between UNHCR and religious faith organisations, including churches. The UNHCR (2014:9) succinctly puts it this way: '... staff rotation may affect UNHCR's institutional memory and presence in the deep field, with the risk of calling into question long-standing Positive Corporation'.

One can argue that the churches' responses to migrants' challenges can be adversely affected by the UNHCR staff rotation policy. In other words, some churches would have formed positive cooperation with some UNHCR professional staff. However, the mandatory mobility international professional staff policy of the refugee agency can disrupt the positive initiatives that the church would have already established with the former UNHCR staff. This negatively affects the continuity and effectiveness of the positive UNHCR-church initiatives and interventions. In other words, the church constantly deals with new staff who may take time to match the positive cooperation initiated by their predecessors. This slows down the progress of the already existing UNHCR-church integrated interventions to refugees' challenges as well as the existing positive institutional cooperation relationships.

### **The nature of the relationship between the church and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' responses to refugee crises**

Miles and Villiers (2010:149–159; cf. Magezi & Mutowa 2018) highlight the lack of understanding of the nature of the relationship between the churches and non-governmental organisations as a major challenge. In contextualising Miles and Villiers' concern (2010) to the current study, the following question can be posed: How are the responses of the church to refugee crises different from those of non-governmental organisations and the UNHCR? This concern arises from the notion that the churches operate from a spiritual and faith perspective, whilst the UNHCR operates from a framework that is informed by refugee policies. In this way, when formulating policies and responses to refugee crises, the UNHCR should recognise that the church's responses to refugee challenges go beyond merely availing its physical or material resources such as church buildings, money and food

to refugees. That is, the spiritual or faith and healing role of the church should not be considered in a superficial way nor referred to in passing, but it should also be at the centre of all possible responses to refugee crises.

For instance, in reference to the aspects of Jeremiah's letters to the exiles in Babylon, Magezi (2018:145) notes that the message in Jeremiah 29<sup>7</sup> yields rich insights about ministering to refugees who may have been painfully uprooted and suffered significant losses in the process.

By using Jeremiah 29, the church makes it possible for refugees to draw comfort from focusing on and trusting in God's ability to make all things work together for the achievement of all divine plans (Magezi 2018:145). Thus, the assertion seems to suggest the need for churches to also respond to refugee challenges from explicitly faith and spiritual perspectives, which the UNHCR and policy makers should respect and apply without bending backwards for relevance.

Notwithstanding the existing barriers and challenges, it is apparent that there are opportunities for strengthening integrated UNHCR-church interventions as discussed in the forthcoming section.

## Recommendations to address the barriers

In view of the identified barriers to the UNHCR-church integration in responding to migration crises, the following recommendations from an ecclesiological perspective can be advanced:

- Churches need to develop thoroughly worked out theologies of migration to drive their migrant ministries. As indicated already, some churches do not have internal and external migrant ministries, because they do not have solid migration theologies (Magezi 2018:236–321). Bush (n.d.:1) argues that the practice of the church is an expression of its theology of practice. Likewise, in his research titled *Contextual theology: Drama of our times*, Matheny (2011:xv) concurs with the recommendation when he argues from a contextual theological approach that clergies, pastors and theologians should always be cognisant of the fact that '... good theology keeps the church in touch with reality'. Having advanced the foregoing argument, it is now argued that it is not biblically justified for churches to claim to be God-centred and Christocentric and yet have limited theologies that deter them from joining hands with other organisations such as the UNHCR in responding to migrants', specifically refugees' challenges (cf. Magezi 2018:236–321, 27–146).<sup>5</sup>
- Secondly, the UNHCR and the church should formalise their relationship, as this will empower the latter to

<sup>5</sup>For more information on churches that do not have external migrant ministries because of limited theologies as well as for comprehensive theologies of migration that drive the internal and external migrant ministries of the Church, one should read Magezi (2018:236–321) and Magezi (2018:27–146), respectively.

address the needs of outside its jurisdiction as well as beyond its financial capacity. Emerging from the discussion above is that many churches lack the financial muscle to address some of the migrants' needs. Therefore, formal relationships with clear memoranda of understanding will supplement the churches' limitations in the proposed regards.

- There should be a clear stipulation of the nature of the relationship between the church and the UNHCR. At one level, the latter operates from a spiritual and faith perspective, whilst the former operates from a framework that is informed by migration and refugee policies. In this way, the UNHCR should not have an inadequate view of the role that the church can play in responding to migrants', particularly refugees', challenges. In my view, the church's contribution in responding to migrants' challenges goes beyond merely availing its physical resources such as buildings. Instead, the spiritual or faith and healing role of the churches is critical; hence the UNHCR should not view it lightly.
- If possible, the UNHCR's mobility policy for its international staff members should be reviewed, because, as staff are rotated, the progression of positive cooperation that would have been initiated between the UNHCR and the church would be negatively affected. The policy also has an adverse impact on the UNHCR's institutional memory and presence in the deep field.
- The UNHCR should capacitate faith communities (including churches) to familiarise with its processes, regulations and procedures when addressing the challenges faced by migrants, particularly refugees.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article presents the UNHCR as a United Nations agency that is mandated to safeguard refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. However, in discharging its tasks of protecting migrants, particularly refugees, the UNHCR involves many stakeholders, including the church. In view of the given background, this article critically assesses the barriers that inhibit effective UNHCR-church integration in responding to migrants' challenges. This article concludes by offering the following recommendations from an ecclesiological perspective to address the identified barriers:

1. The UNHCR should capacitate the church to become familiar with its processes, regulations and procedures in addressing refugee challenges.
2. The UNHCR should consider ceasing its rotation of international members to maintain consistency in the initiated UNHCR-church positive corporations.
3. There should be a formal relationship between the UNHCR and the church in order to stipulate the nature of the relationship in responding to the challenges faced by migrants, particularly refugees.
4. The church should develop comprehensive theologies of migration to drive its migrant ministries.

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

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### Data availability

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### 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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