

# ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THE CHURCH

**How can the church be a responsible, active and loving support to asylum seekers and refugees in our communities?** In late November 2015, a group of Christians from across the Black Country and beyond gathered together to consider this important question.

Transforming Communities Together, a joint venture between Church Urban Fund and the Diocese of Lichfield, worked with Boaz Trust, Refugee Action, Restore Birmingham, Walsall Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Association, and Wolverhampton Refugee and Migrant Centre to organise the day, which was funded by Tearfund.

The aim of this event was to question our assumptions about the 'refugee crisis', learn from refugees themselves about their own experiences, better understand the complexities of the asylum process, and hear from the people and organisations who are already working to resource, equip and support refugees as they become neighbours and friends.

This paper is part of the legacy of the conference. It consists of summaries of the talks delivered on the day in order to share this learning across England and beyond.



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### WHY IS THIS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR THE CHURCH?

Displacement is a theme that appears throughout our biblical narrative. A quick glance at Genesis tells us story after story of heroes of the faith displaced by war and violence, natural disasters, famine and persecution. The New Testament provides even more examples: Jesus, Mary and Joseph were displaced by political persecution, fleeing to Egypt for refuge, and the Early Church experienced religious persecution, which displaced them 'throughout Judea and Samaria'. Displacement is not a new phenomenon, but rather is written deeply into the identity of our faith.

As Christians we have a biblical imperative to welcome the stranger. The writer of Hebrews compels us to 'Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.' (Hebrews 13:1-3)

Furthermore, we are told that when we welcome the stranger we welcome God himself. 'The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:40). Our Christian faith compels us to welcome those who are displaced, to show them hospitality and to extend to them the same love that we would give to the most honoured guest.

### UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

#### Who is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been granted refugee status in the UK. This means they have been legally recognised, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, as someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

#### Who is an asylum seeker?

Asylum seekers are those who have fled their home country, have claimed 'a well-founded fear of being persecuted', and are awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status.

#### The **facts** about displacement<sup>1</sup>

- There are almost 60 million displaced people in the world.<sup>2</sup>
- About 20 million of these displaced people have crossed borders.
- About 38 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs), displaced within their own country.
- About 2 million are asylum seekers, awaiting status decisions.
- The UK is home to less than 1% of the world's refugees.
- About 86% of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in camps in the neighbouring countries to the one from which they are fleeing.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated these stats are drawn from The Truth about Asylum, produced by the Refugee Council.

<sup>2</sup> BBC News online, June 2015, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-33178035](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-33178035)

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### The asylum system in the UK<sup>3</sup>

On arrival in the UK, those who wish to seek asylum must present themselves to the authorities as soon as possible. After submitting their application, each individual will have a meeting with an immigration officer (known as a 'screening') and then an asylum interview with a case worker.

While waiting for a decision on their status, asylum seekers are supported by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This support entitles them to housing, though they are not allowed to choose where this will be and are often allotted 'hard to let' properties, and a cash allowance of £36.95 for each person in the household to cover all essentials including food, transport and clothing. During this process, asylum seekers are not allowed to work, and adults are not able to access free education, such as English classes, until they have been in the UK for six months.

Asylum seekers can apply for further support while their asylum application and any subsequent appeal is being considered. This is often referred to as Section 95 support (defined in Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999) and can be used for subsistence and accommodation costs only.

An asylum seeker who has no dependent children at the time of a final refusal decision will have their support terminated 21 days after the decision is made. They may then be eligible for Section 4 support. If the Home Office agree to Section 4 support, they usually provide basic self-catered accommodation and some money; this is not given in cash but is loaded onto the 'Azure' support card which a number of shops such as Asda and Tesco will accept for payment.<sup>4</sup>

Asylum seekers have to report to an immigration officer regularly and can be detained at any point. This creates deep uncertainty, and many asylum seekers experience feelings of hopelessness, despair, isolation, depression and fear as they wait for their status to be determined.

The majority of asylum claims are rejected. In 2014, just under 25,000 people claimed asylum in the UK and 59% were initially refused refugee status.<sup>5</sup> However, many decisions are overturned by courts during appeal. In 2014, a majority of refused applicants lodged appeals and 28% of those were successful.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Truth About Asylum, Refugee Council

<sup>4</sup> Asylum Support, Refugee Council Information, 2013 <http://bit.ly/1nshKnq>

<sup>5</sup> These numbers include only 'main applicants', excluding dependents who are family members accompanying the principal applicant. Migration in the UK: Asylum, The Migration Observatory, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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## The 'moving-on' period: the realities of being granted refugee status

When a person is granted refugee status, they are given the same rights as UK citizens. These include the right to work, the right to access public funds (benefits) and the right to education.

Once a person is granted refugee status however, the future is not plain sailing. Moving from asylum support to mainstream benefits and employment is a process fraught with difficulties and complexities, and usually takes much longer than the 28-day 'grace period' given by the government. The result is that many new refugees become destitute as they make the transition from asylum support to the mainstream system.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, many refugees are only given permission to remain in the UK for five years, and can have their case reviewed at any time. This status makes it difficult for refugees to plan for their future, or to feel safe or settled.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

*'It is a completely different environment, a different culture, different language. It was really hard, everything was new... but I have not felt alone in this city.'*

Ahmed<sup>8</sup> sharing his story of finding a church family in Wolverhampton after fleeing religious persecution

In response to the recent increase in the number of people seeking to enter Europe, and the difficulties and desperation people experience along the way, there has been an outpouring of concern from churches and communities wanting to love their neighbour, regardless of their origin.

This compassion is welcome and should be encouraged, however, before taking action it is important to consider and explore the following questions:

- Who is already working to support asylum seekers and refugees in your area?
- Can you partner with them, or ask for their expertise about what gaps exist and how you and your church could help to fill them?
- What do asylum seekers and refugees in your area really need? Is it clothing or food parcels, a welcoming space to meet other people, or perhaps volunteering opportunities with an existing organisation?
- Have you spent time talking to people, hearing their stories and understanding their experiences?

<sup>7</sup> Asylum Aid, Unsustainable: The quality of initial decision-making in women's asylum claims, British Red Cross, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Name changed to protect his identity.

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### CASE STUDIES OF RESPONSES

**Sanctus, at St Marks in Stoke**, provides hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers with a friendly face, a listening ear, help with bureaucracy, emergency accommodation, food and clothing, translation, as well as spiritual care.

See [www.sanctusstmarks.co.uk](http://www.sanctusstmarks.co.uk)



**Places of Welcome** is a growing network of small community groups, each with a vision to see their communities become more welcoming places. Everyone is welcomed, whatever their background or circumstance, meeting a friendly face, getting a cup of tea and having a good conversation.

See [www.placesofwelcome.org](http://www.placesofwelcome.org)



**Pilot English language courses** are being run for asylum seekers and refugees by a partnership of the University of Wolverhampton's International Academy and Chaplaincy, the Wolverhampton Refugee & Migrant Centre and Transforming Communities Together.



**The Rainbow Project**, with the support of the Diocese of Nottingham, provides practical help to destitute asylum seekers including visiting and providing food parcels, as well as befriending, signposting and providing advocacy support with claims. See [www.nottinghamrainbowproject.org.uk](http://www.nottinghamrainbowproject.org.uk)



**Open Door (North East)** is a Christian charity that provides holistic support for asylum seekers and refugees living in Teesside. It provides crisis support for those left destitute, as well as a number of services to help refugees rebuild their lives and create sustainable livelihoods here in the UK.

See [www.opendoornortheast.com](http://www.opendoornortheast.com)



**West End Refugee Service** in Newcastle-upon-Tyne offers practical help, advice and advocacy to refugees and asylum seekers through its daily drop-in advice sessions, as well as home visits for those who are less mobile. Emotional support is also offered through an accredited befriending scheme and their 'Time to Talk' programme where clients have the opportunity to talk to trained volunteer listeners.

See [www.wers.org.uk](http://www.wers.org.uk)



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### FIND OUT MORE

#### Housing Justice:

Models of accommodation and support for migrants with no recourse to public funds.

[http://www.housingjustice.org.uk/data/\\_\\_resources/648/Models-of-accommodation-and-support-for-migrants-with-NRPF.pdf](http://www.housingjustice.org.uk/data/__resources/648/Models-of-accommodation-and-support-for-migrants-with-NRPF.pdf)

#### Diocese of Canterbury:

Five ways to respond to the refugee crisis.

<https://www.canterburydiocese.org/refugee-crisis-five-ways-to-respond/>

#### The Boaz Trust:

Engage: Support for Asylum seekers and refugees (with links to further articles and resources).

<http://boaztrust.org.uk/2015/09/04/engage-support-asylum-seekers-and-refugees>

#### Tearfund:

A prayer guide for small groups and a drafted letter to MPs.

[http://www.tearfund.org/en/latest/middle\\_east\\_emergency\\_appeal/](http://www.tearfund.org/en/latest/middle_east_emergency_appeal/)

#### The Truth About Asylum:

Facts and figures about Refugees and Asylum seekers in the UK, provided by the Refugee Council.

[http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_research/the\\_truth\\_about\\_asylum](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum)