

**A DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH REFUGEES  
SATURDAY 29<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2003**

**SOLIDARITY WITH REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS –  
MOVING STORIES**

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For us Christians, all people are made in the image of God and therefore must be treated with equal respect and care. Shamefully our society today has become one where “asylum seekers and refugees have become both feared and vilified.

Asylum and immigration have become a major domestic and international issue. Everyone from the media to Joe Bloggs down your way has an opinion on people seeking asylum. Often we don't hear the asylum seekers and refugees speaking for themselves.

I think your meeting today and the theme ‘Solidarity with Refugees’, as you commemorate the Vatican World Migration Day is apt. The stories you are sharing are stories told by asylum seekers and refugees themselves. They describe why they fled their own countries and the way in which they were degraded by the treatment they received when they arrived in UK. Instead of holy respite, they move from torture to torture, what Christians may call “crucifixion to crucifixion”.

Does it really matter what we say about asylum seekers and refugees? Does it affect them? There are many untruths pedalled about asylum seekers:

- 1) They take our job. Through positive discrimination white people go to the back of the queue for jobs or miss out on promotion.
- 2) Big business encourages immigration because cheap labour helps to keep down wages and hard working locals suffer.
- 3) Refugees and asylum seekers are all scroungers and social security cheats. This does not all tie up, of course, but sadly many people believe it.

Of course we may want to believe that we are all good people and none of us would intentionally cause offence or distress to another person. But it happens often enough that casual remarks or actions do cause distress and harm. When we call people “bogus”, when we say, “we are being swamped”, when we say, “they are taking our jobs”. We demonise them and blame them for the ills of our society. All this is plain rubbish and sheer racist rhetoric.

Let me tell you the story of Mohammed. He is a medical doctor and was a Chief Medical Officer of a hospital in his native Algiers. Mohammed treated and cared for many victims of torture. He expressed his horror and publicly spoke against state brutality. His thanks for so doing was a visit from the army in the middle of the night. They forced him to watch as the army slit people's throats and forced their relatives to drink their blood. Mohammed was unhurt but really shaken.

In 1996 he fled to England to seek refuge. He told his story to 600 people at Westminster Central Hall in London. At the end he simply said “those who say I came here for £59.00 a week social security benefit are so wrong.” He broke down and cried. You could have heard a pin drop. We were all stunned by this story.

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All human beings are worthy of respect, dignity and love. But racism - the false belief that different races exist and that one's own race is superior to others – blights the lives of many millions of people throughout the world. Racism is a sin – it is sin.

God's people both as individuals and as churches and gatherings such as this today must challenge and fight racism in its various forms. This includes the fight against:

- (a) Unconscious prejudices as well as those which are conscious;
- (b) Actions which are unintentionally racist as well as those which are deliberate; and
- (c) The behaviour of institutions and organisations as well as the behaviour of individuals within them.

Under international law, anyone has the right to seek asylum and may be granted refugee status. Refugees have divergent background, variety of skills and experiences and seek asylum for different reasons. It is thus important not to generalise. Recent Government figures reveal that refugees make only 0.3% of the British population, i.e. 165,000 out of 55 million people in the UK.

We have a responsibility and duty to show respect, treat others with compassion and to deal with them with sensitivity. We also have to bear in mind that refugees and asylum seekers' perceptions and experiences of racism are different from those of white people.

It is right and it behoves us that we maintain an atmosphere of honesty and trust, so that we can talk openly about racism and how it develops and operates in our daily dealings with refugees and asylum seekers. The government and those in authority should deal swiftly and sensitively with asylum issues and problems, which arise therewith.

It does not help when our newspapers report immigration issues in negative terms and derogatory language. In a recent case a judge ruled that "Refugees can be denied state handouts of food and shelter". This means that if foreigners do not claim asylum as soon as they arrive in Britain, they may be barred from receiving help. However because of this case the Court of Appeal then ruled that "Authorities must step in only in cases of extreme suffering". Decisions like these outrage many and human rights lawyers say this means that the Government does not have to help the destitute and the desperate. This ruling came in a test case as the Government sought to clarify its human rights obligations following the introduction of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act.

The Act, which came on to the statute book in January 2003, stops refugees who make late claims from receiving state aid, e.g. a Malaysian asylum-seeker arrived in March and had to sleep at Heathrow Airport for almost eight weeks because he failed to apply for asylum immediately.

A panel of three judges said that the Government was justified in refusing him assistance because he had not suffered inhumane treatment. However they added that support must be offered to avoid severe suffering. The Home Office welcomed the judges' decision but the asylum seeker's lawyer considered an appeal. The lawyer's argument was that if this is allowed "this would be the first time in history that a court has declared that the British Government does not have a duty to help a destitute person.

There are several difficulties to do with the asylum policies and system in this country. Let me list some of them, the ones that I consider important and say where some of the difficulties lie:

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1. **Health Needs**

There has been little realistic planning for the health needs of asylum seekers and there is a lack of resources. Inequalities in health linked to poverty persist, but also, the health of asylum seekers is affected by temporary accommodation and high mobility. It is therefore important to do health checks on all asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers have unequal access to health care for the following reasons:

- They may not know how the system works or be unaware of the range of available services.
- The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act took away the automatic right to free prescriptions and sight tests. Now people must apply by filling out a complex form of fourteen pages in English.
- They are more likely to be refused registration with a GP despite having a right to register and use the full range of NHS services.
- The level of social security support makes eating a balanced diet difficult. More breakfast clubs and homework clubs, which provide food, would help).

2. **Psychological and Emotional Needs**

Asylum Seekers experience many different stresses but it is important not to stereotype them as experiences and reactions differ. Most cope, some are vulnerable and a few may have disturbed behaviour.

They may have lost family, friends, home, belongings, familiar surroundings and lifestyle. They may also have experienced war, separation, a shortage of necessities and fear of discovery, as well as hostility and material deprivation in their new life. Changes that affect them include language, lifestyle, living standards, status and relationship with parents and children.

Risk factors associated with these changes include repeated, stressful experiences, inconsistency in carers, poor housing, not discussing traumatic events, school problems, bullying and isolation.

3. **Communication**

(a) **Understanding Differences in Culture**

Good communication is necessary for understanding asylum seekers/refugees. This is fostered by being open and interested despite the difficulties involved. Cultural sensitivity and an awareness of our own attitudes are paramount.

Western ideas about family are relatively individualistic emphasising the nuclear family and focussing on competition, individual achievement and independence. In Britain life is more privatised with fewer social networks.

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Asylum seeker families are often from societies based on extended family ties with mutual family duties and obligations. In many asylum seeker families youngsters are encouraged to put family first and to take early responsibility for childcare and household tasks. By comparison, western youngsters are afforded fewer responsibilities and more freedom.

(b) **Using Interpreters**

Asylum seeker communities are not homogenous. An interpreter who appears to be from the same community may not be trusted. Gender differences should also be considered.

Problems can arise if English or home languages are not spoken well, if good communication skills are lacking and when an interpreter is not sympathetic towards asylum seekers.

(4) **Education and Young People**

As large numbers of asylum seeker youngsters were being admitted to schools, the Educational Reform Act 1988 changed education policies making huge demands on teachers' time and energy. This and successive public expenditure cuts, makes it difficult to respond to needs of young asylum seekers.

Most youngsters come from countries where the education system is different with a more formal approach. Active learning compared to rote can seem strange. They may not have attended school before, or their schooling may have been interrupted by war or unrest. Many arrive in school mid term. Education is vital because it provides stability and normality, helping youngsters and adults rebuild their lives.

(a) **Difficulties**

Youngsters have varied needs but there are shared issues which include interrupted education, speaking little or no English on arrival, high geographical mobility in Britain, financial hardship, little career advice tailored to their needs and rules that prevent access to hardship funds.

(5) **Racism**

There is much hostility towards asylum seekers. Factors contributing to this hostility include local tensions, no local consultation, high unemployment and bad housing, ill planned dispersal, negative and inaccurate media coverage and inflammatory statements by politicians, such as David Blunkett's call for separate education for asylum seeker youngsters and reference to "swamping" our schools.

Racial prejudice is characterised by negative thoughts and feelings about a particular group. Racism translates this into actions, in which people belonging to that group are treated less favourably. Institutional racism is embedded in the culture of institutions and agencies of society such as the police force and the education system. It is very damaging but is often hidden and almost impossible to prove. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry focussed on institutional racism in the police force and made recommendations for public institutions.

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Asylum seekers, having already experienced oppression and violence, find racism towards them is commonplace.

Many crimes against asylum seekers are not reported because of lack of English, fear of police and fear of reprisals. Adults may be afraid to leave the house or go out alone. Families who already have high geographical mobility want to move to areas perceived as safer. Pupils stay away, drop out, change school, causing further disruption to education as well as distress. Some get into trouble for defending themselves and retaliating.

6. **Deportations**

The Asylum Act 1999 was intended to overhaul the immigration system. However its policies, rooted in hostility, suspicion and racism are restrictive and punitive with large numbers of deportations and fewer appeals. Although the Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone, including asylum seekers and refugees, should be treated humanely and with dignity, this cannot be the case when people live in constant fear of removal and when families who have put down roots are being broken up.

Individuals and families are often forcibly removed prior to deportation in ways that causes distress to many people.

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Let me finish by reading you a poem titled Judgement as our prayer and reminder as to what our duty and responsibility ought to be as we think of asylum seekers and refugees. This is the story of a very famous Man and I am sure you will recognise who he is as I read along.

**JUDGEMENT**

He stood before the court in nondescript clothes,  
No papers, no fixed address.  
The judge cleared his throat,  
“Have you anything to say before I pass sentence?”  
What might have been his answer?  
Had the prisoner the gift of speech  
And the court the gift of hearing?

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“I am condemned because your law allows no place for me.  
My crimes I freely admit:-  
I am homeless, seeking shelter  
Where I may rear my family in modest decency.  
I am stateless, seeking country  
Where I may belong by right in God’s good earth.  
I am destitute, claiming a share of the wealth  
That is our common heritage.  
I am a sinner, needing aid from fellow sinners.

“You will dispose of me according to your law,  
but you will not so easily dispose of him  
who owns me citizen in his kingdom?  
He frowns on crimes your law condones;  
Pride, selfishness and greed, Self-righteousness,  
the worship of all things material  
and the refusal to acknowledge me as a brother.

“By your law I stand condemned;  
but one day you must answer  
to the master of us all  
for the havoc caused by your law  
in his realm”.

Let me offer some reminders which we do well to acknowledge and act upon. We must be clear and demand that our treatment and response to the voices of asylum seekers and refugees are more humanitarian, compassionate and fact-based. What makes this vital is the additional level of suspicion and vilification created by the threat of “terrorism”, part of which today falls unjustly and heavily on asylum applicants.

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Talk based on ideas and references from:

- (1) Redeeming the Time –All God’s People Challenge to Racism (June 2003): Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI)
- (2) Secondary School Age Asylum Seekers and Refugees - Their Needs - A Pilot Document, Irene A. Manatee, United Reformed Church (URC)
- (3) Asylum Voices – Experience of people seeking asylum in the UK (2003), Bradstock A and Trotman A: CTBI
- (4) Judgement - Churches Commission for Racial Justice (CCRJ) Prayer Sponsored by St James’s Church Piccadilly  
Reproduced from Turn But a Stone by Edmund Banyard, by kind permission of the National Christian Education Council
- (5) Metro Newspaper, Wednesday September 24, 2003, by Sarah Getty