

Winter 2008

JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

Reg. Charity 230165

MY LIFE IN THE UK

I came to the UK from West Africa in 2003 and claimed asylum.



I was not aware that, according to the law, I had to claim asylum as soon as I entered the country.

Because I delayed my asylum application by 2 days I was denied support (accommodation, money, clothes).

At Croydon, Migrant Helpline referred me to a church for hot food available to homeless and unemployed people. At night 12 of us were sleeping outside the church building on the floor for about two weeks. We did not know each other but misery brought us together.

Then I was referred to a solicitor and managed to get accommodation and later I started to get £35 a week support.

One day I met Brother Bernard at a meeting at the French Speaking African General Council. Because I had lost weight due to my situation, I appeared so skinny.

Brother Bernard visited me at my flat near Old Street Station and through him I came to know JRS, which at that time was based near Heathrow.

Some months later, my case was rejected. It was really scary to report to immigration services every week because I could have been removed from the UK or detained at any time.

Life was very difficult without being allowed to work and only having very little income from charities. Without money it was like living in prison.

Thank God, I was granted refugee status after the court hearing. It was a big relief.

The local authorities had then to provide me with accommodation and means to

me with accommodation and means to live. It has not been easy at all.

I did not receive the back-payment of benefits because I did not receive good information about this in time.

The job centre wanted to send me straight away to work without considering my poor English. Brother Bernard was there for me and advised me to learn English first. As I insisted, they eventually sent me to an English course for six months.

It was then that I met a Senegalese man who was a doctor. He directed me to a course intended for laboratory scientists and doctors who are refugees and have previous experience working in hospital or in healthcare to convert their degrees into ones recognised in the UK.

The course was available through a Church organisation, Praxis. Because of this I got a job.

Then I needed my family around me. So I applied for family reunion. My wife and three sons were denied the family reunion visa and we had to appeal this decision, which was not easy.

Fortunately, they finally got their visas and joined me in the UK this year. JRS supported me through my asylum claim and the family reunion process with moral and financial support.

Brother Bernard accompanied me to the court where I was so worried that they could take back my refugee status.

Sometimes I could not understand the judge and Bernard needed to explain what was being said to me.

My wife and children stayed in Cameroon for almost 2 years during the family reunion application and I needed to send the major part of my salary to them so that they could survive in a foreign country.

I cannot describe the joy of having my family around. I am overwhelmed.

I could no longer believe that one day

(cont. page3)

Voucher Exchange Scheme Update

Firstly we would like to thank all of you who support the voucher exchange scheme we operate at JRS. Many of you will know that some asylum seekers receive what is known as section 4 support – basically a form of support which is supermarket voucher based and has no cash element. We are currently exchanging over £7000 worth of these vouchers at face value a month. This of course we could not do without your help!

Unfortunately there are now changes afoot to the way that section 4 support is administered, which does not bode well for the asylum seekers.

Some asylum seekers are now receiving ASDA cards that are topped up every week. These cards cannot be passed on and there is a warning that to exchange these for cash is a breach of rules. (continue page 2)

**WE WISH YOU
A
MERRY
CHRISTMAS
AND
A
HAPPY
NEW YEAR**



THE FIRST DAY OF THE ADVOCACY COURSE

***Speak Out!** is a new advocacy programme we have for our refugee friends who want to be more involved with our advocacy work (in particular the awareness raising work we do). It has been put together with input from the refugees themselves and at their request.*

Diana is one of the administrators of the course. The course has been designed by Ged Clapson, communications officer of the British Province of the Jesuits, to meet the needs of the refugees. It will take place over three days – the first day, about which Diana writes, focused on presentation skills. The second on how to be interviewed for the radio. The third which is still to take place will look at how to write articles or interview other refugees so that their stories and experiences can be heard.

We are very grateful to the first small group of refugees who are taking part in the programme. They all have English as a second, third or even fourth or fifth language! They come for a range of countries and backgrounds and have experienced a lot of things during their time in the UK. We are particularly grateful that they are willing to share these experiences with others to try to develop a greater insight into how the asylum process in the UK works (or not).

If this goes well we hope to train another small group in 2009. We also hope to benefit from the new skills and experiences in developing our policy and lobbying work over the next couple of years.

I was introduced to the Advocacy course by Louise, the Director of JRS- UK. The first course took place on 22nd of October 2008. Ged Clapson was the course leader. There were 3 men and 3 women.

Each one of us chose the subject they wanted to talk about. I talked about destitution and life depending on vouchers. I also touched upon the benefit of granting permission to work to people who have been living in the country for 4 years and above.

We passed comments on the subjects presented and everyone was happy to have the opportunity to learn how to present a subject to an audience.

The course improved my presentation skills.

This has been beneficial for both my academic studies and work with JRS.

I have also gained self-confidence to be able to articulate the needs and difficulties of asylum seekers living on voucher support.

I would like to thank JRS and its supporters for the work they are doing for us, asylum seekers day by day, as well as the support for my education.

A big thank you to Ged for his time and his kindness.

Diana

VOUCHERS EXCHANGE UPDATE

(continued from page 1)

This could result in the stoppage of support and the dismissal of an asylum claim. Up until this point the supermarket vouchers which had been issued were the normal gift vouchers and were fully negotiable.

We are in dialogue with other groups in London which exchange vouchers and London Citizens (who are working with us to sell vouchers and raise awareness) to look at how to proceed in response to this change.

There may be other changes to the system in the UK, which will make the system much harsher, as a result of the Immigration Simplification Bill, which will be considered during the tenure of this parliament.

The draft support measures in that Bill have not been published yet, but are unlikely to improve the situation for asylum seekers on section 4 support.

JRS is working with the Migrants Resource Centre and Refugee Council on a campaign against the use of voucher based support.

We hosted a workshop at JRS on 12th November run by the Migrants Resource Centre to collect data and stories of those living on vouchers.

These findings were presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees on 26th November demonstrating the real hardship experienced by those on voucher support.

Please continue to support our work. We will keep you informed and hope that you would be prepared to be involved with any campaigning actions that we take up.

Claire Lawrence

If you would like to visit Asylum seekers in detention, please contact

**Sisters: anne.devuyst@tiscali.co.uk
margaret.jrs@tiscali.co.uk**

They will either put you in touch with a local group or give you more information about volunteering in this capacity with JRS.



THE WORLD IS THE LANGUAGE OF GOD

I have been thinking a lot about a Jesuit priest of the British Province who worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service. Back in the 1980s, Father Bill Yeomans had a background in Spirituality and working with Geoffrey Chapman, the publisher. Together they prepared the translation for the Vernacular Liturgy for The Bishops Conference of England. When the work was completed, Bill went to America where he gave retreats and worked on translations. Father Billy Hewett recalls visiting his apartment, in the Lower East Side of New York on the middle floor of a condemned building where he lived rent free. When things were not so good, he sold carpets to augment his income.

This experience was his preparation for life in a Refugee Camp, initially in Zambia. What he found very difficult was the isolation. There were 40,000 people in the camp but it was miles away from any other inhabited place. There was a great shortage of medical staff. Sisters in Religious Orders, with a spirituality centred on the Eucharist would have had their apostolate enriched had there been a priest to support them in their work.

Later he moved to Malaysia and eventually to Thailand to the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. It was his writings from this camp that first brought him to my notice.

He wrote: **"The world is the language of God, His way of communicating Himself, and His voice. The life of each human being is a word of God seeking its full expression...surely Christ shows us that to live our human nature and experience it in depth is to meet God."**

He wrote: "I would not want any other work than what I am doing. There is in it no superficial job satisfaction or self-fulfilment and so it is capable of engendering a profound joy".

He wrote in the JRS Periodical Diakonia in 1988 under the title Stranger in a Strange Land:

Helpless scattered seeds can take root,
Grow, bear fruit
Where earth is rich with love
And both must share
In death and life
In love that brings new birth.



These are but some of his writings which I have found while looking at old records. He is still so vivid in my memory it seems incredible he died 20 years ago. He had returned to London on 29th December 1988 and he died in St Joseph's Hospice, Hackney on 8th January 1989.

A Cambodian Family came to him with Cambodian food which they shared while they talked of their experiences in Thailand.

Brother Bernard Elliot

My life in the UK (cont. from p. 1)

I would see them again, touch them, see their smiles. After five years of separation the little one has become so tall. They have grown up so big. It is such a joy. I am no longer alone.

I thank the JRS, Brother Bernard, all the staff and all the people who have helped me through this.

D. Phino

Christmas is traditionally a time most of us are used to spending with our families and friends. We can easily forget those who are lonely or unsettled in their lives in some way, like D. Phino and other refugees. As you will have seen from D. Phino's story, he waited a long time before he was finally reunited with his wife and children and the process itself was not easy. D. Phino is a motivated and industrious young man who managed to get himself employment and managed to look after his family at a distance for some time.

However, although on a low income, he earned just over the means test limit to mean that he was no longer entitled to the UNHCR and Red Cross meeting his family reunion costs. He came to us for help. We bought the tickets for his family to join him, rather than he wait many months (if not years) more until the money for their tickets had been saved. It cost almost £3800.

We would not be able to help people like D. Phino without your generosity and your prayers. Please remember us and the work we do with the refugees at this time.

Louise Zanre

What does JRS do?

The Jesuit Refugee Service is an international Catholic non-governmental organisation, at work in over 60 countries, with a mission to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced persons. In the UK JRS works mainly with detainees and destitute asylum seekers.

Accompanying: being with the individual, befriending him or her but also in some way enhancing that person's dignity and personal growth.

Serving: offering some practical assistance while being with the person.

Defending the rights of refugees: working towards changing qualitatively the person's life for the better by influencing public opinion lobbying and raising awareness about the real hardships that asylum seekers and refugees face in the UK today.

Values

JRS is grounded in Catholic social teaching and draws on the principles of Ignatian spirituality in discerning with whom we work. All members share a common set of values and principles concerned with justice, the dignity of the person and a responsibility to carry out the social mission of the Church.

DIARY

4th May 2009 Strangers To Citizens Rally to show for regularization for migrants who have been in the country for over 4 years with a pathway to citizenship.

We need to demonstrate that there is real public support for this so we need a huge turnout on the day.

More details to follow.

17-19 July 2009 National Justice and Peace Network conference

On the Road Together:

A-mazed by Migration.

JRS is part of the coalition organizing this conference on the complex issues of migration,

Helped and supported by input from our speakers who include:

Bishop Patrick Lynch and Don Flynn, and facilitated by Open Space expert **Annette Zero.**

We will explore the question:

People on the move.

How does the church respond in a changing world?

Update from the Office

October was our first full month of working from our new drop-in centre in Stamford Hill on Thursdays.

It offers more space and comfortable surrounding than our London Bridge office.

There has been a slight drop in numbers but every week we have new people coming to us for help.

During October we had a total of 495 visits to the drop-in service.

We helped 199 adults during the month 37 of them receiving a food subsistence grant.

Claire Lawrence

Did you like this newsletter?


Spread the word and pass it on to someone who does not know JRS.


You can also email us at uk@jrs.net to receive more copies. When you have finished reading it, recycle it!


EDITOR: Victoire Dally

Support our work

What should you do?

If you want to send a donation:
 by cheque (payable to Jesuit Refugee Service) or cash: Fill the information in the box on the right and send it back by Post to: JRS, 6 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP

 Or make a secure payment on:
<http://www.justgiving.com/jesuitrefugeeservice/supportus>

 If you want more information please contact us on 020 7357 0974

- Please add me to your mailing list
- Donation enclosed Amount: £ _____
- I am a UK taxpayer and would like to gift aid my donation to JRS** (*Gift aid increases the value of your donation to us by 28p in every pound*)

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