



# West Yorkshire Churches and Asylum Seekers

A Presentation To The Home Office

23 June 2009

## Who we are

West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council (WYEC) brings together ten major Christian denominations across West Yorkshire and a large part of North Yorkshire. WYEC is represented on this occasion by:

the Rt. Revd. Stephen Platten, Bishop of Wakefield;  
the Revd. Dr. Liz Smith, Chair of the Leeds Methodist District;  
Pastor Gloria Hanley, Chair of West Yorkshire African Caribbean Council of Churches,  
also Chair of WYEC; and  
the Revd. Dr. Clive Barrett, County Ecumenical Development Officer and Executive Secretary

In 2008, church leaders from different traditions across West Yorkshire united to issue a public statement on the needs of asylum seekers, needs that impacted on many churches across the region. Sixteen months on, those needs remain as pressing as ever,

## Our experience

Churches of all traditions across our region are visited by hundreds of destitute and distressed human beings. Congregations have found themselves faced with new and distressing challenges as increasing numbers of asylum seekers appear facing greater financial and personal insecurity. From drop-in lunches at a Huddersfield church to ESOL classes in a Halifax church, an array of education opportunities provided at a Wakefield church, McKenzie Friend court support provide by Christians in Bradford, and legal support offered by Christians in Leeds – right across our region we see churches working together in the face of mounting human needs. Asylum seekers, at various stages in the asylum application process, are seeking basic requirements including food, legal support, accommodation, English language teaching, other education and, most of all, the opportunity for gainful employment. They are telling harrowing tales of persecution in their home countries and are often living in fear of forced return. Congregations are responding generously and collaboratively, offering hospitality and, in the process, finding their view of the world is changed.

As a result of this experience of local churches, we have been able to identify five specific areas of concern: prejudice, the legal process, destitution/employment, deportation, and faith matters.

### 1. Prejudice

It is a sad and unfortunate reality that there is racism and prejudice in our society, and this is often directed towards asylum seekers. The way in which asylum seekers are treated can either perpetuate or challenge that underlying prejudice. We look to Her Majesty's Government to give a lead in treating asylum seekers with due dignity, to assume that claims of past persecution are genuine unless proved otherwise, and, through public education, to promote a culture of tolerance and respect.

### 2. The Legal Process

Many asylum seekers feel that they are assumed to be guilty unless they can prove their case, which they do not always feel they have sufficient time to do. Perhaps a more inquisitorial and less adversarial process would be in order. It can also be difficult for many asylum seekers to find adequate legal representation. Fewer firms in Yorkshire are offering legal aid for asylum appeals, and those that do are cherry-picking their clients, leaving those unrepresented already tagged as likely losers. The principle here, especially for appeals, is that all asylum seekers should be able to be properly represented and to receive a fair hearing.

**BAPTIST CHURCHES** members of Yorkshire Baptist Association  
**THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND** Bradford, Wakefield, Ripon & Leeds  
**THE LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
**THE METHODIST CHURCH** Leeds District, West Yorkshire District  
**THE MORAVIAN CHURCH** Yorkshire District

**THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH** Diocese of Leeds  
**THE SALVATION ARMY** Yorkshire Division  
**THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS** Yorkshire General Meeting  
**THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH** Yorkshire Synod  
**WEST YORKSHIRE AFRICAN CARIBBEAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

### 3. Destitution / Employment

It is the desperate lack of resources of asylum seekers which makes the greatest impact on local churches. One Leeds church hosts a charity which gave out 2,600 food parcels last year and twice that number of free hot meals. Much of the most serious destitution is found among those who have been refused leave to stay in the UK, but who are unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin. Hunger and homelessness cannot be acceptable policies, even toward those who have not been given leave to stay. Even among those eligible for Section 4 support, recent research in Leeds by Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust indicates increased numbers experiencing destitution whilst “Waiting for Section 4 Support”.

Even for those who are given leave to stay, there is a window of destitution between leaving NASS accommodation and receiving housing benefit and not everyone feels they are adequately briefed or advised to take the right steps at the right time.

Far and away the biggest issue that arises time and again is the inability of asylum seekers to work. People who could contribute to the economy of the nation are being refused employment. This is undoubtedly the single most common cause of destitution among asylum seekers. Asylum seekers should be given the right to employment, especially if their future has not been assessed during their first six months in the UK, and most especially among those legacy cases still outstanding.

### 4. Deportation

Losing a friend is painful, and communities and schools losing a long-standing member to an overnight removal can face significant bereavement. There are many instances where advance notice of deportation would not lead to absconding but would give asylum families and their communities the opportunity to say appropriate farewells. We also hear stories of traumatic return journeys, with returnees receiving less than gentle treatment during the deportation process, and, on arrival in their home country, experiencing repetition of the brutality from which they had originally fled (not least in Iran and the DRC). Hence we are concerned at the quality of monitoring of the well-being of returned asylum seekers.

### 5. Faith matters

When asylum seekers repeatedly experienced Christian charity and hospitality, it is not surprising that some are drawn to the faith which motivates that charity. There may be an awakening of their own faith and a deep and genuine personal commitment to Christ, whether or not they had received lengthy tuition in matters of doctrine and practice. There is a genuine conversion to Christianity as God moves in that person's life; it affects the depths of their being, their identity and their self-understanding. For a number of converts, this spiritual journey and transformation of identity can affect significant details of their asylum application.

We are deeply concerned that the seriousness of this transformation is not always recognised by interviewing staff who may reflect a “culture of disbelief” towards religious conversion. Interview questions on cultural practice (e.g. Christmas dinners) are inappropriate, as are questions on one Christian tradition to a person whose experience is rooted in another tradition. UKBA staff need further training to ensure greater faith awareness and acceptance of the reality and spiritual depth of conversion.

Neither are we convinced that requirements of the practice of faith are sufficiently considered when returning deportees to countries hostile to the outward expression of Christianity. It is not acceptable that a new-found all-embracing faith commitment should be expected to be quietened or disavowed.

### Summary of our conclusions

- The Home Office can take the lead in challenging prejudice by promoting a cultural shift in which asylum seekers are treated with dignity and respect.
- All asylum seekers should have access to appropriate legal advice and receive a fair hearing.
- **Asylum seekers should receive permission to work.**
- UKBA staff should carry out any forced return process with as little physical coercion as possible.
- UKBA staff should take seriously the spiritual reality of faith conversion, and recognise its potential impact on asylum applications.
- Finally, we call on Her Majesty's Government to support voluntary, community and faith sector agencies which are working with asylum seekers.

