



West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council Statement of Support for Asylum Seekers

SUPPORTING MATERIAL

'I Was a Stranger and You Did Not Welcome Me'

New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield

Ash Wednesday, 6th February 2008

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SUPPORTING MATERIAL

'I Was a Stranger and You Did Not Welcome Me'

WEST YORKSHIRE ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (WYEC)

WYEC is a federation of most of the churches of West Yorkshire, and can claim to be the collective voice of a million Christians across the region. Its backbone is a personal covenant by which the Church Leaders (Bishops, District Chairs, Moderators, etc.) commit themselves to work closely together, to the greater glory of God.

TERMINOLOGY

Asylum Seeker

In immigration terms, an asylum applicant is someone who has claimed asylum in the UK, under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and is waiting for a decision from the Home Office on their application.

Refugee

A refugee is someone whose asylum application has been successful. That means that under the 1951 Convention, they have shown a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion and that they are unable or, owing to such fear, are unwilling to return to their country of origin.

The European Convention of Human Rights states 'no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'. If someone fears they would suffer that on return to their country of origin, they should not be removed from the UK.

THE DATE

In the Christian calendar, Wednesday 6th February 2008 is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the penitential season of Lent. For many Christians, it is a time for reflecting on the nature of one's relationship with God and with one's neighbour.

THE PLACE

New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield, HD1 5JU

Enter via New North Parade.

The church has had a support project for asylum seekers since 2002. There is a weekly Drop-In on Tuesday lunchtimes. It has produced a booklet for churches, *How to Set Up Support for Asylum Seekers*. Based on five years experience, it addresses such issues as:

- What needs do asylum seekers have that you can meet? (Start with a meeting point to combat isolation. Refreshments, clothing and – if you find someone with the expertise – legal advice could follow.)
- Would you function 24/7 or one day a week (Realistically for most churches, the latter.)
- Do you need paid staff? (No, if you have committed volunteers.)

The booklet also includes useful information on the asylum system with notes on housing, employment, health and education. A DVD and PowerPoint presentation have also been produced.

THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION OF HOSPITALITY

The Revd. Ernie Whalley, Regional Minister of the Baptist Church, and Chair of West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council, expounds on this in his introduction to the Statement. He says:

‘Two thousand years ago, Jesus told a story about responding to the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the prisoner. The list also includes “welcoming the stranger”. Then we read: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of one of these sisters and brothers of mine, you did for me.” Down through the centuries, the Christian Church has sought to live this out – to offer hospitality. Christian involvement in the establishment of our first hospitals is one aspect of this. We believe that our hospitality reflects the welcome of God. Today we extend our welcome towards those seeking asylum.’

West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council is considering further events to indicate church leaders’ concern for hospitality towards asylum seekers.

CONCERN 1 : PREJUDICE

Jesus was a refugee.

The Christmas story ends with the Holy Family fleeing from Bethlehem. There was a ‘massacre of the innocents’ as Herod killed other children under two years old.

‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ (Matthew 2.13)

It’s impossible to read the passage of scripture where the Holy Family escapes from Herod’s slaughter of the innocents without thinking, ‘Thank God for the Egyptians’. Mary, Joseph and Jesus not only had somewhere safe to flee to, but presumably received at least a basic welcome from the people there when they arrived.

Asylum seekers make up only 0.025% of entries into the UK.

This number has fallen by almost three quarters in the last five years. [UNHCR, *Asylum levels and trends in industrialised countries, 2006*, 23 March 2007; cited by the Refugee Council on <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/basics/facts.htm#factthree>]

The UK is home to less than 3% of the world’s refugees – around 290,000 out of 8.4 million worldwide. [UNHCR, *2005 Global refugee trends*, 9 June 2006; cited by the Refugee Council on <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/basics/facts.htm#factthree>]

The conflict in the Sudan has forced seven million people to move from their homes. Only 675 Sudanese people applied for asylum in the UK in 2006.

CONCERN 2: THE LEGAL PROCESS

Imagine fleeing from the terrors that beset parts of the Congo, say, or Somalia. Home, familiarity, family and friends are left behind in a desperate attempt at survival. A long, uncomfortable journey in the back of a trafficker’s lorry brings you to the UK. Stressed, anxious, exhausted, the adrenaline flowing, you claim asylum, desperately trying to put your words into some coherent order. Your chances of being able to stay may well depend on those first, confused words in an unfamiliar setting.

For those whose application is eventually turned down, only a minority will find a qualified legal representative who could afford to take their case to appeal. Even so, almost one in four initial decisions to refuse asylum are overturned at appeal.

Without proper legal support, some genuine asylum seekers are not having the truth of the situation clearly expressed, and their case for asylum properly put. As a result, some innocent people are being deported to situations where they face great danger.

[For Home Office Statistics on deportations, see the Home Office Press Release, 21st August 2007: <http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/490751>]

CONCERN 3: DESTITUTION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work in the UK until they receive a positive decision and become refugees. There is a high level of destitution among asylum seekers awaiting that decision, and an even higher level among those who have been turned down. There is an expanding UK economy, and a lot of expertise among asylum seekers. Most asylum seekers do not seek benefits; they want to work and support themselves. They should be allowed to work and to contribute to the economy.

Micahel Marks, who founded Marks and Spencer from a Leeds market stall, was a refugee. Montague Burton, founder of the Leeds-based tailoring empire, was also a refugee from Eastern Europe.

More than 1,100 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association's database. It only costs £10,000 to prepare a refugee doctor to practise in the UK. It costs £250,000 to train a doctor from scratch. [Source: BMA in *BBC News, NHS fails to use refugee doctors, 16 June 2004*, cited by the Refugee Council on <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/practice/basics/facts.htm#factthree>]

Destitution

In 2007, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust published the results of an inquiry into destitution among refused asylum seekers in Leeds. The inquiry Commissioners were Kate Adie OBE, Julian Baggini, Courtenay Griffiths QC, Bill Kilgallon OBE, and Sayeeda Warsi. [The full report, *Destitution in Leeds*, by Hannah Lewis, ISBN 978-1-903196-12-0 is available from JRCT, The Garden House, Water End, York, YO30 6WQ. A summary can be downloaded from www.jrct.org.uk]. If an asylum seeker is unsuccessful in their application, all official support is withdrawn within 21 days. However, many are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin, (perhaps Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan...) a prospect that is even more unappealing than destitution. How afraid must such people be of what would face them in their country of origin, for such a plight to be preferable to returning home? Their fear of persecution must be genuine and immense. The Inquiry found that rough sleeping in Leeds was common, with accompanying mental and physical illness, and that families with children under 18 were being made destitute.

The question remains, what about those people who have been refused leave to stay and who choose to remain in the UK? Perhaps Matthew 25 can help: 'I was hungry, I was a stranger...' Nowhere in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats is there any interrogation of the person in need, to check that they were 'worthy' of help. Worthy or unworthy, 'I was hungry, and you gave me food... I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'

Does refusing to return warrant the sentence of destitution, starvation, existence without medical provision? Should it require children to go to bed each night afraid that they will be woken up by a dawn raid to evict them? *Any* human being in need is worthy of our love. 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' The Churches, especially, have a duty to care, an imperative to Love our Neighbour.

A 'solution' that leads to the degradation of human beings is no solution.

CONCERN 4: DEPORTATION

In a report published on 25 July 2006, Her Majesty's Prisons Inspectorate was critical of the deportation process and the treatment handed out to asylum seekers at the Immigration Removal Centre run by the private company, SERCO, at Yarl's Wood, the UK's main centre for the detention of women and children. Among their concerns were:

- that they found no evidence that children's welfare was taken into account when making detention decisions
- that staff lacked sufficient guidance in managing suicide and self-harm
- that it was difficult for detainees to get up-to-date information about their cases
- that removals were carried out without proper warning or planning.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, said that, 'Our interviews... vividly illustrate the effect of sudden arrest and detention on the wellbeing of children, and the extent of their fears and anxieties for themselves and their parents.' [HM Prisons Inspectorate reports are found at www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprison]

The annual report of the Prisons Inspectorate for 2006/2007, pages 54-57, referred to 'Negative staff behaviour and attitudes' at the Harmondsworth detention centre, run by the private company Kalyx, and reiterated that 'Our inquiry into the quality of healthcare at Yarl's Wood raised serious concerns about the systems underpinning privately-contracted services, and the adequacy of support for those with serious health needs and those who were held for long periods. It recommended strongly that commissioning should move to the NHS to improve standards and safeguards. Facilities at short term holding facilities operated by Group 4 Securicor were described as 'poor'. On 18 December 2007, the BBC reported, 'Heathrow detention "inadequate"'. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7149060.]

Having taken witness statements from Yarl's Wood and Harmondsworth, the human rights campaign, 'Liberty', argues that staff there are frequently abusive, with racist abuse and beatings. It claims there is 'systematic brutalisation of those being held, many of whom are in the most vulnerable state physically and mentally'. [www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/news-and-events/pdfs/excerpts-witness-statements.pdf. See also Jamie Doward, 'Self-harm soars among detainees', *Observer*, 20 May 2007; www.guardian.co.uk/immigration/story/0,,2083996,00.html]

The story of Manuel Bravo, below, is a tragic local example.

CONCERN 5: TESTING FAITH CLAIMS

Stories such as Mina's, below, page 8, indicate that there is a serious lack of understanding of aspects of Christianity and Christian conversion by those interviewers whose task is to investigate the faith of asylum seekers, in instances where they claim a real fear of future persecution on the basis of their faith. The Asylum Matters Group of the Churches Main Committee has raised issues of the training of interviewers and interpreters in matters of Christian faith and conversion. [Report of the Very Revd. Nicholas Coulton, Sub-Dean, Christ Church, Oxford, et al, being the Asylum Matters Group of the Churches Main Committee, November 2007. This report also considers the deportation and legal issues raised above.] It is not acceptable, for example, to distinguish between a proselytiser / evangelist and a so-called 'ordinary individual convert', as if one's entire being and doing were somehow separate from one's all-embracing faith-commitment. To suggest that a question like 'How do you prepare a turkey for Christmas?' could be a test of the validity of one's faith, is breath-taking. [Page 14, *Alltogether (sic) for Asylum Justice: Asylum Seekers' Conversion to Christianity*, Evangelical Alliance, 2007. See www.eauk.org].

CONCERN 6: SUPPORTING ASYLUM SEEKERS

The work of New North Road Baptist Church has already been noted. Many other churches across the region make special efforts to assist the asylum seekers in their congregations and in their communities. Numerous Christians are also engaged in other asylum support agencies. One of the biggest obstacle to voluntary agencies providing the necessary levels of support for asylum seekers is the difficulty in obtaining funding. Many agencies do extraordinary work with minimal finance. Local agencies include (the list is not comprehensive):

BEACON (Bradford Ecumenical Asylum Concern)

BEACON encourages churches to draw upon the experiences and spirituality of Christian asylum seekers from many different parts of the world. It aims to 'Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute' [Proverbs 31:8]. Projects include:

McKenzie Friends

- members of the public, not legally qualified, who accompany an asylum seeker to court at appeal, when there may be no legal representation. It is a time that is often bewildering and full of anxiety for an appellant whose future is being decided by the court. A McKenzie Friend is a volunteer, independent of the court system and the Home Office. She / he will not give legal advice and does not have the right to speak in court, but it is possible to provide moral support and to give informed non-legal help.

Care and Hospitality at Thornbury (CHAT)

- based at Thornbury Methodist Church, CHAT is linked to BEACON. It provides refreshments and a place to relax for asylum seekers at the time of their court hearing.

Hosting Project

- this provides accommodation not least for those who have been granted leave to remain but who cannot immediately find other accommodation.

BEACON: c/o Touchstone, 32 Merton Road, Bradford, BD7 1RE. Tel: 01274 721626.
judy.beacon@yahoo.co.uk

BIASAN (Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support)

The 'Hands' hanging on display at the launch of the Church Leaders' statement was made by women and children asylum seekers at BIASAN. Each hand was made by a different woman (or child). Some of these women have since been deported, and their handprint is a lasting memory of their time in the UK, and reminds us to pray for those who have returned to the place which was the source of their fear.

Email: biasan@bigfoot.com

BIASAN meets on Thursdays in Bradford. It includes a homework club for children of asylum seekers,. For details of the homework club, email: treehousepeacelibrary@hotmail.co.uk.

CHURCH ACTION ON POVERTY

Church Action on Poverty has been sending postcards, Amnesty-style, to detained asylum seekers. For details, contact Leeds Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission, Hinsley Hall, 62 Headingley Lane, LS6 2BX. Tel: 0113 261 8055. Email: Shelagh@leedsjp.org.uk. This is also the contact for information about ABIGAIL, a housing project.

INDEPENDENT ASYLUM COMMISSION

The Independent Asylum Commission is due to report before the end of 2008. It has just launched Citizens Speak to enable individuals around the country to be involved in the consultation. Opinions can be sent to Citizens Speak, Independent Asylum Commission, 112 Cavell St, London E1 2JA. Email: citizensspeak@cof.org.uk. www.citizensspeak.org.uk

LASSN (Leeds Asylum Seeker Support Network)

LASSN's coordinates volunteer support. Its activities include:

- Befriending – with volunteer visitors,
- Short Stop – short term overnight accommodation provided by volunteer hosts, often at times of acute crisis,
- English at Home – with volunteer tutors. (Absurdly, given the importance of the English language for community cohesion, there are restrictions on asylum seekers accessing other free basic English language classes.)

LASSN has 150 active volunteers providing a major service at cost of their own time and resources.

LASSN, 233 Roundhay Road, Leeds LS8 4HS. Tel: 0113 380 5690. www.lassn.org.uk

MANUEL BRAVO PROJECT

Demand for legal advice far exceeds capacity and many asylum seekers are unable to find adequate legal representation.

The Manuel Bravo Project is volunteer-based with barristers, solicitors, law students and lay volunteers giving their time to assist people. Any immigration advice is provided by the solicitor or barrister as an individual rather than from the Project.

The Project is named after Manuel Bravo, an asylum seeking democracy activist from Angola, whose family there had suffered attacks and whose parents had been murdered. He was a member of Christ Church, Upper Armley, Leeds. Taken from home in September 2005, he committed suicide in Yarl's Wood Detention Centre, hoping his son would be allowed to remain safely in the UK.

Manuel Bravo Project, Cordelia House, 45 Westfield Road, Leeds, LS3 1DG. Tel: 0113 3508608. Email: office@manuelbravo.org.uk. www.manuelbravo.org.uk

PAFRAS (Positive Action For Refugees and Asylum Seekers)

'I was hungry and you gave me food.'

PAFRAS works with asylum seekers from across West Yorkshire. Many are destitute. PAFRAS estimates that there are over three thousand destitute asylum seekers in Leeds alone. They exist below an underclass. Twice a week (10.30-12.30, Tuesday, Thursday) PAFRAS provides refreshments, clothing, toiletries and food parcels from St Aidan's Church, Roundhay Road, Leeds. Experienced case workers offer information and support. The balanced food parcels are an essential component of the service, as one community dietician explained,

'Inadequate food intake causes low energy levels, weakness and sleep disturbance, and a depressed immune system leading to increased illness as well as long term physical damage and mental impairment – including decreased concentration, depression, anxiety, personality changes and social withdrawal.'

PAFRAS is appealing for food and toiletries. Amongst the items most needed are:

Basic items

Tinned tomatoes 400g
Spaghetti 420g
Rice
Tinned tuna
Tinned meat (not pork)
Tinned vegetables
Soup (vegetable based)
Cereals (wheat, oat or rice)
Fruit juice (1litre or smaller)

Secondary list

Onions
Biscuits
Noodles
Creamed rice
Instant custard
½ litre vegetable oil

Sugar 1kg
Tea bags
Pasta
Tinned sardines
Long life milk
Pita bread
Tinned fruit
Semolina
Baked beans

Occasional list

Chocolate bars
Cereal bars
Sweets
Chocolate drink

To arrange food donations, contact PAFRAS on 0113 2484147 or email pafrasemail@yahoo.co.uk

REFUGEE COUNCIL

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. It is a national body for policy, research and asylum support. It not only gives direct help and support, but also works with asylum seekers and refugees to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed. The Refugee Council Yorkshire and Humber Office provides a One Stop Shop with advice and information, 9am-4pm, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Ground Floor, Hurley House, 1 Dewsbury Road, Leeds LS11 5DQ Tel: 0113 244 9404. www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

STORIES

Mina's Story

In the years that followed the Iranian revolution of 1979, families which had links with the Shah and the old regime were liable to persecution. Mina, now 39, served time in prison and faced torture and rape. She escaped the country in the back of a lorry, and did not emerge until it reached the U.K. She claimed political asylum.

It has been a long period of limbo, as she has been in the U.K. for seven years. During that time she has converted to Christianity and become an established member of Wakefield Baptist Church, leading an Alpha Course, and active in practising her faith. She has brought many friends into the church, helps out in the church office and is part of the wider leadership. She has been married for three years, and lives with her husband and 16 year old daughter who is studying at Wakefield College and wants to join the police.

Mina has studied accounting for three years and wants to work, but is not allowed to do so. She recently received a letter from the Home Office saying that it had refused her application for leave to remain in the U.K. The likely result would be that her family would be broken up and she would be sent back to Iran where the Home Office claimed she could practise her faith 'in private', so long as she was 'discreet'.

'I can't be private about my faith,' said Mina, 'but if you practice it in Iran, and do ministry, you will face death.'

[Source: *Unity Post*, published by WYEC, 2008]

K's Story (with A the volunteer)

K was referred to LASSN by way of a mental health worker who was worried his isolation and anxiety would lead to serious depression. He suffered post traumatic stress symptoms from his experiences in prison in Congo. K did not want to engage with the Congolese community because of past experience.

He was taking high levels of medication to contain his memories and flashbacks but they made him feel tired, listless and unable to concentrate.

A volunteer, A, was matched with K to show him around Leeds and introduce him to the local church. They decided to look into English classes at the local college to improve his ability to communicate.

Eventually, K was refused by the Home Office and A was the first person he turned to. A supported him while his solicitor lodged an appeal. They had become friends and met on an informal basis once a week for a coffee and a walk. A would ask how things were going and K would bring letters to be translated. K's English was now a lot better and they shared personal stories and concerns. There was a lot of fear of being detained and deported, but A helped relieve some of this anxiety by being a point of contact in an emergency.

The case is ongoing. At times K loses hope and thinks he would be better dead, but A gives him security and the will to continue. For a few hours a week he puts aside his worries and feels valued and cared about.

[Source: LASSN Annual Review 2006-2007]

INTERVIEWS AND ENQUIRIES

The church leaders will be available for interviews at the launch of the statement. Requests for interviews at other times, and all other enquiries, should be directed through the WYEC Office:

The Revd. Dr. Clive Barrett, WYEC, Hinsley Hall, 62 Headingley Lane, Leeds, LS6 2BX
Tel: 0113 2618053; Email: clivebarrett@wyec.co.uk. Web: <http://wyec.co.uk>

Oli's and Ed's Story

Ed, a community project worker, volunteered on a project welcoming new people to Leeds. Through the project he met Oli, 22, who had come to the UK from the Democratic Republic of Congo in early 2006, and was soon moved to Leeds. The two have since become very close friends, working and volunteering together on various community projects, regularly talking politics late into the night!

Ed said,
'Oli's an amazing, inspiring and generous guy: I'm so grateful we met! It's been such a privilege journeying with Oli over the past year, as he's developed a new life here in Leeds. I've been able to support him in various ways, like helping him get plugged into some great community projects (which he's totally given himself to), meet lots of people (who all love him), and simply encouraging him as he finds his feet here in the UK.

'And I've 'received' so much back from him: he's a funny, charming and fascinating guy with a lot of integrity and vision, someone who enriches life for all those around him.'

Oli's said,
'I hadn't been in UK for long when I met Ed, so hadn't had opportunities to develop meaningful contact or friendship with people here. I had (and still have) a double perception of British people: some as very conservative, closed, unfriendly, but others as open, friendly, and good humoured... Ed is definitely the second of these!

'We had so much in common, we just talked and talked from the beginning – and we're still talking! Politics, culture, society, faith, personal things, everything. And Ed helped me get involved in lots of really good social projects, to learn a lot about British culture, and meet so many people.

'We've now developed a really solid friendship, learning so much from each other. My friend Ed is one of the most passionate, intelligent and caring people I've ever met, someone with a deep and strong sense of what it means to be a citizen of the world.'

[Source: Refugee Council, Regional Media Office, 2007]