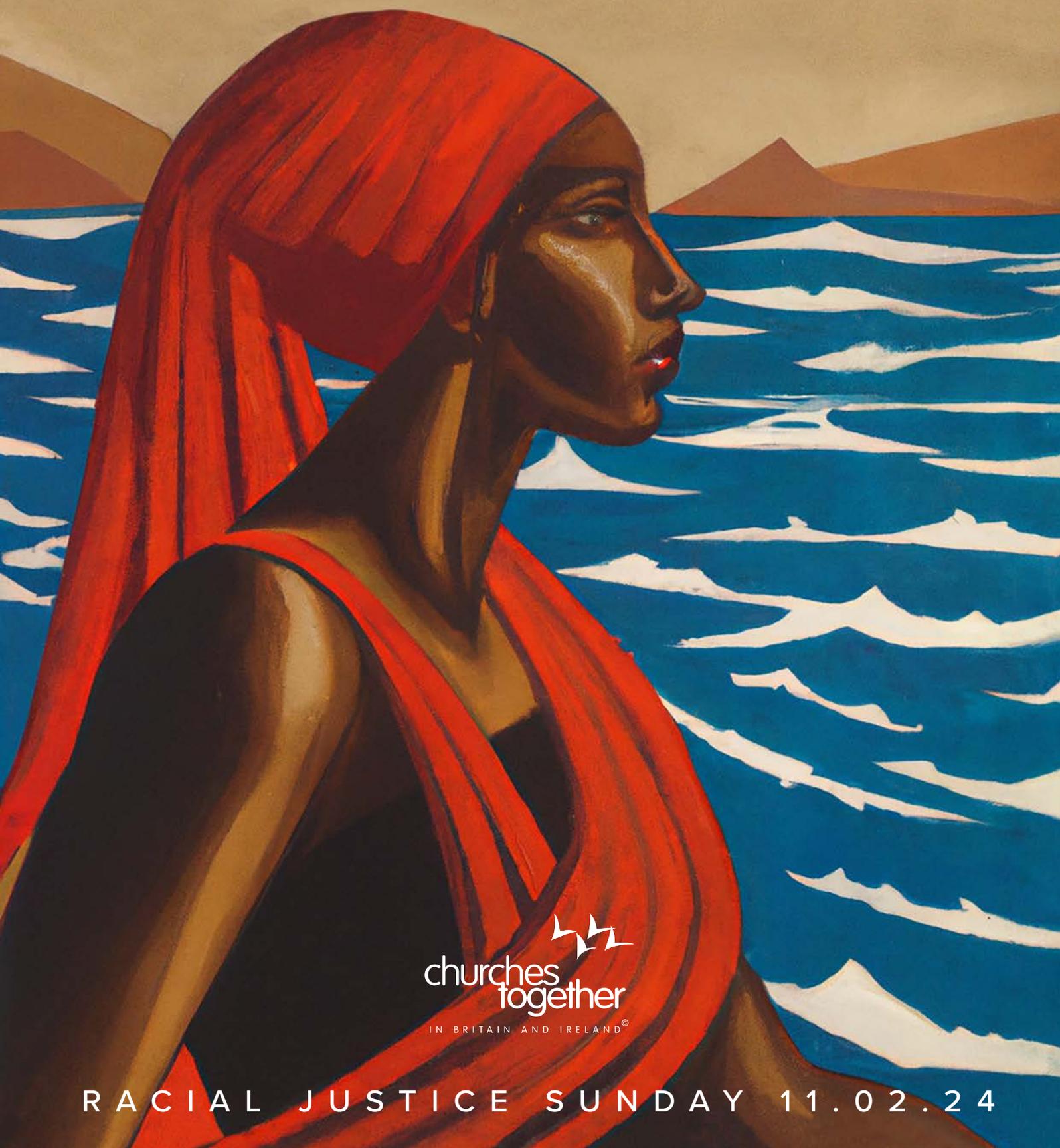


EXODUS!

JUSTICE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE ON THE MOVE




churches
together
IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND®

RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY 11.02.24

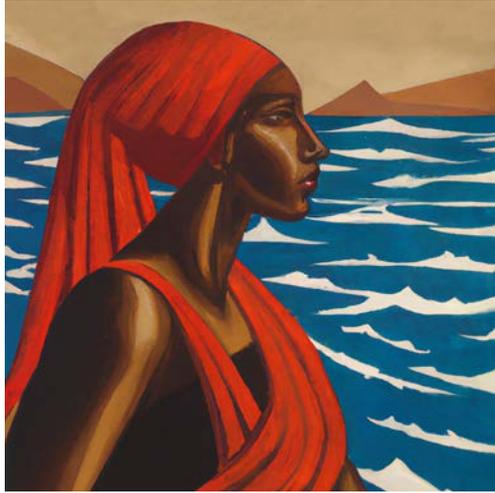
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RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY 11.02.24

EXODUS!

“The rich and the poor have
this in common: the Lord is the
maker of them all.”

Proverbs 22:2

Foreword

Racial prejudice plays a dominant role in the hostile approach to refugees. Racism is at the root of the 'hostile environment' that is promoted as an official policy in our country. Therefore, on Racial Justice Sunday this year, it is appropriate that we focus on the justice dimension of our hospitality to those who are fleeing persecution.

The affirmation that every human being carries the image of God regardless of their race, colour or geographical location is foundational to our Christian understanding of humanity. It is a tragic effect of our sin that a huge number among us live in poverty and conflict – which compels them to look for places of safety and security elsewhere – while many of us live in comfort and relative peace. Offering hospitality to the most vulnerable among us is part of reparation as we repent of our corporate sin.

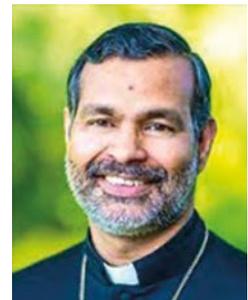
God called out a people to be His own to serve the world that He loves and to be a light to the nations. He commanded welcome to aliens and strangers among His chosen people (Leviticus 19:34). The people of God in the New Testament are also called aliens and strangers in this world (1 Peter 2:11). We are people on a journey; pilgrims. In that sense we are not hosts, which makes others guests and at our mercy, but co-pilgrims and sojourners with those who arrive on our doorstep, seeking sanctuary.

And the God who called us is also on the move with those who journey! The Tabernacle represented a God who pitches His tent among the people on the move. In Jesus Christ we find a God who chose to be a refugee Himself – one who had to flee to North Africa from the Middle East in search of a safe place (Matthew 2:13-14).

I pray that these resources will help us to affirm and celebrate our calling as the people of God to work for justice in our world, and to offer safe passage to those fleeing inhuman living conditions or hostility.

The Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath

Bishop of Liverpool
Chair, Churches' Refugee Network



'We are people on a journey; pilgrims. In that sense we are not hosts, which makes others guests and at our mercy, but co-pilgrims and sojourners with those who arrive on our doorstep, seeking sanctuary.'

Introduction

This year's Racial Justice Sunday resources explore the movement of people from their homelands to the places they now call home, and examine the motivations behind this movement – the journeys made, and the reception or welcome received on arrival.

According to the latest figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'At least 108.4 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 35.3 million refugees, around 41 per cent of whom are under the age of 18.'ⁱ The UNHCR figures also reveal that 62.5 million of those who are forced to leave their homes are 'internally displaced people' (IDPs) – those seeking sanctuary within their country's borders.ⁱⁱ Equally, figures show that '70 per cent of refugees and other people in need of international protection lived in countries neighbouring their countries of origin',ⁱⁱⁱ and that 20 per cent are now resident in the world's 'least developed countries'.^{iv}

Europe is one of those areas of the world to which people have been fleeing for safety. In recent years, the region has witnessed arrivals escaping war and upheaval in Afghanistan, Syria and the Ukraine – the top three countries in the world for refugees.^v Equally, protracted conflicts in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia have been 'push' factors for movement to Europe.

While Britain is no longer part of the European Union, its links to continental Europe remain indelible and, alongside Ireland, it is regarded as a 'destination' for many seeking refuge. What is more, over the last few years it appears as if attitudes have hardened regarding 'inward migration' to these shores. It can be argued that the worldwide refugee crisis, political opportunism and a cost-of-living crisis have served to change the narrative, especially towards those from outside Europe who are seeking sanctuary within it. In recent years we have seen the weaponising of 'migration' by figures who are disposed to make capital out of the rising numbers of Channel boat crossings, and the spiralling costs of housing those seeking asylum on these shores. While British overall attitudes towards immigration and refugees remain positive,^{vi} we have witnessed the verbal (and physical) harassment of those seeking sanctuary or asylum, especially over the costs and the chosen location of accommodation, on both sides of the Irish Sea.^{vii}

i 'How many refugees are there around the world?', UNHCR, bit.ly/46Tv62r.

ii 'How many refugees are there around the world?', UNHCR, bit.ly/46Tv62r.

iii 'How many refugees are there around the world?', UNHCR, bit.ly/46Tv62r.

iv 'Forced Displacement', European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, European Commission, bit.ly/3QktwzH.

v 'Forced to flee: Top countries refugees are coming from', World Vision, bit.ly/49iGs1w.

vi Mark Townsend, 'UK is among countries with the most positive attitude towards refugees, poll finds', *The Guardian*, 17.06.23, bit.ly/3SmAnvk.

vii Sophia Siddiqui, 'Attacks on asylum housing: fighting the weaponisation of gender-based violence', Institute of Race Relations, 2.03.23, bit.ly/3Stc6n0 (accessed 17.10.23).

Given the crisis, this Racial Justice Sunday resource aims to shine a biblical light on what is currently taking place, and the way Christians are (and can) make a difference within these spheres. This is a racial justice issue because, apart from the Ukraine, most of those seeking sanctuary have Black and Brown faces. What is more, it is an interfaith/religious justice matter because a good number are not Christians.



The Bible is replete with verses that call upon God's people to offer sanctuary to the foreigner, the alien and the vulnerable. Many of these references are implicit or 'hidden in plain sight', but there are others such as the 37 commands in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible to 'love the stranger'; the entire Book of Ruth or the Holy Family's escape to Africa (Egypt) in the Gospel of Matthew, which are explicit references to refuge and sanctuary.

'In recent years, the region has witnessed arrivals escaping war and upheaval in Afghanistan, Syria and the Ukraine – the top three countries in the world for refugees.'

If the Scriptures have this to say about sanctuary and hospitality, the questions we need to ask are:

- Who are 'God's people on the move' and what is our responsibility, as Christians, towards them?
- Is there a sliding scale of importance regarding the regions from which those seeking sanctuary or asylum come?
- Do we prioritise Christians fleeing religious persecution over those of other beliefs or none?
- How have policies and economic practices emanating from Europe detrimentally affected parts of the developing world, resulting in conflict and poverty?
- Do we view those fleeing poverty differently from those escaping persecution?

As such, this resource aims to inform, challenge and inspire everyone to pray and take action, so that hospitality and not hostility becomes our overall approach to those fleeing persecution, peril, poverty and war.

Richard Reddie

Director of Justice and Inclusion,
Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
Coordinator, Churches' Refugee Network

Contributors

This Racial Justice Sunday resource features contributions from Christian church denominations, parachurch organisations, community groups and individuals in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England – the four nations. Akin to the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's raison d'être, ecumenical partnership is very much the watchword of this important publication.

It is often said that where there is unity, there is strength. Racial Justice Sunday is a great opportunity to exhibit Christian unity in addressing the many prevailing inequalities that still exist in our churches and society. It is only by working together that we will be able to see the changes that are necessary.

This year, we are thankful to all those groups and organisations that are working to highlight and address the refugee crises, both on these shores and overseas. Therefore, the following individuals are to be thanked for their sterling contributions:

Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal, OBE, *Lead, Church of Sanctuary*

Rocio Cifuentes, *Children's Commissioner for Wales*

Barbara Forbes, *Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network*

Revd Steven Foster, *Southern Chairperson, Council on Social Responsibility of the Methodist Church in Ireland*

Revd Gerard Goshawk, *Pastor, Six Ways Erdington Baptist Church, Birmingham*

Angela Hill, *Human Resources Assistant in Higher Education, Wales*

Professor Uzo Iwobi CBE FLSW, *Founder and CEO Race Council Cymru*

Phill Mellstrom, *Worship Development Worker, Faith Action Programme, The Church of Scotland*

David Moodie, *Coordinator, Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees – Faith Action Programme, The Church of Scotland*

Fr Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA, *Irish Augustinian friar and biblical scholar*

The Rt Revd Dr John Perumbalath, *Bishop of Liverpool; Chair of the Churches' Refugee Network*

Richard Reddie, *Director of Justice and Inclusion, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland; Coordinator, the Churches' Refugee Network*

Mark Sturge, *PhD candidate, Durham University*

Father Phil Sumner, *Trustee of the Catholic Association of Racial Justice; Rural Dean for Oldham, Ashton under Lyne, Mossley and Uppermill; Parish Priest of Our Lady and St Patrick's, Oldham*

**SECTION ONE:
WORSHIP RESOURCES**



GATHERING/CALL TO WORSHIP/ OPENING RESPONSES

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather here to mark this Racial Justice Sunday.
Remind us that even as we gather here today,
Many arrive on our shores, bereft,
Fleeing oppression and war,
Seeking safety, security and sanctuary.

God of justice and peace,
May we see Your beauty in each one of Your dear children,
Recognising the fingerprints of a loving God
Who made all of us in the image of the Divine.
Knowing deeply that it was You, O God,
Who breathed life and beauty into us all.
May we welcome one another here today, and
May we welcome Your children into our communities
With the same passion and zeal that we welcome Your presence with us.

Unite us as the family of God,
Called to love and transform the world,
That Your dream may come true for all people.

Amen

CALL TO WORSHIP

God of all,
You have named each and every one of us as Your child.
Remind us that we are God breathed, beloved
And imbued with beauty and dignity.
As we gather in Your presence on this Racial Justice Sunday
In different communities around the country,
Unify us in Your love
And join our different and distant voices
Into one song of worship to You.

Amen



OPENING PRAYER

(BASED ON/ADAPTED FROM A PRAYER BY REVD DR MARTIN LUTHER KING JR)

Ever-present God,
You call us to be in relationship with one another.
In our coming together, unite us in spirit and truth.

You promise to dwell wherever two or three are gathered.
In our communities, we are many different people.
As we gather, may we reflect the Image of God.

We come from many different places,
have many different cultures.
Hear us, O God, and blend our voices into one song of worship.

Open our hearts, that we may be bold
in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us.
We pray in faith.
Amen

THANKSGIVING

PRAYER

Threefold One, Holy Community of Love,
We give You thanks and praise for all that You have done for us.
For the joy of family and friends, and the refreshing we find in the company
of others.
For the beauty and nourishment that revives us in our interaction with creation.
For the inspiration and challenge brought to us by the arts and culture.
For the continuing service of those who have a vision for a better future.
For the beauty and diversity that enrich us when we open ourselves to the gift of
difference.
God, we raise our voices in thanks to You.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

Amen

PRAYER

*Choose whether to hold silence for people to reflect and pray, or perhaps use
music/song as a bed underneath the prayers. The chorus of the song could be
used as a common response after giving thanks in a particular context.*

Living God,
In whom we find fulness of life,
Clothe Your people with gratitude,
Adorn our gathering with Your light and love,
That we may know Your presence among us.
We take time to bring to mind those things that we are grateful for.

For those gathered together in this place, we give You thanks ...
*Moment of silence for those gathered to lift their prayers silently to God, or sung
refrain.*

For those in our communities and surrounding areas, well-known faces and new
members alike, we give You thanks ...
Moment of silence...

For the people who serve our communities and make a difference to our life, we
give You thanks ...
Moment of silence...

*Using local knowledge and local and national news, you can find other things
that are good to give thanks to God for.*

Living God,
In whom we find fulness of life,
Receive our thanks and adoration
As we lift our prayers to You,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

INTERCESSIONS/PRAYERS FOR OTHERS

For each section, wait in stillness, allowing people to imagine or to speak out their prayers, or you may wish to use the Taizé song 'Wait for the Lord' before speaking the response.

God of all creation,
We have come to worship together in unity of the Spirit.
Hear the prayers of Your children,
Expressed in our different voices and imaginations,
Our different experiences,
But in our common hope for justice.

Lord, in Your mercy,
Hear the prayers of Your children.

We pray for peace ...

We wait together – you are invited to imagine what peace may look like, or to speak out where you hope for peace.

Lord, in Your mercy,
Hear the prayers of Your children.

We pray for healing ...

We wait together – you are invited to imagine what healing may look like, or to speak out where you hope for healing.

Lord, in Your mercy,
Hear the prayers of Your children.

We pray for justice ...

We wait together – you are invited to imagine what justice may look like, or to speak out where you hope for justice.

Lord, in Your mercy,
Hear the prayers of Your children.

We pray that all may flourish ...

We wait together – you are invited to imagine what flourishing may look like, or to speak out where you hope for flourishing.

Lord, in Your mercy,
Hear the prayers of Your children.
Amen

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS/INTERCESSION

In the midst of industrial action, rising prices, cost-of-living concerns and unjust systems,
We pray, O God,
That You will inspire us to stand for what is right and just.
Empower us to speak out and raise our hearts and prophetic voices in solidarity
With all who have been oppressed and marginalised.
Lord Jesus,
As we consider our options and choose where to place our votes,
May we mark our ballots with a cross that remembers the power of Your cross –
A place of pain and suffering, but not the end.
Your powerful act of love brought salvation and life.
As we cast lots that determine the future of many,
May we act in love and mercy,
And follow Your Spirit beyond optimism,
And into the wild and free space of hope,
That there may be justice and peace for all.

Amen

PRAYER OF LAMENT AND HOPE FOR POLITICAL CHANGE/ PRAYER OF LAMENT IN A POSSIBLE YEAR OF GENERAL ELECTION IN BRITAIN

God of justice,
Challenge any apathy that there may be within us,
As we look at the conditions within our communities and as we consider the things that could divide us.
When we take note of the policies and decisions that have led us to a place of dysfunction and disunity,
With so many people struggling to keep a roof over their head,
And having to make decisions whether to heat or eat,
God of all compassion, we ask You to intervene –

How long, O Lord?

Silence is held.

When we distrust the narrative of spin that would sell us false choices,
Show us the ways in which we can exercise our agency to make significant and lasting change.
When we feel despondent and doubtful that there is a right way,
When we feel as if we are losing faith and trust in our institutions,
and sense corruption and greed distorting our view,
Guide us towards hope.
God of mercy, we ask You to intervene –

How long, O Lord?

Silence is held.

Lord of our life and God of our salvation,
 We ask Your blessing on all that is best about us.
 We seek Your forgiveness for anything that has fallen short in the legacy of our
 past decisions and our ways of being,
 And the hopes of the present.
 May we heed the call to higher things in the future.
 May we live to see the fruit of Your Spirit's work within these shores.
 We call for equity, for justice and for peace.
 God of mercy, we ask You to intervene –

How long, O Lord?

Silence is held.

God of all creation,
 You are the ground of our being,
 The source of our life and hope.
 In You is life abundant and eternal.
 Draw us towards hope and trust in You,
 The all-powerful and mighty God.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son
 And to the Holy Spirit;
 As it was in the beginning, is now
 And shall be for ever.
 Amen**

**PRAYER FOR FAITH IN POLITICS/PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE IN
 PREPARATION FOR A GENERAL ELECTION**

Eternal God,
 By Your Spirit, guide us in our discernment,
 As we consider all of the factors in the upcoming process for a general election.
 Raise our awareness of the issues that need addressing,
 And remind us that beyond the policies, polling and propaganda
 Are real people, Your beloved children.

May our spirits be pricked by the suffering, oppression and injustice
 That we know of, and that which is unknown to us yet is real for so many.
 Make known to us the groaning of creation,
 As our common home is used and abused through the greed of the few.

May we remember Your manifesto of love, peace and justice for all.
 Empower us to speak out, to work together and to vote,
 As we seek with You, and those who are in positions of power and authority,
 To shape a common future of justice and peace.

Amen

CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE

CONFESSION

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our prayers.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our groans and cries.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Sense our despair and our hope.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our prayers.

When we say we will strive to make a difference,
But falter at the first hurdle, misstep or trespass,
God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Guide our steps.

When we seek to challenge practices and systems that oppress,
But end up wounding ourselves or others,
God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Tend our wounds.

When we seek to defend the honour and dignity of others,
But instead protect our privilege or reputation,
God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Forgive our sins.

When we cling to ideals and/or old habits that sow seeds of racism,
Or cling to wrong thinking and ways of being that hold us to ignorance and
arrogance,
God of all compassion,
Deliver us from evil.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our prayers.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our groans and cries.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Sense our despair and our hope.

God of all compassion, in Your mercy,
Hear our prayers.

Amen

CONFESSION/LAMENT

Untamed God,
 You are the Wind and the Wisdom.
 When we try to domesticate Your Holy Spirit,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

When we ignore Your invitation or block access to Your table of grace,

CHRIST HAVE MERCY.

When we let fear bind us and misguide us,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

Hold space for reflection with silence or music.

Generous God,
 You open Yourself in love to all people.
 When we draw limits around this to exclude or control access,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

When we speak to diminish another's dignity,

CHRIST HAVE MERCY.

When we act in fear and obstruct Your way of love,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

Hold space for reflection with silence or music.

Faithful God,
 You call us to faith and unity.
 When trust is eroded and we sow division,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

When abundance is replaced by austerity,

CHRIST HAVE MERCY.

When we allow despair to cut us off from hope,

LORD HAVE MERCY.

Hold space for reflection with silence or music.

May the Trinity of Love
 Bind up our wounds,
 Challenge our complacency,
 Lead us to freedom and abundance,
 For the sake of peace and harmony,
 As our Creator ordained it.
 Saying the prayer Jesus taught us,
 Using the language of our own hearts,
 We pray now in unity –

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.

Amen.

PRAYER OF ASSURANCE

Abba,
We, made in Your image,
 We, made by Your hand,
 We, loved so deeply by our Creator,
 We, cared for so intently by our Saviour,
 Are blessed to call ourselves children of God.
You blessed our differences with Your kiss,
As You breathed Your life and love into our lungs.
From the moment of creation,
 Each and every one of us
 Loved and cherished by You,
Your fingerprints upon us,
 Your hopes and dreams spoken between the Trinity of Love, for us.
Your divine hopes and dreams given to be shared by all –
 Regardless of where we are from,
 Despite how we may well fall short,
 All because of the worth we have, bestowed upon us
 by You, our loving heavenly parent.
Saving God,
 You persevere with us,
 You dare to hope extravagantly for us,
 You were willing to die and rise for us,
 Help us to do the same for each other.

Amen

BLESSING AND SENDING

SENDING PRAYER

Journeying God,
Be with us as we continue to journey through life each day.
In each step we take, may we walk ever closer with You.
In the light of day and in the darkness of night,
Where the ground is sure or uneven,
May we walk with faith and hope and love.
Let each step today be sure, humble and just.

Amen

BLESSING

May the Lord bless you.
May the Lord keep you upright and dignified.
May the Lord provoke you to walk in the shoes of others.
May the image of God be made whole by your beautiful being living fully into its calling.
May we all journey towards justice and the Kingdom of God made real,
For all our sakes.

Amen

BLESSING

May the blessing of God enfold you,
May the breath of God Almighty be the wind in your sails,
May the tender mercy of Christ guide your coming and going,
And may the Spirit fill you with life and love.

Amen

BLESSING

May God's Kingdom come,
May God's will be done,
May we, through the Spirit's strength
And our love for one another,
Show the way
Of God's Kingdom dream for all,
In this and in every place.

Amen

BLESSING

(TAKEN FROM THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND BLESSING FOR A MEAL DURING BREXIT)

God, who brought heaven close to earth,
You journey with us
As we seek to follow Jesus.
May Your generous Spirit
Open our hearts to receive love,
Open our mouths to speak compassionately,
Open our eyes to see Your signs and wonders,
And open our hands to share peace with friend and stranger.

Amen

BLESSING

(TAKEN FROM *PRAY NOW*, CHURCH OF SCOTLAND PRAYER BOOK)

May the blessing of light be upon you,
Within you
And around you.
May the blessing of light shine out from you,
Like the welcoming glow of the house on the horizon,
Bidding the wanderer,
'Come in and find shelter.'

Amen

EVENING PRAYER

(TAKEN FROM *PRAY NOW*, CHURCH OF SCOTLAND PRAYER BOOK)

As day draws to its close,
We rest our weary feet
And recount where they have taken us today:
The uphill struggles,
The downhill coasting.
Lord, You have walked
Ahead of us,
Behind us,
Beside us.
Our walking now complete this day,
Be by our side as stillness falls over us.

Amen

CREATIVE PRAYER IDEAS

PRAYER DIARY OR RHYTHM OF PRAYER

Below are some suggestions of different topics and contexts that can help to be a focus for our prayers as we seek God around issues of justice. For those who find it helpful to have a list of things to pray for, you might outline particular people/ areas of the work/context, but you may also wish to use it as a way of providing a rhythm of prayer that fits the rhythms of your community life and seeks to encourage and empower everyone to pray together creatively for justice.

As part of this rhythm of prayer you may feel it is important to include elements of confession. This could be done as part of the personal focus on Mondays, or as individual or corporate prayer throughout the suggested themes – especially if there are areas where you feel you/the church needs to seek forgiveness.

We suggest having two parts to each day's prayer:

Part 1 – Listen to God: Before speaking to God, it is good to be quiet and listen to how God is leading. There will be some questions each day to help you think and reflect as you listen to God in the silence or actively look over your day with God's help.

Part 2 – Speak to God: This time will help you focus your thoughts and allow prayers to emerge privately or corporately for the many different issues facing us now and as we look to the future.

PERSONAL

Issues affecting you and your discipleship journey.

- **Listen to God:** How are you feeling and how have you felt/reacted at different times throughout today?
- How are you feeling about God today?
- **Speak to God:** Are there particular things you would like to give thanks to God for or to ask for God's help with?

JOURNEY OF FAITH

Issues affecting your discipleship journey.

- **Listen to God:** Take time to reflect on your journey of faith: one or two key milestones on your journey so far; people who have influenced or helped shape your faith.
- Perhaps call to mind any weariness in your body and soul that you feel at this point in your journey.
- **Speak to God:** Give thanks to God and pray for strength and refreshment within the places where you feel weary.

LOCAL COMMUNITY

The people around you and the places you inhabit.

- **Listen to God:** Think about the people who are important in your community or with whom you come into contact regularly (neighbours, teachers, carers, new members of the community, shop workers, community workers, police officers). Do you recognise anyone or any group in particular that may be isolated, excluded or marginalised?
- **Speak to God:** Perhaps tell God what your highest hopes are for the people you have been thinking about and ask how we as the church can help them.

LOCAL ISSUES

Current issues affecting your local community, such as the need for food banks, local elections, poverty and crime.

- **Listen to God:** What are the issues you are most aware of in your local community? How can the church engage with these issues?
- **Speak to God:** Pray for the issues you know about or that have affected you directly.

GOVERNMENT AND LEADERS

In a time of political upheaval and unrest, we remember the national governments of the United Kingdom and other prominent figures who influence or make decisions about national policy.

- **Listen to God:** What are the issues that are most affecting our governments?
- Think about the people across Scotland, Wales, England and Ireland making decisions that affect us as nations.
- **Speak to God:** Pray for integrity, truth and compassion throughout our governments.

POLITICS

Global political issues, economic policies, foreign policies and decision making that affects the world. Where do we see justice and equity beyond greed and power?

- **Listen to God:** Let your emotions guide you to form prayers. What decisions have made you angry? In your anger how will you pray about these decisions? Think about the people who made these decisions – in your love, how will you pray for these people?
- **Speak to God:** Pray for the decisions being made and the people making these decisions.

OUR SOCIETY AND OUR CULTURE

Public services and amenities that help our society function, such as the NHS, emergency services, education and care provision. Those things that shape and influence our culture, such as arts and humanities, media and music.

- **Listen to God:** Spend some time reflecting on your interaction with public services and amenities. Consider how culture has influenced you and how you are influencing culture.
- **Speak to God:** Pray for providers and users of public services and amenities. Pray that we would recognise God's presence within our culture.

GLOBAL

Issues affecting the world around us, such as racism, oppression, conflict, the climate crisis and other social justice issues.

- **Listen to God:** Call to mind a time you have been particularly aware of the beauty and wonder of God's creation. Spend some time remembering this experience.
- **Speak to God:** Allow your prayers to flow from this time of remembering. Tell God everything you are feeling.
- Now spend some time praying for how you/the church can best engage with these particular issues. How might these prayers become embodied?

GLOBAL EVENTS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

Beyond the political and economic changes we see in our world, what else do you notice in global trends?

- **Listen to God:** Think over some of the key global events in the past week, month and year – if you let your sorrow lead your prayers, what would you say to God? If you let your hope lead your prayers, what would you say to God?
- **Speak to God:** What, then, will you pray, in light of this?

REFLECTIVE PRAYER PROMPTS

These questions can be used to help focus our reflections and prayers either at the end of the day, like the Ignation spiritual practice of the Examen prayer, or perhaps as a way of empowering prayer in different types of gatherings through a time of still reflection or prayer stations.

- Where did I experience beauty today? Where did I notice beauty within myself and in others?
- Where did I recognise love and mercy today? Where did I show compassion to myself and to another?
- Where did I see a need for justice today? What was my response? What is my prayer now?
- What am I hopeful for?
- How may I help to bring that hope into being?
- How did I open myself up to and close myself off to the Holy Spirit today?
- What will I choose to lay down, and what will I take with me from today as I journey on from here?



CELTIC PRAYER ADAPTATION

This ancient Celtic prayer could be adapted to speak into your community life. We don't all have cattle, nourishment from food and drink is not the only immediate need, and we don't all live in areas where we encounter larks, so how might this be adapted to speak into your context? And how might this newly formed prayer inspire you to live in ways that are just and peaceful?

We saw a stranger yesterday.
We put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place.
And,
With the sacred name of the triune God,
They blessed us and our house, our cattle and our dear ones.
As the lark says in her song:
Often, often, often goes Christ in the stranger's guise.
(Phill Mellstrom)

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

God of justice,

We praise You for Your love shown to us, flowing through us.

We thank You that You have shown us how to live, how to love.

We pray for Your love to prevail in how we welcome our sisters and brothers who seek safety among us.

We pray for Your love to melt the cold language of our politicians and media.

We pray for Your love to open hearts and homes and budgets and bank accounts.

We pray for Your love to bring down fences and barriers.

We pray for Your love to comfort and strengthen people seeking safety in the midst of trauma and uncertainty and injustice.

We pray for Your love to change us and challenge us and show us how to live, show us how to love like You love.

We praise You for Your love shown to us, flowing through us.

We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen

(Revd Gerard Goshawk)

Lord Jesus Christ,

May Racial Justice Sunday be a further occasion for us to consider the issue of justice in our world, especially in the country in which we live.

Lord, You are a God of justice; we know this because so much of Your word, the Bible, speaks about Your passion for justice.

Give us Your heart for justice, so that we may share Your passion to see real equity, fairness and integrity in church, community and society.

Lord, in Your Scriptures we see how Jesus Christ, our Saviour, responded to unjust practices that were sinful; He opposed them in a demonstrable way, which at times was manifested in a righteous anger.

May we recognise that anything that denies the very source of humanity – the image of God in humankind – is a sin.

And that anything that 'destroys God's likeness in every person is also sinful'.

We are all made in Your image and are 'living icons of God' and so worthy of respect and dignity.

May we be aware that racism is sinful because it assumes that all are not equal before God and are not part of His family.

May we remember that all who fail to challenge racism in church or society are guilty of condoning or colluding with sinful behaviour.

Lord, may we realise that 'justice is love in action', and that if we love people like You do, we should love justice, because justice issues invariably involve people.

Show us how to be real agents for change in Your world, and how this change starts with us working for justice in the places where You situate us.

Finally, may we also recognise that justice is everyone's business, and that when it comes to racial justice, it is unfinished business.

So we pray that Racial Justice Sunday will be an excellent occasion to focus our thinking and actions on making the necessary changes in church and society, by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

Amen

(Richard Reddie)

Heavenly Father,
On this Racial Justice Sunday,
We thank You that You are a God of justice who is active in the world,
We praise You that Your word has the power to change lives,
We believe that You redeem and restore the victims of injustice
And we recognise that, as Christians, we are to embrace the biblical call to do justice.

Lord, Your word says that we are all made in Your image and loved by You. We live in this world, which You created, in which sadly injustice is manifested in ways that are harmful and damaging to so many, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised.

By the power of Your Holy Spirit, give us, as Your people, the courage to stand up for what is just and right, and against sinful attitudes and behaviours that fail to treat all people with the respect and dignity they deserve, as men and women created in Your likeness.

Just as You are the Alpha and Omega, God of the past, present and future, help us to remember the lessons of the past and apply them to the present, so that our future will be a world in which justice, peace and love preside.

This we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen

(Mark Sturge)

Let us pray together:

Our loving Heavenly Father, we are so grateful to be chosen by You, to be included in Your family. Thank You that You extended Your welcome to us and called us to be a part of Your people.

We pray for all those around the world who are experiencing a breakdown in their society.

We lift before You all peoples traumatised by war and conflict, and the victims of floods, earthquakes and other disasters.

Lord, in Your mercy, meet with all those who daily experience terrible suffering; we especially remember refugees and those seeking asylum.

We pray too for the vulnerable who are oppressed by cruel regimes, and for those imprisoned for their beliefs. We believe that You can bless all these people with the presence of Your Holy Spirit, comfort them in their distress and encourage them in their fight for justice.

King of kings, we pray for those in government around the globe. Give all our leaders wisdom as they make difficult decisions.

Lord, You tell us to pray for our enemies, and we ask that where arrogant oppressors stand against Your Kingdom, You will soften their hearts to have compassion for their people.

Lord, we know that there are times when we fail to love others as You love us, and yet You still offer us love and forgiveness.

Jesus, open our hearts so that we accept others as You accepted us. Help us to grow in our faith so that we understand each other better.

By Your Holy Spirit, move Your people forward so our welcome shines as a beacon to lead all people to Your throne of grace.

Amen

(Uzo Iwobi and Angela Hill)



God of love, Your Son's prayer is heard today through the voices of the many desperate refugees fleeing war, famine or injustice. May we not close our ears to His pleas. Help us to find the best ways to respond, that they might live with dignity and develop integrally.

Lord, in Your mercy ...

God of life, we thank You for the richness of diversity that refugees have brought to many of our faith communities, often revitalising them. May we recognise the blessing of their difference and enable them truly to belong.

Lord, in Your mercy ...

God of help, may we find ways to address the sources of the desperation that compel people to leave their homes in other countries. Then, may we have the courage and the commitment to implement them.

Lord, in Your mercy ...

God of mercy, we pray for the many who have lost their lives through the work of callous traffickers. May they now know Your mercy and Your life to the full.

Lord, in Your mercy ...

(Revd Inderjit Bhogal)

SCRIPTURE VERSES THAT CAN BE USED

Hosea 12:6

But as for you, return to your God,
hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God.

Romans 12:21

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Proverbs 22:2

The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

Acts 10:34-35

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Colossians 3:9-11

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Micah 6:8

And what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Amos 5:24

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Isaiah 1:17

Learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Psalms 82:3

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

HYMNS AND WORSHIP SONGS

- Be Thou My Vision
- Beauty for Brokenness
- Bring Forth the Kingdom
- Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You
- Christ, Be Our Light
- Cry Freedom! In the Name of God, and Let the Cry Resound
- Extol the God of Justice
- From Those Forever Shackled
- God Forgave My Sin
- God is working His purpose Out
- God of Freedom, God of Justice
- God, Your Justice Towers
- God's Spirit Is in My Heart
- Great God and Lord of the Earth
- How Good It Is, What Pleasure Comes
- How Shall We Sing Salvation's Song
- I Got a Crown Up in the Kingdom
- Jesus Christ Is Waiting, Waiting in the Streets
- Jesus Heard with Deep Compassion
- Lord, for the Years Your Love Has Kept and Guided
- Lord of All Hopefulness
- Let Us Build a House Where Love Can Dwell
- My Love for You
- They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love
- This Is Amazing Grace
- True Religion
- With the Lord, There Is Mercy and Fulness of Redemption

'I was a stranger and you
welcomed me'

Matthew 25:35

**SECTION TWO:
SERMONS**



1. THE GLOBAL SAMARITAN

BY REVD GERARD GOSHAWK

We live in a mobile world. In many of our communities, in our economy, schools, workplaces and churches, we see a turnover of people like never before. We are globalised. Everywhere is more accessible than it was a hundred years ago. And the whole world is thoroughly connected.

One aspect of all this is the issue around people on the move as they seek a safer life: for ease of reference, we call such people 'asylum seekers'. Other words are used too, but I would like to stick with the term 'people seeking sanctuary/safety'. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tells us that across the world in 2023 there were around 117 million displaced people. The majority of these people were in their own country seeking safety. Because of war, persecution and the impact of the climate crisis, millions of people make the massive decision to uproot and move away from their home in order to find a safe place to live.

All of this is very high on the political and media agenda in the UK. We see a system that is struggling to keep pace. Most of our towns and cities that are of a reasonable size have people seeking sanctuary living within them. We see around us lots of challenging issues and questions that might trouble us as followers of Jesus:

- the controversial political context: the 'Hostile Environment';
- the Rwanda project;
- the *Bibby Stockholm*;
- the Illegal Migration Act;
- the language and actions of politicians and media influencers which are very negative towards people seeking sanctuary.

There are also the experiences of people seeking sanctuary:

- the trauma that caused them to flee;
- the routes they have taken;
- rejection and discrimination upon arrival in our country.

Along with economic issues:

- concerns by people feeling threatened, 'overwhelmed' and confused;
- questions as to whether we have the resources to support those who come.

And then there are cultural and societal issues: changes to the fabric of many of our communities.

Oh dear. There is a lot for us to concern ourselves with here. As Christians, what shall we do? What does the Bible say that might guide us in this?



We can start at the beginning of all things with the assertion in Genesis 1:27 that we are all made in the image of God. We can turn the pages of the first five books of the Bible and find reference upon reference to welcoming the stranger. Jesus Himself reminds us that when we welcome strangers and provide practical help, we are doing this not just *for* Him but also *to* Him.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:35-36:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (NIVUK)

We see in Jesus' story about the workers hired in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) that all are welcome and treated fairly, regardless of when they arrived.

But like so much of our faith and how we should act, it all boils down to love, doesn't it?

And so we turn to Jesus' assertion that God so loved ***the whole world***, all of it and all of us, and that's why He sent His only Son to save us (John 3:16).

Jesus grounded this for us; presumably He knows we struggle to deal with big scales and big concepts, so we can head to Luke 10:25-37 where we find the story of the Good Samaritan and the simple Old and New Testament concept of loving your neighbour as you love yourself. The neighbours in the story are on different sides of an ethnic divide. Help is given. Help is received. Let's focus on these two dynamics: help is given; help is received.

First, **help is given.**

The Samaritan gives help to a fellow human being because he sees someone who is in a time of need. This help is given at personal risk and at personal expense. He takes the beleaguered traveller to a safe place. The help is given in spite of their differences.

What does this tell us about how we should respond to people seeking sanctuary? In fact, as it is a story that Jesus told in order to teach us how to live, we should say, 'What is Jesus telling us here?'

The story tells us that our Christian response should surely be based on mercy, compassion and love: the Samaritan sees the image of God in the injured man. It tells us that our response should be about action: the Samaritan takes action. It tells us that we are required to take risks: perhaps for us this might be about speaking out, challenging and changing the language that is used to talk about people seeking sanctuary, regardless of the pushback that might follow.

It tells us that we should use the resources we have to help those who seek sanctuary from persecution, conflict and crisis. These might be our own, those of our churches or our collective national resources. And this teaching of Jesus tells us that we do all of this regardless of differences: no partiality.

How host nations deal with people seeking sanctuary is surely a racial justice issue. We deal with different people from different places in different ways, don't we? We can help change this! Within our churches and across our communities we can model a better way of being.

And second, in the story, **help is received.**

In Jesus' story, just as help is given, it is obvious that help is received too. The Jericho Road is a two-way street. The 'insider' in Jesus' story is helped by the 'outsider'. It is the Samaritan, the outsider, who enables the blessing, the healing, the safety and much more.

And for us, in our own story of providing safety for 'outsiders', in the complex exchange of giving and receiving, we too will be blessed, our community will be enriched, our economy and everything will be given added value. People seeking sanctuary have so much to give, so much to bring into our lives together. We miss out on all this if we overlook the Christian imperative that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. The simple, effective power of loving our neighbour!

2. **HOMILY FOR RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY 2024**

BY FATHER PHIL SUMNER

There's no doubt that there's so much desperation in our world. Many people are on the move, fleeing wars, famine or oppressive situations. Why would people risk their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean or the English Channel in such flimsy and overcrowded boats if the vast majority were not desperate?

In September 2022, in the space of 24 hours, more than 6,000 people landed on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Such a statistic will, no doubt, arouse concern in the minds of many. But it's important, as was suggested in the document published by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in 2023, called 'Love the Stranger', not to reduce people to statistics. So many have human stories that would move most hearts, if only they had the chance to be heard.

In his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope describes the dynamics of some worrying tendencies of our days. He mentions specifically the growth in different parts of the world of individualism, populism and nationalism, all having a negative impact on people's attitudes towards migration. It's important to question how these tendencies have affected our own ideas because they are now metaphorically part of the air we breathe.



The Pope bases his encyclical on several pieces of Scripture. He quotes the Book of Exodus, where it says, 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22:21). A similar but more positive quote is used by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales. They cite the Book of Deuteronomy where we read, 'You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Deuteronomy 10:19). Pope Francis refers, at length, to the parable of the Good Samaritan, where no limits are put on who is seen to be a neighbour, and he cites the passage in Matthew's Gospel describing the Last Judgement. There we read, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Matthew 25:35). Perhaps many people would argue that they want to be welcoming but there are limits. And, of course, the Pope, too, recognises that there must be control of borders for the sake of the common good. But that control can all too easily become too restrictive or even 'hostile'.

In September 2022, a British Government inquiry on Brook House Detention Centre near Gatwick Airport was published. The inquiry acknowledged that, in the space of five months, 19 incidents were uncovered that would contravene Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Convention states, 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment

or punishment.' The inquiry describes the story of Brook House as being one of stress and distress, and says that the issues discovered were likely to be found elsewhere in the asylum system.

'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22:21)

But don't governments have the right to claim ownership of their territories and to deny entry to others? An important longstanding principle of Catholic theology, referred to again by the Pope, is what is called 'the universal destination of goods' (page 124 of *Fratelli Tutti*). This is a principle that does not deny the right to private property but recognises that the original gift of the earth was made to all humankind. The Pope quotes St John Chrysostom in this regard, saying, 'Not to share our wealth with the poor is to rob them and take away their livelihood.' 'Every human being,' he says, 'has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally' (page 107).

Sadly, the story of too many who make those desperate journeys is one of being further deprived of dignity, leaving some to become suicidal. On the other hand, many parishes that have received refugees into their communities have reported a real enrichment.

Hearing the cry of desperation and responding to it appropriately is not easy, but it gives life both to the refugee and to those who give refuge!

3. A MORE EXCELLENT WAY (1 CORINTHIANS 12:31)

BY REVD INDERJIT BHOGAL

THE WAY OF LOVE: SANCTUARY AND HOSPITALITY

Loving, compassionate and welcoming responses to refugees arriving in Britain from across the English Channel are lighting up ways to challenge hostility with protective hospitality. These include 12 small and large church congregations, such as Nailsea Methodist Church and Chester Cathedral, that in 2023 received the recognition of Church of Sanctuary. Their prophetic responses help to unpack a little of what may be defined as a 'more excellent way': challenging hostility with hospitality.

According to a North Somerset Council webpage, some hotels in the area have been used to provide accommodation for asylum seekers. The webpage gives helpful information for the local community. The small Nailsea Methodist congregation reached out to asylum seekers housed in a nearby hotel, with expressions of welcome, friendship and community. The congregation works with other local churches to provide a Conversation Café for refugees. The Revd Deborah Mallet, the local Methodist Minister, stresses the central importance of welcoming the stranger: 'The call to love our neighbour, whoever they are and wherever they come from, lies at the heart of Christian faith. We aspire to be a community of welcome and a safe place for all.'

The Church of Sanctuary award recognises proven commitments to learning about sanctuary issues, embedding practices of hospitality and inclusion, and encouraging others to do the same. It is a marker along an ongoing journey to express deeper solidarity with isolated, marginalised and maligned communities.

A Cathedral of Sanctuary such as Chester Cathedral stands in a long and deep history of giving sanctuary spanning a thousand years. There were many Cathedrals of Sanctuary in the past. The practice of sanctuary in sacred buildings began to re-emerge in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, when a number of people took sanctuary in church buildings. In contemporary practice, sanctuary is provided in communities of welcome and hospitality. This is what a Church or Cathedral of Sanctuary is, with the focus on the congregation working together to build cultures of welcome and hospitality, in solidarity with refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

The ecumenical instrument Churches Together in Britain and Ireland is working with the national charity City of Sanctuary to develop and promote the Church of Sanctuary movement.

Alongside people of different faiths and beliefs involved in the work of hospitality and sanctuary, this continues to be an important and urgent work for churches. The purpose here is to do all we can to ensure that people seeking sanctuary among us have the protective hospitality in communities and cultures of welcome and safety. This is a constructive example of standing up to racist rhetoric and behaviour around refugees. It is the faith-based response to the declared intention of our government to build a hostile environment here to deter refugees from coming to these shores.

AN ENVIRONMENT OF HOSTILITY: STOP THE BOATS

The hostile environment in Britain includes the vilification of refugees crossing the English Channel in small boats, and the threat to send 'illegal immigrants' to Rwanda. That most asylum seekers coming to the UK in unseaworthy vessels across the terrifying waters of the busy English Channel route are 'illegal immigrants' or 'economic migrants' and unworthy of sanctuary here is a fallacy. This was exposed in a Refugee Council report published on 1 October 2023 ('The Truth About Channel Crossings and the Impact of the Illegal Migration Act').

The report analysed British Home Office statistics on Channel crossings and stated that 74% of arrivals in the UK would be recognised as genuine asylum seekers, people who have fled persecution, terror and oppression. Most of the people crossing the English Channel are refugees. According to the report, more than half (54%) of arrivals from across the Channel are from just five countries: Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Syria and Sudan. Almost half of those who come to Britain from outside Europe come here for family reasons. It should be noted that Britain is home to only 1% of the world's refugees.

The former British Home Secretary's language of 'crisis' and 'invasion' and 'hurricane' misrepresents the reality and is unhelpful in the context, and it only serves to ramp up and legitimise hatred and hate speech. Deliberate dehumanising and demonising of refugees in the interest of political purposes, short-term publicity and point-scoring may be hollow rhetoric, but it deepens hatred and is extremely dangerous.

'Stop the boats' is the political mantra now, designed to further the hostile environment as a deterrent to refugees coming to the UK. The criminal activity of traffickers exploiting vulnerable people can be tackled by stopping wars (the vast majority of people seeking sanctuary are fleeing war) and by providing safe and legal routes for refugees seeking sanctuary.

Boats are not only prominent in politics. They are also a metaphor of human life and struggles. Over the last four hundred years, for example:

- We have the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade when by the mid-1700s more than 100,000 people every year were being taken on British boats from African countries to the Americas and the Caribbean, chained and enslaved for labour. Harriet Tubman inspired enslaved people in their journeys to freedom with the song 'Wade in the Water': get into the water to keep dogs and their keepers off the trail.
- The *Titanic* tragically sank with a massive loss of life in April 1912. It was the biggest boat at the time. It was so big because of the huge demand from people to leave Britain and Ireland for a better life in the USA.
- The *Empire Windrush* is the name given to a former German warboat that carried a thousand people from the Caribbean to the UK, to 'help rebuild the motherland'. It docked in Tilbury on 22 June 1948 and has come to symbolise migration, racism and the Windrush injustice scandal.



- SS *Karanja* sailed for almost 30 years from 1948, carrying passengers between South Asia and East Africa across the Indian Ocean. This is the boat my parents travelled on in 1948 from Bombay for their journey to Mombasa in Kenya, and I at the age of ten travelled twice on this boat in 1963.
- The ‘Vietnamese Boat People’, who fled Vietnam by boats and ships following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and the exodus that continued into the 1990s. Many came to the UK. However, thousands perished in the sea.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic it was not uncommon for people to say, ‘We are all in the same boat,’ though this was far from the truth. Some were in strong boats, those most vulnerable were in flimsy boats, others were looking for boats to be in. ‘We are all in the same boat’ often represents conversations around Mother Earth and climate change. The Book of Wisdom describes life as a ship passing through stormy waters (Wisdom 5:10; 14:1-7)

Boats featured prominently in Jesus’ ministry. There are strong images of Jesus on small boats in choppy waters (Mark 4:35-40), sometimes for safety (Mark 3:9), sometimes using a boat as His pulpit (Mark 4:1), and it was noted on an occasion that when He set off on a boat, alongside His vessel there were ‘other boats’ (Mark 4:36).

A boat symbolises the ecumenical movement, perhaps based on the idea of an ark, like Noah's Ark. It may be mindful also of the boat Jonah sailed in and from which he was ejected only to be swallowed by a big fish. The logos of the World Council of Churches and Churches Together in England portray the church as a boat floating on the ocean of the world with a mast in the form of a cross, symbolising faith and unity and the message of the ecumenical movement.

Sadly, many of the boats in the news and media currently are unseaworthy or have capsized, broken or overturned. Thousands of people seeking sanctuary and crossing dangerous seas have drowned and died. In 2022 it is estimated that 2,062 people died while crossing the Mediterranean. The true numbers are not known. Between 2014 and 2018, for instance, about 12,000 people who drowned were never found.

Overturned boats are far too common a sight today, symbols of broken institutions that fail to protect people, life savers they claim to be but they are actual moral wrecks. On Lampedusa Island there is in the harbour area what is termed the 'boat cemetery', where dozens of capsized refugee boats are laid out and abandoned. They hold memories and stories of struggle, loneliness, fear, the fragility and passage and hope of life. Shipwrecks are a familiar image in the Bible too; three are referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:25.

An overturned boat is a tragic image. It represents harm and danger, but it also has a shape of a dome or a roof. How can people have safe routes of travel, how can a boat become a symbol of safety again, being rescued, being saved? What part can churches play in this? Churches have not always been the sanctuary they enshrine. How can they pay more attention to their motif, and uphold the sacredness of movement, wading in waters, craving safety, building sanctuary?

After all, the word 'ecumenical' has its roots in the Greek word *oikumene*, meaning the whole inhabited earth, and it embraces all people too. It is about reaching out to, including and being a safe home for everyone. How can we bring safety into situations of harm and danger, and what role can we all play in building communities and cultures of sanctuary, protective hospitality, welcome and safety? There are different strategies being held before us in relation to boats carrying refugees seeking sanctuary across turbulent waters.

FOR OUR PURPOSES, I WANT TO TURN TO THE SCRIPTURAL CALL TO A 'MORE EXCELLENT WAY'

What does a 'more excellent way' mean? These words introduce 1 Corinthians 13, a beautiful biblical poem. Its wisdom should not be confined to wedding ceremonies. Its original intention was to give direction to small congregations struggling to discern their best gifts and their calling, how to use their gifts in situations of opposing views and deep conflicts. 1 Corinthians prioritises love. It asserts that without love all gifts are a sham, a show. Words – however angelic and well meaning – without love are hollow rhetoric, like 'a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' (verses 1-3).



It insists that love has to be incarnated, made real and visible. We have to express love. Love is revealed and recognised in kindness, patience, humility, self-giving, truthfulness, bearing with one another, keeping hope alive and facing up to all things in life (verses 4-7). It affirms that love is eternal, not a short-term expression; it endures, never ends. Love outlasts. The Greek word used here is *pipto*, meaning that love never stumbles and never trips up. No other gift is 'complete', no other gift lasts as love does, no other gift compares to love (verses 8-13).

Love is the 'more excellent way'. So 'pursue love' (1 Corinthians 14:1). We aim at love, grow towards it, however imperfect our efforts are. It is an ongoing, never-ending pathway. We aim at perfect, complete love into eternity (1 Corinthians 13:9-12).

How can we respond in love to people seeking sanctuary, and consider strategies enshrined in love?

Is it not our calling also to call for politics of love? Wouldn't it be great if political strategy was rooted in love, and if the wisdom of all people were used to work towards a more excellent way? I want to leave you with one symbol of love, and that is sanctuary, protective hospitality. The way ahead I offer as an expression of love is Church of Sanctuary. Church of Sanctuary is a faith-based initiative, a call to prophetic Christian witness. It is an expression of hospitality as a clear challenge to hostility. It is about the inclusion of all, valuing everyone's gifts and contributions.

The aim is to build protective hospitality in ways that are mutually enriching. The hope is that churches will become places for all and will be proud to foster welcome, hospitality and safety to people fleeing violence and persecution. This would be a clear demonstration of Christian discipleship as a holy act of solidarity, an expression of love.

Sanctuary, or hospitality with safety, is a long-standing prophetic theme of Scripture. The foundation is 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18) and 'love the alien as yourself' (Leviticus 19:34). It is the most repeated ethical requirement in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is echoed in Jesus' teaching about how we treat the neighbour and the outsider (Matthew 25:35-40; Luke 10:29-37).

Churches take pride in welcoming all. Many churches go beyond welcome and are thoroughly engaged with supporting refugees and people seeking sanctuary. What value is added by becoming a recognised Church of Sanctuary? You will become part of a movement to build cultures of welcome and hospitality. You will

be enabled to engage in more informed ways with serious issues that matter to you. You will connect refugees and people seeking sanctuary to support networks and agencies.

The hope is that churches will become places for all and will be proud to foster welcome, hospitality and safety to people fleeing violence and persecution. This would be a clear demonstration of Christian discipleship as a holy act of solidarity, an expression of love.

In a Church of Sanctuary, all members of the congregation intentionally work together to learn about the real stories of refugees and people seeking sanctuary. They seek to embed the values and cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety as part of the values of the congregation and community, using these to support refugees and people seeking sanctuary. They include them in their activities, and share with pride their vision, commitment and achievements,

and let others know about the positive contributions of refugees to society and the benefits of welcoming others. Buildings can provide shelter, but sanctuary is best provided in human warmth, community and relationships. Individuals and single congregations can provide hospitality, but this is stronger when it is in collaboration with others, and a two-way process of mutuality and solidarity.

Church of Sanctuary is not a campaigning political movement. It is a biblically inspired initiative; it is about being prophetic, challenging hostility with hospitality. This might mean we become political, and this is in keeping with the style of biblical prophets, speaking truth to power with passion and compassion, seeking justice.

Human warmth and welcome are the sanctuary we all hold and bring into relationships. Learning and working together to grow cultures of welcome and hospitality is rewarding.

You might decide to apply for Church of Sanctuary recognition. The application form is not a tick-box exercise; it remains a learning exercise. The whole process is about learning together. There are suggestions to assist this process in the book *Hospitality and Sanctuary for All* which is available from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.



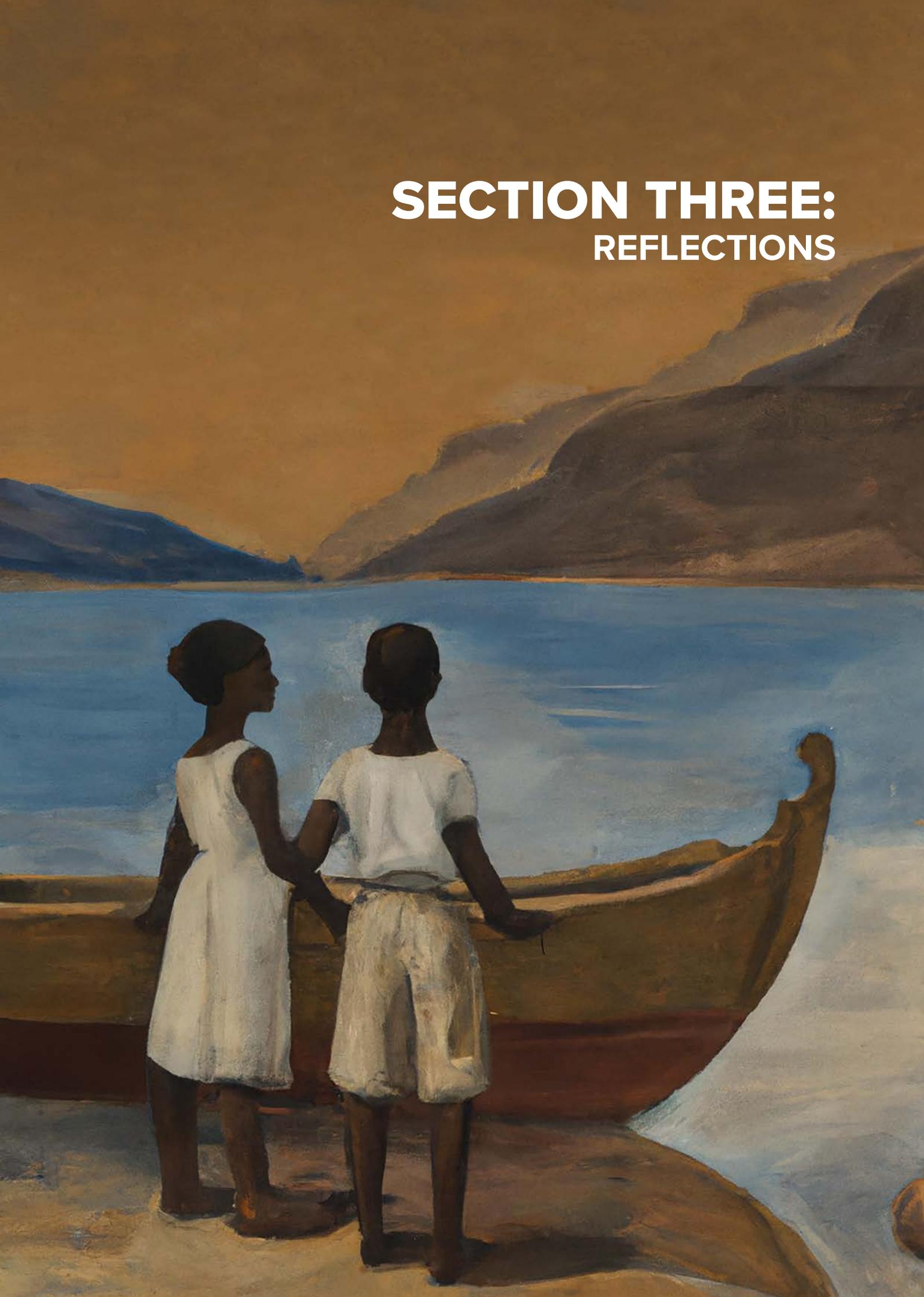
The award has value as a statement by your congregation. It is about your inclusive values of welcome, hospitality and safety for all. It is something to celebrate and to share, and will be an inspiration and encouragement to others. In the process you will build and strengthen refugee voices and leadership. The award is not the end of the process; rather, it is an important stage on an ongoing pilgrimage. It's not about getting a certificate to display, as for example in the eco church initiative. It's more about learning together and building communities of sanctuary.

Acts of love are never erased; they strengthen the foundations and the pathways of love, for us and for others. They are a lasting legacy.

‘Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.’

Psalm 82:3

SECTION THREE: REFLECTIONS





1. GOD'S PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

BY UZO IWObI AND ANGELA HILL

Anyone who has been abroad on holiday knows what it's like to suffer culture shock. Sometimes you visit a country where English is not the first language and you struggle to make yourself understood. Even buying grocery essentials like bread can be a challenge as you cope with the different types of loaf, the currency as you pay and the conversation that accompanies the process. For the refugee who settles here, this is an example of the daily challenges they will face, yet on a much grander scale. It's not just a trip to the grocery store that involves a learning curve. For some people, absolutely everything is different from back home.

Growing up in sunny Nigeria, with our vibrant culture, colourful textiles and pumping Afrobeats music, it was a real shock to have to leave Africa as a young woman to travel to the UK to join my beloved husband Andrew and to fit into the culture and society of Wales – with its cold weather! My husband had settled into Swansea, having secured a lecturing job at the Law School. I was terribly lonely and was informed at a job centre that I had to change my Igbo name, Uzo, into an English name because no one could pronounce it. So I arrived here as 'Uzo' but quickly had to adapt to become 'Linda'.

Life was extremely hard. It was critical that I secure paid work because we had family members to support, including elderly parents. It was disappointing to experience race-related incidents, such as when I visited the local job centre. There I was told that I couldn't get a job in the legal profession in this country, despite being a qualified barrister and solicitor in Nigeria, because I am Black. It was such a shocking statement to make. Immediately it made me feel a sense of otherness which I had never felt in my life up until that point. Not only was there this huge adjustment to the new culture, but I also felt a sense of lack of belonging in my new home and a desperate longing for all I had held dear in my home country.

Imagine the culture shock experienced by many new arrivals to Britain. You might miss your daily routines, the warm weather you've been accustomed to, and all the local grass-roots community events you would normally attend, such as traditional weddings and cultural festivals. The music you loved, the food that sustained you, as well as the people you knew and loved, all left behind. For those people forced to flee a homeland owing to conflict, war, famine or persecution, for the refugee there is no choice but to seek asylum in another land.

My parents were refugees during the Biafran War. They were forced to flee their home and their own village of Abonkwu in Udi, a local government area, in order to escape the bombs being thrown from Nigeria towards Biafra. My father recalled hiring a big lorry that could transport 27 people and driving them in the night through the countryside with headlights extinguished so as to not attract bombing.

Forced to flee to Mbanjo in Imo state in a different part of Biafra, we ended up arriving at a far distant village, inhabited by a very disadvantaged people. Despite their hardship, they were wonderful and kind. On our arrival, they ran into the village square to welcome the lorry and its occupants and opened their homes to all the members of the party. My parents were taken in with all three children.

We were unable to travel further, as our lorry had barely any fuel left, and it would have aroused suspicion if my father had tried to buy some. My pregnant mother ended up giving birth to me in the middle of nowhere, with no medical help available. One of the villagers, though, had a long john bicycle, which had a section where my mother could sit. He cycled my mother and me to the nearest hospital three miles away, where I then received medical attention.

Even though they had very little to eat themselves, and very little to wear, these villagers showed an overwhelming kindness to these complete strangers who were desperately tired, exhausted and hungry. Their homes consisted of just one small room where everyone slept together. Opening their homes to us so graciously, and sharing the very little they had free of charge, was completely selfless. They exemplified the grace the Bible instructs us to offer in Hebrews 13:2: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

'There I was told that I couldn't get a job in the legal profession in this country, despite being a qualified barrister and solicitor in Nigeria, because I am Black. It was such a shocking statement to make.'

My parents never forgot the circumstances into which I was born, which is why my full name is Uzoamaka, which in Igbo means 'the doorway of blessing'. They arrived in a place where the door for blessing had been graciously opened to them.

In his first letter in the New Testament, the Apostle Peter writes to the Christian brothers and sisters in the early church who themselves were God's people on the move, forced to escape brutal persecution because of their faith. From his description, we can tell that even in their new home, they were still experiencing suffering and conflict. They were nobody's choice for new neighbours. They were unwanted individuals, strangers in the world, at odds with the culture where they were now living. But Peter's opening message to these Christians is astonishing: you have been chosen by God Himself. You may be unknown to the people around you; they might not understand who you are, but the Father has always known you and chosen you. Can you imagine how profoundly reassuring this was for this rejected people? Despised by the society around them, hounded from their homes, they were nonetheless chosen by God.

For us as God's chosen people today, we are called to reach out with the same heart as our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself reaches out to rescue a world dying in sin. Whether we're meeting those fleeing persecution and war, or economic migrants escaping poverty, we are called to extend love and friendship, even if just expressed through a friendly smile or a hug. A warm welcome makes such a difference to people who feel lost, troubled and desperately sad.

Because of these experiences in my life, my deepest wish is for our community to become more generous and welcoming, and I was so grateful to have had an opportunity to serve as the first Black Policy Adviser on Equalities for the Welsh Government. I feel so blessed to have made long-lasting friendships with people in this country, especially those who work together to create an inclusive society: a society that recognises the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, and all people who have not had the opportunity to grow and develop themselves in their home countries, who may have been abused, tortured, humiliated or raped, and who have faced all kinds of difficulties to get to this country. Jesus extends open arms to the whole world to say no matter what your background, no matter where you come from or what you've been through, I am with you to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. And just as Jesus extends His peace and His grace to us today, as His people on the move towards our heavenly home, may we extend the same love to others around us.



2. MY STORY

BY ROCIO CIFUENTES, CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER
FOR WALES

I'm very pleased to have been asked to contribute to this important work you are carrying out as a Racial Justice network, particularly on the theme of sanctuary. This is a subject very close to my heart, and is a theme that has most certainly defined my life in a positive way, and now closely informs my work as Children's Commissioner for Wales.

As a young baby, close to half a century ago, I was forced to flee Chile with my parents following the brutal military coup and dictatorship led by Pinochet, which killed, imprisoned and tortured thousands and forced close to a million Chilean people into exile across the globe. Fortunately for us, we were offered sanctuary in Wales, and found here a safe home, solidarity and the opportunity to rebuild our lives.

How that happened is a question I have often been asked, and as time has gone on I have also asked myself, and in doing so I have tried to unpick the factors that made Wales, for me and my family, a true nation of sanctuary, in practice as well as in name.

Growing up in Wales as a political refugee from Chile made me different from my classmates, but it was not something I was ashamed of. I heard my parents say they were political refugees, and I would say the same if anyone asked. I knew we'd had to leave because of the dictatorship, that my dad had been imprisoned and tortured. Both my parents had been persecuted, and had eventually decided the dangers were too great and they could not risk any harm coming to me, their baby.

Yet having witnessed the hardening of attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers over recent decades, I am intensely aware of how different life might have been had the politics of the time been different. Fortunately for me, at the time there was no stigma in being a refugee. On the contrary, there were a whole host of community, trade union and student-led groups that were actively organising to welcome the Chilean refugees.

But goodwill alone is not enough to live on, and we were very fortunate that my family was materially and financially supported so that we could live with dignity. We were not rich by any means, but we had enough, so I never felt that I stood out in relation to my peers. This also stands in sharp contrast to the very meagre levels of financial support that are made available today to those seeking sanctuary, as well as to many other vulnerable groups in society, including jobless and homeless children and families.



I did not know then, but I know now that this grant was made possible through the work of a charitable organisation called the World University Service (WUS), which successfully lobbied the British government of the time to provide funding for a university scholarship grant programme for Chilean students forced into exile. My parents were among the 900 or so recipients of those scholarships awarded by the WUS between 1974 and 1986.

Thanks to this investment, both my parents were able to get jobs in Wales, my dad as a teacher, social worker and later educational psychologist, and my mum as a teacher, social worker and then community worker. For myself, I just carried on growing up and then being a teenager in Wales, before going to university in Cambridge where I did (or 'read' being the posh word for it) Social and Political Science.

I later returned to Swansea, worked for a couple of decades with young people in different jobs, including as a teacher and a youth homelessness worker, and also setting up a Wales-wide charity supporting ethnic minority, refugee and asylum-seeking young people and families. In early 2022 I started in the important role of Children's Commissioner for Wales, an independent institution with the remit of protecting and promoting the human rights of all children who live in Wales. There are around half a million children in Wales, sadly around one-third of whom are living in poverty – something I am fighting very hard to focus hearts, minds and action on.

'Goodwill and open hearts would not, by themselves, have been enough. I would not have flourished in a hostile environment, no matter how hard I might have tried.'

I see my story as a clear example of the importance of actively organising to put values into action and beliefs into practice. From those who organised to welcome the Chilean refugees to those who lobbied the government to fund scholarships, and then ran those scholarship programmes for more than ten years, the difference was made by the vision, the perseverance and the tenacity of those activists. Goodwill and open hearts would not, by themselves, have been enough. I would not have flourished in a hostile environment, no matter how hard I might have tried.

And I suppose this is what has driven me, in my own life, to always seek to turn ideas into something tangible and to turn good intentions and words into action. Sadly today, the world is perhaps in an even more turbulent state than it was 50 years ago, and though we have taken many steps forward, we have also gone backwards. We see racism, Islamophobia, anti-refugee and anti-migrant sentiment and other forms of intolerance on the increase. Even worse, there are organised groups espousing these views.

But if my experience has taught me anything, it is that we all have the duty, the responsibility and the power to change the world around us. I am not religious, but I am pretty sure that most religious texts would urge us to be neither silent in the face of injustice nor bystanders to brutality. So speak out, act out, do as you would be done by. After all, sanctuary is something you can offer, but it is also something that *you* may need one day. Diolch yn fawr am darllen. Thank you for reading.



3. NEW SCOTS: STORIES OF FAITH AND WELCOME

BY DAVID MOODIE, COORDINATOR, SCOTTISH FAITHS ACTION FOR REFUGEES – FAITH ACTION PROGRAMME STAFF, THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

“They welcomed me, I was so surprised! They gave me words that encouraged me, that motivated me. They told me I should be coming back. They gave me that protection that I came here for and they encouraged me ... they asked me not to give up on my dreams.”
(Philomena, who is seeking asylum in Scotland, speaking about her church in Glasgow)

In 2014, during the lead-up to the drafting of a new refugee strategy, refugees in Scotland were asked what would be an appropriate and inclusive term for all refugees and people seeking asylum in Scotland. The name they chose was ‘New Scots’. It is a name that reflects both the journey they have been on and their new sense of identity.

There are now more refugees in Scotland than ever before. In the past few years our nation has welcomed people from Syria and Afghanistan, more than 24,000 Ukrainians, as well as people from nations across the world seeking asylum.

From Strathpeffer to Stranraer, there are New Scots living in every community. Churches and faith communities in Scotland have always played a critical role in welcoming and providing hospitality for people new to Scotland. Since 2015, Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees (SFAR) has existed to equip and empower faith groups to offer a faithful welcome. SFAR strives to ensure that faith groups are engaging in two-way integration, where both individuals and hosting communities engage in positive change. Across the country there are countless groups and projects building community with New Scots. Just a few examples include:

- In Erskine, with the opening of a hotel as accommodation for asylum seekers, local churches worked together to provide a warm response. In the face of far-right targeting, the churches coordinated to lead the community in a generous and friendly local welcome.
- In Raploch, the local Church of Scotland minister developed a good working relationship with the council resettlement team. This meant that when a new family arrived as part of the UK resettlement scheme, they contacted him. The family connected with the local church, the children joined the Scout troop running in the church halls, and last year the mother was ordained an Elder.
- In Edinburgh, St Paul's and St George's have been running Family Fun Days. Every month more than a hundred attendees from a range of nationalities come for games, activities and food, all for free. In addition, the church has been running a popular Conversation Café, and supporting a number of Ukrainians living on board the MS *Victoria*.
- And just across the border in Carlisle, the Border Kirk has welcomed a large number of Iranian asylum seekers to connect and worship alongside them. It now gives its Bible readings in both English and Farsi, and share fully integrated services and fellowship.

'There are now more refugees in Scotland than ever before. In the past few years our nation has welcomed people from Syria and Afghanistan, more than 24,000 Ukrainians, as well as people from nations across the world seeking asylum.'

These are just a few of the many stories of welcome and hospitality happening across the country. But our engagement cannot end there. Refugees and people seeking asylum face many challenges and injustices that make their lives unnecessarily difficult. As people of faith, we have a responsibility to listen to those on the margins and use our voices to raise the concerns of those whose voices have been ignored. This calling to justice is why, following requests from people seeking asylum, Scottish faith leaders are supporting the campaign to provide free bus transportation for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

People seeking asylum in the UK are given £47.39 to live on per week, or just £9.58 if they are living in a catered hotel. This is expected to cover all their costs, including food, toiletries, clothes and phone bills. One thing that is often out of reach is transport. On a budget this tight, even a single day ticket is beyond people's means. Not being able to travel limits people in their ability to access food and essentials, education, doctors' appointments and a large number of other services. It also restricts people in practising their religion, as travelling to a faith community becomes unaffordable.

To address this, leaders from across Scotland's faith communities are calling for free bus passes for asylum seekers. Access to free travel would be life-changing for those otherwise stuck in an inadequate and slow asylum system. It would give people freedom and options that would positively help their mental and social well-being. It would also help to foster two-way integration and help build stronger and more resilient communities as it would allow people to actively participate in activities such as English language practice, and religious worship and fellowship.

Update: On 30 October 2023 the Scottish Government announced that £2 million will be made available in next year's budget to progress free bus travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland.ⁱ

i www.transport.gov.scot/news/free-bus-travel-for-people-seeking-asylum/



4. SANCTUARY AND THE CHURCH IN IRELAND

**REVD STEVEN FOSTER, SOUTHERN CHAIRPERSON,
COUNCIL ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE
METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND**

Many people have sought sanctuary on the island of Ireland. In examining the church's response, we need to acknowledge that we live on an island of two jurisdictions, with religious, political and troubled issues at play.

In terms of UK politics, immigration is not a devolved matter in Northern Ireland (NI). The difference in geography between the south of England and the north part of the island of Ireland is very obvious. However, the same laws about immigration apply in NI as in the rest of the UK.

Northern Ireland has been marked by decades of division and conflict. Its legacy can often be played out in suspicion of the 'other'. All too often this has defined the responses towards people who have come from other countries. There is a great variety of responses to others in NI society. And churches have been vulnerable to being part of the problem – of being inward looking or tribal. Prejudice in the form of sectarianism can all too easily transfer across to xenophobia and racism. The church has had to work hard to examine itself.

The church in NI tends to have a place in society that is more prominent than the rest of the UK and Ireland. Its strength also means that it is well placed to respond to many social needs. And that has proven to be the case with those who have travelled from other places. This is particularly so in more urban areas where people from other national backgrounds have been accommodated or settled. Many of the churches have good premises and many of their buildings are used in activities to support others.

Ireland as a whole has all too often been familiar with an exodus of its people to other places. A few generations ago, more than a million people died in Ireland owing to famine, and two million emigrated. It was the loss of nearly a quarter of our population at the time. The twentieth century continued to see many more leave these shores in search of a better life. Many continued to suffer in the places they arrived at, but many thrived in their new homes.

There are those with a limited awareness, deliberate or accidental, of our history. However, for the most part this history is embedded in the consciousness of Irish people in regard to migration. That has played itself out in the Republic of Ireland generally being a welcoming country. Politically in the Republic, there hasn't traditionally been a strong anti-immigrant sentiment. In the past couple of years, however, there has been a rise in the willingness of some people to be vocal about their opposition to Ireland accommodating people seeking refuge from other countries. There are a few reasons why this may be.

The big political issue in the Republic of Ireland – but more importantly a big human issue – is housing. The lack of affordable and social housing has been an issue for many years, and under successive governments it has not only become a crisis, but also a disaster for many. People are locked into exorbitant rents, unable to study or work where they need to, unable to have the prospect of buying a home and, in many cases, being forced to emigrate. Too often a phrase has been heard in recent years: 'We shouldn't take in anyone else until we can house our own.' There are also crises in health care and childcare, alongside other social challenges. Concerns that people have regarding social infrastructure are a backdrop to unrest. However, the past decades have also been marked by corruption or institutional complacency, and so most people recognise that the roots of many problems run deeper and are political.

Twenty-five years ago, the Irish Government set up an emergency measure to accommodate International Protection Applicants – Direct Provision. This degrading system is still in place today. The government departments, with the help of local councils, source property owners who will then be paid to provide accommodation and food. The core of its moral failure is that it is a financial transaction relating to vulnerable people.

Separate to this system of recognising those seeking asylum, Ireland has taken in nearly 100,000 Ukrainian refugees under the EU Temporary Protection Directive. Unlike those in Direct Provision, Ukrainian people can rightly work and receive other benefits. There is effectively a two-tier system that suggests that our white nearer neighbours can be treated differently from others.



Racism has always existed within Ireland. However, the past couple of years has seen a rise in online groups promoting unrest about immigration and the local housing of asylum seekers. There have been some very vocal protests at proposed Direct Provision centres. Local people have various concerns relating to their area and social needs that must be listened to and addressed. However, there are those with racist sentiments who are building on those concerns to create unrest.

The rise in racist rhetoric needs to be combated with a different voice and in peaceful action. The systemic causes of social unrest need to be addressed with political urgency, sensitivity and courage. The welcome and integration of people who have come to Ireland must happen well throughout all our communities. These things are happening at different levels. How much is the church a part of this?

Most Christians in Ireland see their response to the social needs around them as something to be lived out among the general structures rather than necessarily through the church function. The place and size of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland's history is significant in this. Protestants over the years have become less interested in big social projects in their own settings. They have become more active alongside all in their community for the common good. As a result, it is not always easy to assess fully what the church is doing, because the church is out there in society doing it! And this is certainly true when it comes to the integration of those from other backgrounds.

Some years ago, word got out around a rural town that some vacant apartments were being prepared to accommodate families of asylum seekers. There was alarm because the local community had received little actual information. A meeting was quickly arranged in the local community hall, with hundreds turning up. The leader and members of the main anti-immigration party came in from other counties and scattered themselves around the meeting hall with the aim of agitating the conversation. However, local church members, with clarity about

'People are locked into exorbitant rents, unable to study or work where they need to, unable to have the prospect of buying a home and, in many cases, being forced to emigrate.'

the social consequences of their faith, spoke up and were influential in the direction of travel. Days later, the locals told the outside protestors to go away. The integration of the 20 families has since been a great success.

Those who have come to Ireland have come from all sorts of religious backgrounds. There are many from Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal backgrounds. When those who are committed Christians are housed in a particular area, they usually seek out the church that best reflects their own religious expression. Many otherwise declining churches throughout Ireland have been transformed by this growth in membership. Those churches have generally had to address all sorts of challenges in their worship life and fellowship as well as seeing renewal.

A number of churches throughout Ireland have originated as a result of particular migrant populations. There are many churches where nearly all the membership comes from a particular country or continent and have particular cultural expressions.

Multicultural church membership, however, does not necessarily translate into racial justice in society. And the church in Ireland has a mixed record of providing sanctuary and yet not being as effective as it could be in regard to countering injustice. Some churches have really struggled to integrate newcomers. There have been strong expectations that others would automatically adhere to the very particular expressions and customs of a particular church. The journeys of how integration happens have not always been handled well. The ineffectiveness in this regard of those churches within their own walls has meant that they have had little to offer to wider society.

However, many churches have struggled well. They have taken seriously the needs of all and sought to journey well in ensuring that church truly is a place for all. This has been the case in terms of not only the church's fellowship, but also the church's mission.

Church of Sanctuary must be commended as a very positive initiative. Churches commit themselves to be places of sanctuary and welcome. Churches are guided in this by learning what is needed for welcome and sanctuary to happen well, embedding the core of welcome and integration into the thinking and body of the church, and sharing what's being learned. There are a number of Irish Churches of Sanctuary, but there is a real need for more. We should also note the wonderful work of Embrace NI in supporting churches in the North. There is also Sunago that helps churches with their welcome.

Many churches, North and South, including others not part of Church of Sanctuary, host some imaginative and compassionate initiatives to welcome all. There are coffee and café drop-ins with specific commitments to integrate people from different ethnic and national backgrounds. Some churches have dedicated spaces in their premises to being a welcome hub. Churches have also let their premises be used by other community groups engaged in this work, including settings where the small local church fellowship didn't feel it had sufficient resources to run it. There are mother and toddler groups and others specifically for women. English language classes are a common feature in the North. Some churches have community gardens for people to work in. There are also various groups and engagement with sports, exercise and walking groups.

Many churches are very actively engaged with SVP or food banks (and host them) and engage with them to the benefit of asylum seekers and refugees. Practical needs are met that have included clothing and furniture as well as food. There are churches where the local members have turned up to provide a different narrative at local protests. Church groups have met with Direct Provision providers and engaged with them about the needs of residents and facilitated small groups of various kinds.

Consideration also needs to be given to the overall national discussion. As Ireland considers its various societal challenges, what voice does the church have and are we exercising it? There was criticism in the Irish media in 2023 about the perceived silence of the church with regard to the welcome of the stranger and the re-traumatisation of individuals in Ireland after they had already fled persecution. It's hard to say that such criticism has been totally unfair.

The Irish Inter-Church Committee spoke out in 2022 against the intimidation of people seeking International Protection. The Irish Council of Churches marked its 50th anniversary with a symposium that reflected well on a diverse, secular and unequal Ireland. However, we have heard little from the main Irish church leaders or church bishops in these years about the racial and integration issues facing Irish society. Some church denominations have produced good resources and reflected well on such concerns. Others don't comment much.

Some church groups participated among the tens of thousands at the national Ireland for All Solidarity March in Dublin in February 2023. For most churches, however, it was not on their radar to engage with. Maybe they would have felt concerned about being seen to be aligned with political activism that critiques government policy. There is a sense that the Roman Catholic Church in particular is on the back foot in regard to speaking out on social issues given the changing place it has had in Irish society over the decades. However, in a more general sense, many of the churches may feel marginalised. The church too often perceives that society doesn't want to hear from it. Maybe underneath, the church knows that too often we have leaned towards judgement of the 'other' rather than the Christlike default of wholehearted love and embrace.

The church needs to be out there. Justice matters. Welcoming the stranger, the lonely, the dispossessed, the migrant is at the core of our faith. We have no choice but to speak out and to act with compassion and courage.

5. STUDENTS IN BIRMINGHAM TAKING A STAND FOR JUSTICE

BY BARBARA FORBES – QUAKER ASYLUM AND REFUGEE NETWORK

As people of faith, many of us will find inspiration in the Scriptures and in the writings of a whole variety of theologians. Sometimes we are inspired by particularly uplifting services or sermons. Often we are inspired by actions – our lives speak for what we believe, and a faith without action is a dead faith, as we can read in the Letter of James (2:14-26).

In relation to asylum seekers and refugees, we are often inspired by members from many different faiths, those who show courage and resilience even when faced with unbelievable hardship, danger and hostility, and those who show hospitality and welcome and who go above and beyond any mere call of duty.

We all know that children have a very strong sense of fairness and justice, and all across the country, schools are becoming involved in the City of Sanctuary movement to help build a culture of hospitality and welcome. The work of pupils and staff can be inspiring, and none more so than in the Catholic Primary Schools of Birmingham! Of the 70-plus schools in the local network, around half are Catholic schools, mainly primaries but there are a few amazing secondary schools as well. Children read and reflect on stories about the lives of refugees, invite asylum seekers into schools and cover their buildings with posters and orange hearts.

They write stories and poems (one pupil from St Bernard's Primary received a phone call from Benjamin Zephaniah, and Brian Bilston commented very favourably on some of the poems produced by pupils at St Ambrose Barlow). The pupils at Our Lady and St Kenelm invited parents and members of the public to view a stunning art installation in their school hall, produced an exhibition for a local art gallery, and put up a display in their local shopping centre. Many pupils write to their MPs, invite them into schools to ask quite searching questions (and I have heard at least one veteran MP taking great care to respond thoughtfully and appropriately to 10- and 11-year-olds who are outraged by the government's policy towards asylum seekers), and they also write to the British Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. Some schools even go beyond that and have quite rightly been mentioned in local and national media.

In spring 2022, we encouraged our schools to send messages to their local MPs on Valentine's Day, asking if they 'had a heart for refugees' and if they would oppose the Nationality and Borders Bill then going through the British Parliament. One school, Abbey Primary, featured in the local press, and pupils at another school, St Dunstan's Primary, were thrilled when their local MP, Tahir Ali, actually mentioned this initiative and held up one of their Valentine's Day cards in the House of Commons during the debate. The fact that they then very soon had to learn that the Bill had been passed was a hard learning process, but they also learnt that people will listen to them and take note of what they say.

Pupils from St Dunstan's took to the streets in spring 2023 in collaboration with the 'Lift The Ban' campaign. They visited local shops and businesses to persuade them to support the call for asylum seekers to be given the right to work. Pupils from nearby St Ambrose Barlow did the same (and the school also put the City of Sanctuary logo on its sports kit!).

Perhaps the most remarkable development in the academic year 2022-23 took place right at the end of the summer term. Outraged by the news that Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick had ordered cartoons in children's reception centres to be painted over, pupils from St Gerard's and St Dunstan's promptly started producing posters and welcome messages which they sent to those reception centres, and also to the Immigration Minister himself with a request that he deliver them. This caught the imagination of Change.org which teamed up with City of Sanctuary to produce a petition (with now more than 120,000 signatures) and developed into the #CartoonsNotCruelty campaign.

Looking forward, we're confident that these schools will continue their exemplary campaigning work and that they will be an inspiration to others.

But the question remains: why do Catholic schools embrace this vision so wholeheartedly while we sometimes struggle to inspire such a level of commitment in other denominational and faith schools?

Perhaps the answer lies in the role of Catholic Social Teaching and the fact that all leaders of Catholic schools are strictly required to be active in their churches. Catholic teachers have told me that 'this is who we are'; they are enjoined to 'love the stranger' and are proud that their pupils are 'keen to live their virtues for the common good'. The vision to be a place of welcome and sanctuary is so entwined with the fabric of their faith that for them it is self-evident that they commit to this work. They are not timid in their approach!

Here in Birmingham, we welcome all schools into our Schools of Sanctuary Network, and it was wonderful to experience our last Celebration Day when one of our Catholic primaries opened its doors to a dozen other schools, including other Catholic schools, as well as non-religious institutions with a high proportion of Muslim students. All these children came together to share their skills and their passion, and to make friends with each other. We hope that this model can continue on an annual basis. As John Cotton, currently Leader of Birmingham Council and former Cabinet Member for Social Justice and Equalities, has said on several occasions, 'The commitment and vision of these children is wonderful to see – they are our future.'

'One school, Abbey Primary, featured in the local press, and pupils at another school, St Dunstan's Primary, were thrilled when their local MP, Tahir Ali, actually mentioned this initiative and held up one of their Valentine's Day cards in the House of Commons during the debate.'



6. THE ONE GOD OF ALL NATIONS

**BY FR KIERAN J. O'MAHONY, OSA, IRISH AUGUSTINIAN
FRIAR AND BIBLICAL SCHOLAR**

As a counterpoint to the national histories produced and published by the various chroniclers, the voices of the prophets add a distinct, sometimes discordant, tune. They are, of course, voices of the classical tradition, trying to bring people back to fidelity to the covenant as found in the Pentateuch. But, even though they are national figures, they are not confined to national issues. The prophetic writings promote an awareness of others that includes other nations as part of God's plan of salvation. This is a surprising development, which takes place under the rubric of two discoveries. As we just saw above, the first discovery is that YHWH is not the God of the Israelites only (henotheism) but the one God of all creation (monotheism). The second discovery is that the salvation he offers to the Israelites is offered as well to the Gentiles. How did such a revolution come about?

Already in the second chapter of Isaiah, God's concern for "all the nations" is clear:

"In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the

hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isa 2:2-4)

This wonderful inclusion of the nations is found also in the Little Apocalypse of Isaiah (c. seventh century BCE) at Isaiah 25:6ff.

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever." (Isa 25:6-7)

Although this text is indeed a progression from Isaiah 2:2ff., nevertheless, Isaiah 25 teaches that the offer of salvation to all nations is not only by means of Israel, but by means of becoming Israelites. In practice, this would mean joining the religion of the Israelites and accepting their pivotal role in God's history with humankind.

Nevertheless, viewed within the limits of the period it is an impressive and generous insight. It responds to a peculiarly Israelite problematic. In antiquity, polytheism was generally tolerant and concern for the salvation of others by means of our religion was not actually an issue. You have your gods and we have ours. The same easy indifference accounts for syncretism, that is, the tendency to "pick and mix" beliefs from a variety of sources. But in the prophetic texts we see the dawning realisation that God is one alone. With that conviction arises the consequent question, how will the other nations fare?

In the middle of First Isaiah, an unexpected text jumps off the page:

"The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'" (Isa 19:22-25)

This is a text that presumes some kind of Jewish settlement in Egypt, as in Jeremiah 44:1 (or it may be a text from a later period which has been added here).

Second Isaiah, writing during the exile in his Book of Consolation, takes this awareness of God's concern with all the nations a step further:

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa 49:6)

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you." (Isa 55:3-5)

This is a new role for Israel - to be the means by which God is made known to other nations. In the last part of Isaiah, it becomes clear that what is envisaged is conversion to the faith of Israel, as we read, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. (Isa 42:6)

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. (Isa 42:9)

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isa 60:3) This vision comes to expression too in the prayer book of Israelite religion, the Psalter:

"Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia - 'This one was born there,' they say." (Ps 87:4)

Although the distinctive duality remains, the prophets call for a mission among the aliens: Isaiah 42:5ff.; 66:19; Zechariah 14; Tobit 14:6. The insight that God is not just ours and concerns himself not just with us will lead eventually within the Christian gospel to a breakthrough in relation to the Gentiles. The creator who wants to save everyone can no longer be confined to an ethnic group. The place of other nations in God's plans is a biblical issue, in both the Old and the New Testaments. However, the wider question of the role of other religions in God's plans for humanity is a modern question that is not specifically raised in our texts, although it is a question with which contemporary Christians must struggle. The reader may like to read the story of Jonah in this context. It constitutes a quite ironic reflection on narrow nationalism and religious mean-spiritedness. The new attitude towards the nations is not based on any discovery of the joys of pluralism. On the contrary, it is rooted in a sense of responsibility towards God and a desire to be true to an understanding of God who is not exclusive to one nation.

THE STORY OF JONAH

The Bible uses many different kinds of writing to communicate its teaching about God. The book of Jonah is a rare biblical genre, that of satire or ironic comedy. It seems to have been written during the Persian period (548-332 BC), although it purports to come from Jonah, son of Amittai (2 Kings 14:25). Because the book counters a narrow nationalistic faith, we may conclude it was written at a time when feelings against the outsider and the foreigner were high.

Before looking at the message, it is useful to notice a few unusual features. It portrays, mostly in prose, an unwilling prophet, who tries to escape God's call by going to Tarshish, a place where according to Isaiah God is not known (Isaiah 66:19). God however is persistent and, by means of a boat, a storm and a great fish, sends Jonah to Nineveh, "the great city." But where or what was Nineveh? It used to be the ancient capital of Assyria, the most hated enemy of Israel (2 Kings 18:13-37). So, the prophet is sent on an apparently ridiculous task. But, the outcome is surprising.

When the reluctant prophet arrives at Nineveh and preaches judgement in the name of God, the results are startling. Every single person repents, from the king down to the lowest citizens and even extending to the animals (as God himself notes!). In response, God quite reasonably decides not to inflict disaster on Nineveh. Jonah's response, however, is different: anger and displeasure. The prophet confronts God for being "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2). God defends God's self robustly: "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11). God's word is the last word.

The unwillingness of Jonah is instructive. He is unwilling to carry God's word beyond the confines of Israel. He is unwilling to recognise the genuine response of the Assyrians. He is unwilling to accept God's merciful concern. In a word, he is unwilling to accept God as God really is, gracious and merciful to all. Perhaps the writer has in mind that great passage from Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9).

"But where or what was Nineveh? It used to be the ancient capital of Assyria, the most hated enemy of Israel (2 Kings 18:13-37). So, the prophet is sent on an apparently ridiculous task. But, the outcome is surprising."

FOR REFLECTION

- Church members often think “my/our God” is just that, “mine/ours” and no one else’s. Have you met that attitude in yourself or others?
- Prejudice against other cultures is often supported by religious differences. Am I genuinely convinced that “my/our” God is truly the God of everyone in every time and place? Have I any contact with people of other Christian denominations or with those of other religious faiths in my community?
- How can people of different religions live at peace with each other, and so contribute to a peaceful co-existence not only in our country, but on this planet?

PRAYER (JONAH)

God, by whose word we were made,
by the words of our own stories
we shape and reshape the world.

And so, we pray:

Teach us to be so at ease with ourselves in your love
that we are never, like Jonah, wrong-footed
by the story of your kindness to others,
and knowing no grievance,
may only laugh with joy.

*This chapter is taken from the book **What the Bible says about the stranger: biblical perspectives on racism, migration, asylum and cross-community issues**. It is republished with the kind permission of Fr Kieran J. O'Mahony and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting.*

ORGANISATIONS AND GROUPS WORKING TO PROVIDE SANCTUARY, AND TO ADDRESS THE REFUGEE CRISIS

SCOTTISH FAITHS ACTION FOR REFUGEES

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees is a multi-faith partnership project hosted by the Church of Scotland seeking to coordinate and promote action by faith communities in Scotland to support asylum seekers and refugees.

www.sfar.org.uk

THE JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation, at work in more than 50 countries around the world, with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.

www.jrsuk.net

MIGRANTS ORGANISE

Migrants Organise provides a platform for refugees and migrants to organise for power, dignity and justice to enable meaningful inclusion and integration.

www.migrantsorganise.org

QUAKER ASYLUM AND REFUGEE NETWORK

Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) works to change the way refugees and asylum seekers (whether recognised under the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees or not) are treated, to ensure that justice and compassion are the guiding principles.

www.qarn.org.uk

WELCOME CHURCHES

Welcome Churches work to ensure that every refugee is welcomed by their local church.

www.welcomechurches.org

THE REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CENTRE

Assisting refugees and migrants through crisis and disadvantage, by removing barriers to their integration and enabling them to become equal citizens.

www.rmcentre.org.uk

LONDON CHURCHES REFUGEE FUND

London Churches Refugee Fund makes grants of up to £1,000 every spring and autumn to multiple front-line refugee projects in London.

www.lcrf.org.uk

STORIES OF HOPE AND HOME

Stories of Hope and Home is a Birmingham-based story-telling project offering asylum seekers and refugees a space to share their stories and others a space to hear them. The aim is to empower those who have been forced to flee and seek refuge to recognise the value of the stories of their humanity, and to create spaces of powerful personal encounter in order to challenge and change perceptions around these issues.

www.storiesofhome.org.uk

CORRYMEELA

Corrymeela began with the idea of ‘community’ – with individuals, inspired by their Christian faith, agreeing to be in respectful relationship with each other as an expression of how people can live well together.

www.corrymeela.org

BOAZ TRUST

The Boaz Trust is a Manchester-based charity supporting people who have become homeless after claiming asylum. This dynamic charity supports people seeking safety, who are in need of hospitality, not hostility.

www.boaztrust.org.uk

JOINT PUBLIC ISSUES TEAM

Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) includes the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church working together for peace and justice.

www.jpit.uk

CHURCHES’ REFUGEE NETWORK

The Churches’ Refugee Network encourages churches in Britain and Ireland to take an active stand in addressing the myriad issues linked to asylum, refugee and immigration matters.

www.ctbi.org.uk/crn

CHURCH OF SANCTUARY

Church of Sanctuary encourages churches and cathedrals in Britain and Ireland to be welcoming places of safety for all, and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution.

www.churchofsanctuary.org



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS: AN ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION STARTER

BY MARK HOWARD, DESIGNER

The images on the front and back cover of this resource, as well as those on pages 7, 29 and 43 are Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated, with some manual adjustments using Adobe Photoshop software.

All expand on the Exodus narrative with a contemporary parallel, created with the instruction to be “*in the style of Aaron Douglas’ painting ‘Harriet Tubman’ (1931)*” For example, the front cover instruction was to generate an image of “*The Red Sea parted in the style of Aaron Douglas’ painting ‘Harriet Tubman’ (1931)*”



Aaron Douglas (1899 - 1979) was a successful and highly influential black American artist. One of his most famous paintings was of the abolitionist and social activist Harriet Tubman (see p36), who lived from 1822 to 1913.

After escaping her own enslavement, Harriet rescued approximately 70 slaves before the American Civil War, using a network of antislavery activists and safe houses known collectively as the “Underground Railroad”. As news of her endeavours spread, Harriet Tubman was nicknamed “Moses”.



WHY USE AI?

In today’s global media, it is widely publicised that the rapid development of AI is a cause for concern because of its potential impact on employment and society at large, which will affect every one of us, and probably not equally.

What is becoming very clear is that AI is not going to go away. The challenge is to find internationally agreed ways to control it and to “train” it, so that it can be used for the benefit of all.



Less well reported is that AI is also the subject of rightful scrutiny and criticism for “bias”; a result of the datasets on which AI systems are trained. Left unchallenged, this will have serious repercussions in future as AI systems inherit and reproduce these biases exponentially, affecting everything from information retrieval to service provision even more than happens at present.

By instructing AI to generate interpretation of elements of the Exodus story, based on the style of a particular artist whose style is respectful and dynamic, has been an interesting and perhaps “risky” challenge. While the images barely resemble the original painting “Harriet Tubman”, they do appear to be similar in style to other paintings by Douglas, and seem to have “understood” the narrative. With AI, the key is the way we ask the question.



What do you think? Are these successful examples of how we might “train” AI away from bias and towards more respectful, faithful representation? I think they could be...

Contact: mark@base25.com for more information



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