

# Welcoming the Immigrant Stranger: Stories of Mission from among the Churches

## ***Introduction***

Many churches across a wide range of denominations are currently engaged in ministries with immigrants and particularly with asylum seekers. Christians in the larger cities have become aware of growing and proliferating local ethnic communities, but there is also much compassionate pastoral care for dispersed vulnerable individuals and families. Some of these people, including families with children, become utterly destitute in our land.

The following stories are mere fragments of this significant response to an urgent humanitarian need amongst us. Grateful thanks are due to all those who have willingly told of their joys, frustrations and hard work in the service of asylum seekers and of other migrants. These stories have been selected to illustrate the range of ministries: from support for individual migrants and their families, through to chaplaincy in a government detention centre, and to focussed contact with the Home Secretary over the inadequate vetting process for Christian asylum seekers who have been persecuted in their homelands for their faith. Finally, as this report is being collated, there is a growing momentum of *ecumenical* awareness and *ecumenical* concern for the plight of too many of these strangers amongst us, with mention of a couple of resulting initiatives.

**Andrew Hubbard** is minister of **Lincoln Baptist Church**, which borders on a relatively poor area of the city. Migrant workers are attracted to cheap rented accommodation. The local primary school has experienced a huge influx of thirty Polish children: thirty children at one intake, equivalent to a whole additional class. Andrew is a familiar face, regularly visiting the school, and taking assemblies, and his ongoing support has been appreciated. The Polish children initially spoke no English, and the school had no specialist resources to help address the challenge. Breakfast and after-school clubs were quickly established because their parents work very long hours, and too often for below the minimum wage. It is not uncommon to see one Polish mother arrive at the school gate with a crocodile of a dozen children. Members of the church work as volunteers, assisting teachers in the classrooms.

The majority of these Polish people are faithful Roman Catholic Christians and attend Mass locally. The Baptist Church contributes complimentary practical help. One important initiative has been the launch of English classes for the adults, on church premises. Half a dozen posters for the first session attracted over forty people. Each Wednesday there are now three separate language groups, with volunteer support from the congregation. Several months later, the children speak very good English, but many of their parents need ongoing help. The quality of family life often depends on being able to access the Citizen's Advice Bureaux and Social Services, for example, and to make educated decisions about the future. It is good that they are befriended by UK Christians.

**Ruth Shepherd** is a **Methodist Deacon** working with **The Avenue Methodist Church in Castlefield**, a multi-ethnic housing estate, in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. Although the council ward is ethnically diverse, this estate has a particularly high proportion of Muslim people. In stark contrast to surrounding areas, Pakistani children form the majority group as they grow up on the estate, although

this changes abruptly as they move on to study or work elsewhere. There are two mosques in the same street as the small Methodist Church. The church notice board is prominent, in full view of bus passengers and of local people passing to and from their prayers at the mosques. The church membership feels it has a crucial mission to share God's love by working to build a sense of shared community, through breaking down fears of cultural and religious differences.

Ruth is working with the Church on the challenging task of forming links amongst different community groups and individuals. She hopes that the church membership will increasingly be recognised and accepted as 'a people of faith'. The mosques open their doors on 'open afternoons' and many Church people have gone to listen and learn, and to support Muslim friends and neighbours. Inspired by the mosques' initiative, the Church has also offered an event called '*What is a Christian Christmas?*' Visitors had an opportunity to share in seasonal crafts and festive food, and Ruth and Rev. Shameela Jameelee retold the Christmas story.

The church is keen to be known as a centre where anyone can come together, have a good time, *and know that they are safe and respected*. The resources are very limited, but the church organises a variety of events, both for fun and to encourage socialising across different groups. Their regular activities range from '*Prayer and Praise*', a fellowship group, a drawing and painting class, and badminton matches. Special events include film days, art exhibitions, and festival parties. Many community activities also take place on the premises.

There are special midweek worship services and a monthly worship event which caters especially for young children and their families – all designed to give 'easy access' and open welcome to the worship life of the church and to faith in God.

The Church took the initiative to generate community support for the devastated Pakistani communities struck by recent severe earthquakes. Ruth acknowledges that the grim tragedy, with its common language of human suffering, has brought the estate communities closer together, as they have all striven to raise money. A craft group at the church has knitted blankets, which have been sent to Pakistan by a reliable local charity, with a small label sewn into each one, "*Made with love by the Avenue Methodist Church*". This same group are currently filling shoeboxes with essential items to send to children in war-torn countries around the world and other church members have donated the money needed to transport these gifts.

This small, prophetic church is passionately engaged in befriending its neighbours, and in sharing God's love with everyone who lives in the challenging estate context.

**Rev John Yapp** is a Methodist minister, whose work with Chinese immigrant communities is financed by the Methodist West London Mission. The ***King's Cross Chinese Congregation Methodist Church*** was initially largely comprised of immigrants from Hong Kong who settled in London and who are typically working in the catering industry. In the early days there was just one Chinese worship service per week. More recently, however, an influx of immigrants and students from mainland China created an urgent need to cater specifically for this Mandarin-speaking group.

The church now has two distinct congregations, Mandarin and Cantonese, worshipping consecutively every Sunday. Both congregations are thriving, and have a broad age range of people. Both now have a significant student population. Many people have encountered the Love of God and experienced conversion while studying or working in London.

The 2007 Annual Report of the church celebrates this expansion. *The Mandarin Congregation now has an average attendance of 45 people. It used to consist of asylum seekers and restaurant workers. However, when the Mandarin Youth Fellowship came into being in early 2007, educated working adults and undergraduates were added to the fold. We now have a full time worker, Ms. Pingting Chen, who serves the Mandarin Congregation, in addition to Revd .John Yapp who oversees the work of both congregations.*

The Chinese church also offers practical support for immigrants. There is a range of community support activities such as basic English classes, in addition to information and advice service. It is very hard for migrant people to access medical care, and the church has a link with Project London, an independent organisation which serves vulnerable and disadvantaged people. The church also works closely with International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to help migrant people to return to their homeland.

The life of these two congregations provides a spiritual and material lifeline to all these young people and adult workers whilst they are in the UK.

**Rev Philip Clements-Jewery** is minister of **New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield**. The church runs the **Reach Project** for asylum seekers. One Sunday, five years ago, an African man arrived to worship with the church, and to give “thanks to God for his deliverance.” He had been successful in claiming sanctuary in the United Kingdom. The church was immediately alerted to the needless suffering of many other asylum seekers in and around the city, and the Reach Project began. Over the last five years, the project has opened its doors each Tuesday, largely staffed by a volunteer team from the church congregation. All the user-members of Reach sign in every week, and have access to drinks, and free hot food, second hand adult and children’s clothing, furniture, toys and baby equipment, and vital bus fares. They can draw on the combined experience of the church team: local knowledge, practical help, and advice about the Home Office rules. They enter a social space, where *all are welcome*. Over five hundred people have crossed the threshold since the project began. The vast majority had fled from their homes in twelve different African countries, and others from Turkey and the Middle East.

Philip is also on hand to pray with individuals, when requested, and particularly when they have to face legal tribunals which, in some instances, may determine *either life or death*. He also offers more formal opportunities for prayer, which attract both Christians and also some Muslims. The project employs a multi-lingual interpreter, and a community worker, who provide skilled support, and home-visits, when families first arrive in Huddersfield.

**Reach** successfully applied for a grant to produce a booklet, *How to Set Up Support for Asylum Seekers*, designed to encourage other churches to establish similar projects. There is also a video of their work. The support they offer has provided friendship, hospitality, encouragement and confidence to many fearful people over the last five years.

**Rev John Western** is Pastor of **St Leonards-on-Sea Baptist Church**, and has also supported many asylum seekers. The majority of in-comers to the local area are placed by the Home Office. John’s earliest involvement with these vulnerable and disorientated people began when there was a sudden influx of Albanians, Kosovans and Serbs. They were all accommodated in a local hostel, with no thought given to

the conflicting ethnicities which were the fundamental source of inter-cultural aggression which had made them homeless. Since then another wave of asylum seekers from Iran and Iraq was also placed in St Leonards.

Most recently, John has been approached by Eritreans, who have fled their homeland where they are currently persecuted because of their Christian faith. Some people arrive bearing marks of torture on their bodies; others, with undoubted mental and emotional scars have only their personal testimony to support their identity and history. John finds himself in role as friend and pastor to these displaced Christians, and very often is asked to act as personal advocate in court. This raises a particular dilemma. All are welcome at the church, but in order to act as a character witness, John must be absolutely sure that the particular person is who they say that they are: a Christian asylum seeker, fleeing genuine persecution. He must be confident that people's claims to faith are authentic, and that they are not actually economic migrants, attempting to enter the country illegally. Failure to discern the difference would compromise this personal ministry to persecuted people, whose lives are in danger. John has developed a pastoral model which meets all needs. Groups of Eritrean asylum seekers gather together to pray and to worship. The church is a place of shared fellowship in a foreign land. John also offers to teach English through the medium of Bible study. These provisions are extremely welcome for the genuine asylum seekers, and they also provide a context within which to identify possible false claimants. It is hard for someone to pretend faith when everyone around is talking about God. Everyone is welcomed, but not all are eligible to have their asylum claim authenticated in a court of law by the church. The wider church fellowship provides a drop-in facility for the needy, with practical help: food, clothing and friendship.

John has also recently been contacted by EU migrant workers who have been abused whilst in UK settings. An *au pair* girl, for example, was being paid a pittance for her work by an oppressive employer. She was unable to escape from her circumstances, because the employer had also evaded completion of the necessary paperwork which would have enabled her to gain her National Insurance Number and move on to another job.

John and the congregation remain a resource base for a stream of asylum seekers. As such, they are very disquieted by the apparent lack of justice within the current policy. John is aware that 'street wise' false claimants frequently take the opportunity to 'disappear' after their unsuccessful court hearing and appeal process. In contrast, however, he also hears of people who may actually have been given leave to stay, whose linguistic capabilities leaving them utterly defenceless in the face of police trawls. They may actually find themselves being summarily rounded up and deported without anyway to contact help; sometimes to countries on the other side of the world.

St Leonard's Baptist Church has now entered into partnerships with other agencies who work with marginalised people: the Primary Care Health Trust and the Citizens Advice Bureau, to optimize the effect of this ministry in transforming lives.

**Revd Fleur Houston**, is a United Reformed minister, working with the **Church of the Holy Family in Blackbird Leys**, which is on an outer-city housing estate near Oxford. Like many other ministers, her involvement with the lives of immigrants has developed in unexpected ways.

Her earliest contact was with an Iranian asylum seeker who attended the church. He had previously been a non-observant Muslim, but he discovered faith afresh, and sought Christian Baptism. Sadly he subsequently lost his application for asylum status in the UK, and was summarily returned to Iran, where he was immediately imprisoned as a Christian convert. Revd Houston was greatly dismayed. She felt that justice has been very poorly served. The questions asked in the asylum hearing, which were designed to substantiate whether this man's Christian faith was genuine, and which were subsequently to determine his whole future, were both ignorant and improper. His story was unfortunately far from unique.

As a result of this experience Revd Houston made contact with other Christian colleagues, and began to collate a growing collection of disturbing stories about similar treatment of Christian asylum seekers in UK courts. She became a founder of the Asylum Matters Group (AMG). This is an informal monitoring body. In February 2005, however, AMG submitted a dossier of structural problems within the interrogation process for Christian asylum seekers to the Home secretary, via the more influential vehicle of the Churches Main Committee. The paper highlighted a whole range of problems. For example, cuts in legal aid inevitably impacted prejudicially on exceedingly vulnerable people, and comparative adjudications in different UK centres were unpredictable. Tragically, asylum adjudicators were often totally ignorant of the various denominational differences. The time limit on legal aid meant that some lawyers were insufficiently briefed, even when information was to hand. On occasions, legal aid equated with cursory and poor quality attention by some of the larger law firms. Occasionally interpreters were catastrophically incompetent or, worse, actively hostile to the Christian faith.

AMG is an informal group, which continues to give voice to the desperate need for transparently just decisions on the future of Christians who flee persecution and arrive in the UK from many different countries and claim asylum. Revd Houston continues to serve on AMG, and to monitor national trends, in addition to her ongoing pastoral care for migrants amongst the community and congregation on the disadvantaged estate of Blackbird Leys.

***Pamela Cressey is a Free Church (URC) Chaplain at Oakington Immigration Removal Centre.*** She emphasises the very real privilege of serving people from many different countries who are suffering great personal stress. Detention is universally humiliating, and unlike prison there is no specified end-time. There are up to 350 men at the centre, in 12-bedded dormitory accommodation. The 'open' campus is surrounded by very aggressive razor wire, and the perimeter fence is guarded by dogs at night. The food is poor and bland, with little choice, although *halal* and *kosher* foods are, of course, available. There is very little to do. The library is small and basic, and the gym offers very limited space. The English classes and computer room although very good, are always over-subscribed. The Visitors' room is small, crowded and noisy. There is no privacy at all for those having to say 'goodbye' to loved ones. The potential for tensions and hostility is ever present in the Centre. Communication with the Home Office is poor. Many of the personal situations are utterly tragic, and all are difficult. Detainees are often unable to retrieve even their most precious possessions in the UK. The chaplaincy not infrequently sends a courier back to their lodgings. This is an expensive service, but is considered to be money well spent.

Many illegal immigrants have been in the UK for a number of years. Some have even been at school here. Men are frequently removed from their families, leaving partners unsupported and children without a breadwinner or a father figure. Many

younger men are in reality 'economic migrants'. They have often been sent to the UK by their family or even their whole village. Great financial sacrifices are made to pay fares to 'people smugglers' who also provide false documentation. Whole communities gamble precious resources on the financial success of their sponsored economic migrant. Imagine how it must feel to arrive home from a detention centre, or even a prison when you have very little to show for months of trauma. The experience of arrest, followed by detention and deportation, or by detention and removal (technically different), is very humiliating, and adds to the shame of being labelled 'a failure' once the person is summarily returned to their own country.

The close-knit Chaplaincy team is multi faith, and wide-ranging, because every detainee is entitled to receive regular visits from their faith leader. Many of the detainees spend hours in their respective place of worship. The large chapel is abuzz with Bible studies, worship services, singing, and prayer, which is sometimes frighteningly exuberant! Quieter worshippers may sometimes be overwhelmed. The work is challenging. Interpreters are often required. A major dilemma for the chaplains is how to maintain realism, whilst supporting faith and hope in the face of likely removal to an unsafe or hostile country.

This crucial spiritual ministry is further supported by a small faithful band of volunteers who provide second hand clothing for those who are destitute, and games and books for everyone, while they await the decision on their future.

Pamela asks, "*What has happened to, 'welcoming the strangers in our midst,' and the dignity of all God's children?*"

**Another story, another family:** this time, Roma gypsies from Poland. Persecuted and destitute at home, because Romas are denied employment on racial grounds, a family sought asylum in England. Their eighteen year old daughter came with them, as an independent adult applicant, and fell pregnant whilst here. The young father abandoned her before the baby was born. Her application for asylum was rejected, but she had to remain for the imminent birth, although there was now no benefit money to support her. Whilst she was in hospital, some local yobs ransacked the family flat and trashed what meagre possessions they owned. (This is an area where the BNP is very active.) The family was left in the clothes they stood up in, and were shortly deported, but not until after **Saint Ann's Roman Catholic Church, Cheadle Hulme, Manchester** had found them more clothing. The young mother was left on her own in a foreign land, with absolutely no income for herself, and a meagre allowance for the baby from social services. The church provided a pushchair and baby clothes, and then she was deported as well. In Poland, it would be three months before any financial support would be made available to a Roma family. Still there would be no work, and no home. The church continues to send food parcels and Christmas and birthday presents, and occasionally sends money for medicines.

Stories like these can be told from across the denominations. They are stories of compassion and care, reflecting God's love at a time when our social national structures are failing significantly in humanitarian provision. And churches are effectively engaging together in mission.

**RESTORE** is a project of **Birmingham Churches Together**. This is a hugely practical initiative, drawing on the resources of the city churches and partner organisations, and many volunteer workers:

**RESTORE's mission is:**

- **to encourage** friendship and build resources, primarily through the church network in Birmingham and Solihull, to support asylum seekers and refugees;
- **to enable** refugees and asylum seekers to make a valued contribution to society;
- **to work** to raise awareness, change attitudes and challenge prejudice in the host community.

**RESTORE's key areas of activity are:**

- befriending by local volunteers on a one-to-one basis
- hosting social activities for families and adults
- raising awareness within the host community, especially through the church network
- working together with other refugee agencies
- advocating on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers.

Further information about **RESTORE** can be found on the website:

<http://www.restore-uk.org/awareness.html>

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 2008, the church leaders of **West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council** spoke out together on asylum, in a six point statement of concern:

- The prejudice that exists towards asylum seekers - the call for people to develop a greater awareness of the needs of those seeking sanctuary in the UK
- The failure of the legal process to ensure justice for asylum seekers –the call for improved legal representation
- The levels of destitution among asylum seekers - the call for asylum seekers to be allowed to work.
- The trauma of deportation – the call for higher standards of care of asylum seekers.
- The lack of understanding by Home Office of issues of Christian faith, where this is a factor in an asylum seeker's fear of persecution. The leaders call for greater awareness of the missionary imperative of Christianity, and of the needs of those who have become Christian.
- The selfless commitment of hundreds of volunteers in providing hospitality and practical support to the strangers in our midst – the call for more churches to join those already engaged in this magnificent support for asylum seekers.

The statement was endorsed by the Anglican bishops of Wakefield, Bradford, and Ripon & Leeds, the Catholic Bishop of Leeds, the Chairs of the Leeds and West Yorkshire Methodist Districts, the Moderator of the Yorkshire Synod of the United Reformed Church, the Baptist Regional Minister, the Chair of the Yorkshire Moravian District, the Divisional Commander of the Salvation Army, the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, the Chair of the West Yorkshire African Caribbean Council of Churches and a representative of the Society of Friends.

For further information, see the WYEC website: <http://www.wyec.co.uk/>

**The Churches' Refugee Network** ([www.ctbi.org.uk/crn](http://www.ctbi.org.uk/crn)) is an informal initiative of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. It is an ecumenical network set up to share information and offer support. It holds an annual conference and regular high-level seminars to discuss key issues relating to asylum policy and support.

The Churches' Refugee Network has supported the work of the **Independent Asylum Commission**, a project of the Citizens Organising Foundation. The IAC has spent over a year gathering evidence. The interim Findings, *Fit for Purpose Yet?* Were launched on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2008. The first of three reports and recommendations is now available on the web site. *Saving Sanctuary*, makes proposals about how the UK can restore public confidence in the right of sanctuary for genuine asylum seekers. It also suggests improvements on the way that future decisions should be made on behalf of individual claimants. The Commission has investigated many aspects of the asylum process, and has heard evidence from individuals and groups right across the country. Two further reports will be released across June and July 08. Its work is likely to frame the future direction of campaigning on this area in the coming years. For more information see [www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk](http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk)

There is a gathering momentum amongst the churches which is fast becoming a power in the land and, meanwhile, the many acts of grass roots human care and concern continue for the many impoverished strangers whilst they are in UK.

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