

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT WORKING GROUP

This Working Group covers an area of work which has evoked much prayer, discussion and advocacy over the period since our last General Synod.

All members of the General Synod will have been engaged both by the complexity and by the importance of matters relating to refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.

Our whole nation has struggled with these matters now for some years.

Accordingly, Archbishop Jeffrey Driver is to be commended for his initiative with and through the General Synod Standing Committee which led to the timely re-establishment of this Working Group.

Archbishop Driver was the Convenor until the November 2013 General Synod Standing Committee, after which time I was invited to be the next Convenor. Accordingly, at the time of writing this Report I have only been Convenor for a couple of months, busy ones nonetheless.

I can report that the Working Group has not yet met face-to-face but has had considerable email contact to share ideas and information, particularly as regards refugees and asylum-seekers.

SOME FEATURES

1. In November 2013 Archbishop Freier, Ms Sarina Greco and I presented a seminar on refugee issues at the World Council of Churches' Assembly in Busan, South Korea. The seminar captured some learnings from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Ecumenical Migration Centre throughout its almost 60 year history.
2. In January this year I gave a Keynote Address at a meeting of the Christian Conference of Asia in Auckland on "*Becoming the Church for the Nations*".
3. There have been a number of media releases issued, and radio interviews conducted.
4. In January a delegation from the Pakistan Christian Community of Victoria met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Julie Bishop to discuss the plight of minority groups in Pakistan.
5. Through the Australian Churches' Refugee Taskforce (a group established by the National Council of Churches in Australia), lobbying meetings have been held with Members of Federal Parliament.
6. The theme of asylum-seekers, refugees and migration was the basis for the Tamil Christian Community of Victoria's camp held in February this year.

DOCUMENT FOR NATIONAL BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

The following document was prepared for the National Bishops' Conference, held in March this year, recommending a 'grass-roots' campaign for the Church. This would entail visits to Federal Parliamentarians in their Electorate Offices.

ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND REFUGEES: WHERE TO FROM HERE IN AUSTRALIA?

We have a reasonably clear picture as to the state of matters. After a summary I offer one recommendation.

1. The number of asylum-seekers, globally, continues to rise. The tragic war in Syria accounts for an extra 4 million plus, at least.

Ongoing wars in parts of Africa are having the same effect.

The number of displaced people is now estimated at around 30 million globally.

In this context, with some millions listed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as genuine refugees, the developed nations only take about 80,000 per annum. The USA accounts for nearly two-thirds of this number. Australia is a strong contributor with an annual quota of between 15,000 and 20,000.

2. Australia has a proud record, post-WWII, as a nation which has received and settled refugees from many nations.

A creative partnership between UNHCR, national governments and Australian NGOs has meant many refugees have settled happily in Australia and made a significant contribution to the Commonwealth.

The Anglican Church agency, which I chair, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, is this year celebrating 60 years' work resettling refugees. Through its Ecumenical Migration Centre, building on earlier partnerships between the World Council of Churches and the then Australian Council of Churches, BSL has integrated research, advocacy and service delivery in helping refugees to settle well in Australia. BSL is but one example of this positive record.

3. Refugee policy has previously enjoyed a relatively high level of bipartisan support in Australian politics, with argument more around the margins: Should the quota be 15,000 per annum or 30,000 per annum, for example.
4. What has unsettled matters in recent years has been the phenomenon of asylum-seekers coming to Australia by boat.

Inevitably, really, in a world of 30 million displaced people, with more than 20 years the average length of stay in a UNHCR camp before resettlement, and with an annual global intake of only 80,000 people, people have taken matters into their own hands.

Desperate people, fleeing persecution and poverty, have produced a market now serviced by "people smugglers", infiltrated by international and organised crime networks.

5. Accordingly, we have seen people fleeing places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, into Indonesia to buy a place on a dangerous boat and try to reach Australian waters in order to claim asylum under Australia's moral and legal obligations as a signatory to the Refugee Convention.
6. The subsequent debate about 'boat people' has dominated Australian political debate now for some years.

In order to 'stop the boats', Governments have taken increasingly draconian measures to deter boat people. This has included imprisoning children, separating them from parents, sending asylum-seekers off-shore to facilities which independent reports classify as

grossly inadequate – arrangements which I have previously called ones of “intentional cruelty”.

7. In response to evidence as to the cruelty being inflicted on asylum-seekers, recognising that around 80 – 90% will be proven to be refugees, Churches and many other advocates have better organised their lobbying efforts to seek improved Government responses to asylum-seekers.

Lobbying efforts have focussed on resettling asylum-seekers in our community and out of detention centres; giving asylum-seekers the right to study and work pending clarification of their refugee status (rather than forcing them into poverty, stripping their lives of hope or meaning); closing off-shore facilities on Manus Island and Nauru.

These lobbying efforts are ongoing and have created a certain momentum as well as new alliances. For example, our Anglican Church in Australia and Papua New Guinea are now collaborating to seek their Governments’ reconsideration of the Manus Island arrangement.

Through the NCCA’s Australian Churches’ Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) a persistent campaign continues through meetings with Federal politicians, representations at Senate hearings, etc.

Examples: ACRT website <http://www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce.com.au/>; Hansard of Senate Committee hearing, Melbourne, February 2014 <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=COMMITTEES;id=committees%2Fcommsen%2Fe66f4863-5ad7-4876-9cca-03b4ab1e30f5%2F0001;query=id%3A%22committees%2Fcommsen%2Fe66f4863-5ad7-4876-9cca-03b4ab1e30f5%2F0000%22>

All this is good but it is fair to conclude that the debate is currently stymied.

The boats seem to have been stopped at least for the moment. Learning from the experience of the 2007 Rudd Government which modified policies of the outgoing Howard Government, the Abbott Government is unlikely to reverse or modify the draconian measures they think have been successful.

What this means is as follows:

- i. The Government can return to highlighting Australia’s refugee intake through the UNHCR, settling these people, projected to drop to 15,000 per annum.
- ii. Australian overseas aid, focussed now more on the region, can contribute to reversing the conditions which cause people to flee their homelands as asylum-seekers.

Poverty eradication, the better integration of economic and social policies to help build civil societies, diplomatic work to end local and regional conflicts, responses to climate change, can and should be the focus of the now integrated efforts of AUSAid and DFAT with Australia’s NGO aid agencies.

- iii. Notwithstanding Government claims as to the success of their policies to ‘stop the boats’, Church lobbying efforts should focus on more humane outcomes for the approximately 30,000 asylum-seekers either in Australia or in off-shore detention facilities.

These people are not the “organised criminals” behind the “people smugglers”.

They have done what most of us would have done it in similar circumstances, facing the Taliban in Pakistan or Afghanistan, for example. They are not “illegals”.

Most will be found to be genuine refugees.

As the above indicates, there is unlikely to be a third-country who will take them as refugees for resettlement. Certainly not whilst UNHCR is asking those few other countries who take refugees to resettle some of UNHCR's massive backlog.

These asylum-seekers are and will remain Australia's responsibility. This is the reality which must be faced, openly and honestly

- i. There is deep and widespread moral disquiet in all the Australian churches as regards our treatment of asylum-seekers.

This same disquiet is also vivid in continuing media comment and in various places where thoughtful Australians gather. (My partner, at the Adelaide Writers' Festival last week, said this moral disquiet was vivid in many conversations and presentations.)

Australians who travel, including in our Asia-Pacific Region, soon hear how Australia's hostility to asylum-seekers intersects with old stereotypes regarding a racist sentiment in Australia. Australia's admirable record in refugee resettlement is overshadowed by this dismal contemporary tale.

We are seen to be this vast, rich land that punishes even the few, by global standards, who seek refuge and safety as asylum-seekers.

Australians are shamed by the rhetoric and policies of our political leaders.

In this context, briefly sketched, what is the recommended action by the Anglican Church of Australia?

Recommendation:

The only way asylum-seekers onshore and offshore, will get a better outcome, is if all Federal politicians of the major parties hear the demand for this from their constituents.

There are many parishes, schools and Church agencies in every Federal electorate.

Over the months ahead, we need clergy and lay leaders to visit their local Federal members, expressing their moral disquiet and seeking the resettlement in Australia of asylum-seekers found to be genuine refugees.

Federal MPs need to be returning to Canberra, certainly after the winter break, with this as a key message they have for their Party room discussions.

- Treat asylum-seekers as we would want to be treated.
- Let them study, work, belong.
- Let them have a future here.
- Let them contribute.
- They are our responsibility and, with support, like those before them, they will contribute to our Commonwealth.

That is the message our Church members need to take to our Federal MPs, through a grass-roots campaign.

Only when this message becomes irrefutable in the Party rooms of the major parties will there be a change of heart and policy.

In the period ahead, those of us already involved need to give encouragement to such a grass-roots campaign.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

In a letter to the Primate in September 2013, Archbishop Driver wrote:

At a meeting of the Refugee and Migrant Working Group earlier this year there was a strong conviction that it would be helpful to have a debate around Asylum Seeker and Refugee issues at the next General Synod. At that time the date of the General Synod had not been finalised.

Over recent months there has been much fluidity in asylum seeker policy, though with both major parties taking an increasingly less sympathetic line on the needs of those who come to our shores by boat. It is clear that policy and practices will continue to evolve over the coming months, particularly with a change of Government.

This makes it very difficult to anticipate at this stage what might be an appropriate motion to bring before General Synod. However, it would be good for a motion to go forward with the support of the Standing Committee, so I am hoping that we might be able to have a motion considered at a Standing Committee meeting in the first half of 2014. I trust that this would be possible.

I would support this recommendation, noting too the fluidity of this issue but also the deep moral disquiet in the Australian Church as regards our treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees.

It will be the Working Group's intention to bring to the General Synod a proposed resolution for discussion and debate at General Synod.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, may I convey my gratitude to the members of the Working Group, who are

The Rev'd Judy Clay, Diocese of Perth
Ms Libby Hogarth, Diocese of Adelaide
Ms Jessie Taylor, Diocese of Melbourne
Ms Joanne Knight, Diocese of Melbourne

Additionally, may I also convey our gratitude to the many faithful Anglicans who have made a contribution in prayer, service and advocacy to issues focused by this Working Group.

Bishop Philip Huggins
Convenor