

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT WORKING GROUP

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY

Continuing members of General Synod will recall heartfelt and poignant debates at General Synod during the period of boat arrivals and off-shore detention centres.

Whilst they were not the only issues regarding refugees and migrants, they were preoccupying.

One consequence was that Anglican Church members involved in advocacy for an end to matters like children in detention centres, became progressively more involved in ecumenical responses. This included members of this Working Group.

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) was formed by and in the National Council of Churches to better coordinate our advocacy and our intersection with service providers.

Because it was better resourced and because it facilitated ecumenical cooperation on these matters, progressively our energies were invested there. The GS Finance Reports will convey that the allocation to the Refugee and Migrant Working Group was very small. My recollection was that it would not have funded even one annual meeting of the Working Group. As Convenor, I don't think I made one request for funding

RECOMMENDATION:

My recommendation would be that a future Convenor of the Refugee and Migrant Taskforce should continue this participation in the ACRT.

Members of the Working Group and of this 2021 General Synod, such as the Very Rev'd Dr Peter Catt will be able to speak to this recommendation. Dean Peter was a very energetic and effective Chair of the ACRT during much of the period between this General Synod and the last. I was a founding Vice Chair with the Uniting Church leader, the Rev'd Elenie Poulos as Chair when we began the ACRT.

A glimpse at the website of the ACRT will provide General Synod members with further evidence for this recommendation.

<https://www.ncca.org.au/departments/acrt-2>

Therein one sees the Churches, including our Anglican Church, responding to the more recent issues, including the impact of the pandemic on asylum-seekers in Australia as well as the plight of migrant workers stranded 'in-country' and 'out of country' without income to support themselves or income to send home to dependents.

One also sees the ACRT's advocacy for a Community Support Program (CSP) which will enable members of the Australian community to sponsor visas for refugees. A Pilot of this Program was very successful several years ago and Anglican agencies, including the Brotherhood of St Laurence, participated. It shifts some of the cost of refugee settlement off Government as community groups fund these sponsorship costs. As a result, Australia's refugee intake can be increased.

The UNHCR identified 1,440, 408 refugees that needed resettlement in 2020. On current intakes, it is said that 0.5% will get the chance to resettle in a safer country. (Data from the Refugee Council of Australia)

In the current Federal Budget the provision is for a cut of 5000 to 13,750 places.

Hence the importance of support for the CSP as a way to give a safer life to a few more of those forced to flee their homelands as refugees.

CONCLUSION

May I express my gratitude to all those who have served on this Working Group, times past as well my gratitude to all those wonderful Anglicans whose compassion for refugees is persistently welcoming, like is conveyed by the sign which has been on St. Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne for the best part of a decade: "Lets Fully Welcome Refugees".

By way of a story, may I convey one important conclusion which comes from my work.

We held a roundtable of Christian refugees and asked for their recommendations. One woman of faith conveyed: "I knew I had to find someone who would really listen to me. The narrative of my life was so fragmented. The shock of war and violence; the flight from home to a refugee camp; the violence of the camp; the effect of all this on my family. Then finally, a place here in Australia. The journey; then the demands of settlement without the language; the search for work and getting kids settled in schools...I just knew I had to find someone who would listen. Finally, I found someone. I spoke for three months. Then I stopped. I had it all out and I could see what had happened and where the light fell for next steps."

She said, and everyone agreed that there is such a need for careful, prayerful listening. It is a healing ministry, in the grace and peace of Jesus.

Along with all the day to day complexities of resettlement which refugees and migrants face, there are the "soul wounds" that need healing.

While I hope the policy and advocacy work might continue through Anglican participation in the ACRT, this healing ministry is also recommended. It so appreciated where it is offered.

There is a great need for more healing ministries.

The next Refugee and Migrant Working Group might like to consider this recommendation as well.

With prayers of gratitude,

Bishop Philip Huggins, Retiring Convenor.

UPDATE GIVEN THE DEFERRAL OF THE 2020 GENERAL SYNOD TO 2022:

Whilst the reflections and recommendations of the above Report are still relevant, there is still much happening and much needing to be done.

Given that there are now, globally, more than 80 million displaced people, how could it be otherwise?

I shall mention just three issues, as of late February 2022, where Anglicans and I as Convenor have been heavily involved in recent months.

1. The aftermath of another military coup in Myanmar has led to many discussions and much advocacy, careful support for those suffering in Myanmar and prayerful solidarity with the diaspora community here.

At this time of writing, the situation only gets worse.

A primary goal has been to facilitate and carefully encourage humanitarian assistance but the brutal regime make this very difficult. When a regime practises cruelty towards its own people, what can be done from outside is more problematic.

Another goal has been to advocate at any hint that this regime might acquire defacto legitimacy anywhere!

Thankfully, so far, opposition to this and support for the elected National Unity Government is holding, by and large. Our quiet conversations with Federal Parliamentarians and senior officers of DFAT evidence a common mind on this and a shared concern for those suffering, including those leaders still imprisoned.

There are many Anglicans with a great love for the people of Myanmar and a deep resolve to support them as long as is needed.

Since I am retiring from this role in November, this might be an appropriate time to convey that my own long involvement with refugees began when I was an Industrial Chaplain in factories around Dandenong in Victoria. That led on to my time looking after what is now

Anglican Overseas Aid and ,in that capacity ,visiting both the refugee camps on the Thai border as well as sites in Burma .This was not long after the miliary coup which prevented the elected Government of Aung San Suu Kyi from taking office in 1990.

Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned then on phony charges, just as she is again imprisoned now. She is 76. We pray she lives to see her long suffering people safe and free.

2. While what we and our Government can do to help the people of Myanmar is constrained, there are other issues where more can be done quite readily.

One such issue is the cruel, indefinite detention of refugees and asylum seekers . This was highlighted by the brief visit to the Park Hotel in Melbourne by tennis player Novak Djokovic. That publicity gave us a fresh opportunity to call for an end to this cruelty, as attached.

<https://www.bsl.org.au/get-involved/volunteer/insider/set-them-free/>

<https://tma.melbourneanglican.org.au/2022/02/why-two-bishops-locked-themselves-in-a-cage-this-afternoon/>

3. A third issue of involvement has been as regards Afghanistan. Many of us have been involved in the call for an additional increase of 20000 in refugee places for those fleeing Afghanistan.

<https://www.unitedforafghanistan.com/>

UNICEF says that 1 million children under 5 will die of starvation and related causes by the end of this year in Afghanistan.

We cannot prevent all this (and other) suffering but we can prevent some of it.

Accordingly, a number of us advocated for this additional intake of refugees in visits to the Federal Parliament during February.

A CONCLUDING WORD

I sat under a gum tree today waiting for a grandchild to finish school. The person next to me began chatting. He came here as a refugee with nothing. He is now well off and loves this country. This story repeats over and over.

I went home and wrote a prayer to our God who knows the story of everyone of those displaced people globally, including those sheltering fearfully in Myanmar's forests and across the border from Afghanistan in Pakistan.

Our God knows their story and loves them. Hence how the Holy Spirit compels us to help as best we can.

Jesus have mercy. AMEN.