

Why Churches Care About Asylum Seekers

Many Australians support ‘tough’ positions against asylum seekers who arrive by boat and rank asylum seeker issues as one of the top issues facing our country.¹ Some Christians, like many other Australians, are concerned about unsustainable numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat and a fear of the ‘floodgates’ opening if we were to have more compassionate policies. Others have voiced concern about fears of Islamicisation and the changing demographic of Australia. Many more share a deep concern that people are drowning in small, overcrowded and unseaworthy boats making dangerous voyages.

As Christians seeking to live faithful lives and respond to others with the grace of God, there is probably no more confusing and complex area of public policy and debate than this.

We are confronted not only by deaths at sea but also by our concerns for those refugees in camps throughout Africa and Asia. We see vulnerable people suffering because of harsh and punitive policies administered by our Government here in Australia and in offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island, PNG. Children are locked up in immigration detention centres, asylum seekers are living in poverty in the community with no end in sight to their situation and on Manus Island and Nauru the conditions are harsh and damaging to people’s health and wellbeing. The problems seem too great and the solutions elusive.

With such difficult moral questions around Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, it is important to step back from the prevailing public debate and draw guidance from our identity as ‘disciples’. We know that we do not always respond to human suffering and need with compassion and love. We are often driven by our fears and our confusion to give assent to ‘solutions’ which punish rather than protect. Through the national debates around asylum seekers, we have seen the best of the Australian national character – generosity, hospitality, practical care and deep compassion, and the worst of our nation – political opportunism, mean-spiritedness and fear of outsiders.

The Christian Traditions of Love

Created in the image of God and love for neighbour

As Christians we believe that human beings are created in the image of God and that as bearers of God’s image, we are inherently worthwhile and deserving of dignity and respect.

¹ See for example the 2012 Scanlon Social Cohesion survey, conducted by Monash University, <http://arts.monash.edu/mapping-population/social-cohesion-report.php>

This is vital to the Christian story and in understanding God's love for all people. We have a profound link as a human family – God calls us to be God's children through the Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus calls on us to recognise each other as brothers and sisters in his love: 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13:34).

To understand God's will and call on us to show compassion, Jesus explains to the Pharisees that all the law and prophets hang on the commandments to love God and love one's neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:40). In drawing near to God we cannot leave our world and neighbour behind us because we are in communion with the God who loves our neighbour.²

Welcome the stranger and extend grace

Throughout the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), God is identified as the God who cares for the exiled and the persecuted refugee. 'Hospitality to the stranger became one of the strongest moral forces in ancient Israel.'³

Scripture also frames the entire salvation story as one of hospitality, grace and welcome. In biblical terms, salvation is a welcoming home.

Jesus reveals himself as the 'friend of sinners' and frequently portrays heaven as a place of lavish, gracious, 'borderless' hospitality.⁴ The writer to the Hebrews urges Christians to 'not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13:2) In other words, grace received implied that grace be given. One might even say that the first instinct of grace is hospitality.

The way we respond to strangers and to the poor identify us as people of faith.

Challenge unjust systems

The call to stand with and care for those are marginalised, oppressed and persecuted is clear in the Scriptures and in the traditions of the faith: 'Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.' (Isaiah 1:17) and 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these [those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or imprisoned] who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40). Since its beginning, the Christian church has sought to extend the love of God to those in need through care and service.

² Ringma, C., 'Dare to journey with Henri Nouwen', God and neighbour: reflection 160, Pinon Press, 2000

³ Poulos, E., 'Can Australia become a more hospitable country?' Religion and Ethics (ABC), 18 October 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2010/10/18/3041539.htm>

⁴ See the parable of the banquet, Luke 14:15; the prodigal son, Luke 15 (cf. Isaiah 25:6; 55:1-2)

In word and deed, Jesus challenged the systems and structures of society (including religious ones) that forced people to the margins of their communities. He spoke to and ate with people who had been rejected by more ‘respectable’ members of society. Inspired by Jesus and the prophets, as Church we must seek to fulfil our calling to challenge society’s injustice. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that Christians shouldn’t just be pulling people out of the river – we should be going upstream to find out who’s pushing them in. Structures and systems that keep people in situations of injustice must be changed. This is the work of advocacy.

Responding to public debate and government policies: what we believe

As Christians called to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, challenge unjust systems and offer refuge and care to those who are marginalised and in exile, we have a particular responsibility in our society when it comes to responding to issues related to asylum seekers and refugees.

We believe that:

- people do not generally flee their home, their family, friends and community and undertake perilous journeys without very good reason;
- asylum seekers who arrive on our shores should be welcomed and offered appropriate care in the community (once initial health, security and identity checks have been done) while their protection claims are assessed;
- that asylum seekers (consistent with their human rights and Australia’s obligations under international law) should have their claims for protection processed in a fair, transparent and timely manner and that they should have access to review of their case should protection be denied;
- asylum seekers and refugees should be able to find hope and restoration from the despair and persecution from which they have fled;
- Australia’s policies relating to asylum seekers should be driven by bipartisan commitments to a humanitarian response focussed on protection needs, meeting our obligations as a signatory to the Refugees Convention and other international treaties and covenants and working productively in our region over the long-term to ensure that people in neighbouring countries feel safe, can see a future for themselves and are treated justly as their claims for refugee status are assessed;
- asylum seekers who arrive by boat should not be used for political point scoring;
- punishing a vulnerable group of people (asylum seekers) in order to send a message to another group of people (people smugglers and other asylum seekers) is abusive;
- government policies should not deliberately expose people to harm;
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- asylum seekers in the community should have the right to work so that they can support themselves and their families;
- under no circumstances should children be held in closed immigration detention centres;
- no-one should be detained indefinitely without charge and without the right to challenge their detention;
- refugees should be able to be reunited with their families; and
- as one of the wealthiest, safest and most secure countries in the world, we should be able to fund a humanitarian response to asylum seekers without taking money away from our overseas aid commitment.

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You can find more information on refugee and asylum seekers as well as many other issues at the UnitingJustice Australia website:

<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/>

This paper is substantially based on material originally prepared by the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce, which can be found at:

<http://www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce.com.au/why-churches-care-about-asylum-seekers/>