



## **WEST YORKSHIRE CHURCH LEADERS' STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS**

*New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield  
Ash Wednesday, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2008*

*'I was a stranger and you did not welcome me' (Matthew 25.43)*

**We, church leaders in West Yorkshire, express our concern at the plight of asylum seekers in the UK.**

Continuing the long Christian tradition of hospitality, many churches across our region are extending a ministry of welcome to asylum seekers.

- We have become aware of the emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual needs of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.
- We wish to express our concern at what appear to us to be aspects of inhumanity in the official processes undergone by asylum seekers.
- We express our support for the hundreds of volunteers who generously give their time and resources to assist the stranger in need.

Among our many concerns:

- **The prejudiced attitude towards asylum seekers within our society is demeaning both to asylum seekers and to those expressing the prejudice.**  
Jesus was a refugee (Matthew 2.13). In the past, Britain had a proud tradition of welcoming the stranger, especially those who had a well-founded fear of persecution. As a result of a barrage of negative sentiments from some politicians and some quarters of the media, there is now a stigma attached to being a victim of persecution. Often an unhelpful connection is made with issues relating to wider migration. Persecuted asylum seekers, only 0.025% of entries into the UK, are a special case.  
***We declare our willingness to listen to the stories of those seeking sanctuary in our country, and to commit ourselves during the season of Lent to greater understanding of those who seek asylum in our country.***  
***We call upon members of our churches to use Lent to grow in awareness of the special needs of those seeking asylum.***
- **The legal process invites injustice by not enabling asylum seekers to express themselves coherently and with confidence.**  
Traumatic experiences, fear of recrimination and lack of trust in authority make it difficult for newly arrived individuals to tell their story at the initial interview which provides the basis for their asylum claim. Limited legal representation makes it difficult for the whole truth to emerge and a culture of disbelief means many genuine claims are dismissed. (Home Office statistics for April – June 2007 show that 76% of asylum claims were refused). Legal services for asylum seekers wishing to appeal are even more limited.  
***We call upon the UK Government to improve the legal representation available to those whose lives depend on a just asylum system.***
- **The lack of material support for asylum seekers, and the Home Office policy which forbids them from engaging in paid employment, which almost all would be willing to undertake, causes unacceptable levels of destitution.**  
The charitable projects set up by churches, or within which many Christians are volunteers, testify that asylum seekers are among the most deprived members of our society. Not only do they invariably find themselves living in the poorest quality housing, they are also deprived of the right to work. This is an economic loss to our society and an unnecessary added indignity to those fleeing countries where human rights are few.  
***We call upon the UK Government to allow the human right of employment to those who seek asylum.***

- The manner of deportation of failed asylum seekers can be degrading, inhumane and traumatic.**

When officials arrive at an asylum seeker's house in the early morning the experience is so often traumatic, especially for children. There have been substantiated claims of physical abuse and brutality towards returning asylum seekers by those employed by private security firms.

***We call for the dignity of returning asylum seekers to be upheld at all times, and for higher standards of care to be set by those working with them.***
- The Home Office does not appear adequately to understand issues of faith or conversion when these are at the heart of a person's application for asylum.**

For a number of asylum seekers, adherence to the Christian faith in a country known to be intolerant of Christianity is a central ground in an asylum application. For these, and for others from such countries who have converted to the Christian faith during their time in the UK, it is essential that faith commitment is understood by the examining authorities. It is not acceptable, for instance, that committed, evangelising Christians should be told to practice their faith quietly at home.

***We call upon the Home Office to improve its awareness of the mission imperative of Christians, and to improve the sensitivity and vocabulary of its interviewers when exploring the faith of asylum seekers.***
- The unheralded selfless giving of voluntary and faith groups demonstrates that at a community level Britain shows a welcoming face to people fleeing persecution, in contrast to the Government's approach, which has become a cause for national shame.**

There are over 500 volunteers in West Yorkshire, of all faiths and none, who, through the principal agencies, contribute over 100,000 hours each year supporting asylum seekers and refugees. Countless more, in local churches across the county, contribute their time and resources in providing drop-in centres, food parcels, legal support, accommodation and friendship for some of our society's most needy people.

***We celebrate and support all whose time and resources are used on behalf of asylum seekers, and ensure them of our prayers and encouragement. We urge our churches to explore further ways in which assistance can be given to asylum seekers in local communities.***

The spiritual health of our society can be gauged by our attitude toward those who are most vulnerable among us. In failing to support those in fear of persecution, we are failing ourselves. From Jesus's parable of the judgement of the nations:

***'Just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me' (Matthew 25.40)***

Signed, on behalf of West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council:

<p>The Revd. Ernie Whalley, Pastor Gloria Hanley,</p> <p>The Revd. Kenneth Evans, The Revd. Arnold Harrison, Major Bill Heeley, The Rt. Revd. Walter Jagucki, The Rt. Revd. David James, The Rt. Revd. John Packer, Eva Pinthus, The Rt. Revd. Stephen Platten, The Rt. Revd. Arthur Roche, The Revd. Dr. Elizabeth A. Smith, The Revd. Peter Whittaker,</p>	<p><b><i>Regional Minister, the Baptist Church, Chair of WYEC Chairperson, West Yorkshire African Caribbean Council of Churches, Vice-Chair of WYEC Chairman of the Yorkshire District of the Moravian Church Moderator of the Yorkshire Synod of the United Reformed Church Divisional Commander, Yorkshire Division of the Salvation Army Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Great Britain Bishop of Bradford Bishop of Ripon and Leeds Society of Friends Bishop of Wakefield Bishop of Leeds Chair of the Methodist District of Leeds Chair of the Methodist District of West Yorkshire</i></b></p>
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**THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND** Bradford, Wakefield, Ripon & Leeds  
**THE LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
**THE METHODIST CHURCH** Leeds District, West Yorkshire District  
**THE MORAVIAN CHURCH** Yorkshire District

**THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH** Diocese of Leeds  
**THE SALVATION ARMY** Yorkshire Division  
**THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS** Yorkshire General Meeting  
**THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH** Yorkshire Synod  
**WEST YORKSHIRE AFRICAN CARIBBEAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

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