



# WELCOMING REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

# WHO ARE REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS?

There are plenty of headlines in the newspapers - plenty of opinions expressed on the street - but who, in fact, are refugees and asylum seekers? **A refugee** is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...” (Refugee Convention). **An asylum seeker** is someone who has lodged an application to become a refugee.

**R**efugees come from all corners of the world ... Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Eritrea, Albania, Nigeria and more, depending on where the key areas of unrest are to be found. But they all have one thing in common – it is not safe for them to stay at home.

Becoming a refugee isn't a path that someone chooses easily. All too often it means leaving homeland, job, family, community, money and possessions in a bid to survive.

*“T left his home in the Middle East after his brother was shot. The perpetrators made it clear that he would be next if he didn't move away. His family were prominent community leaders – too sympathetic to democracy for the liking of the hard-liners nearby - so he packed a single suitcase, grabbed his passport and left. His sisters, books, clothes, possessions, friends, high-paying job, pets, money, property all had to be left behind if he were to survive. Full of grief and scared of the future, he boarded a plane. Once in London, things didn't immediately improve. Being held in a detention centre for 3 months wasn't what he was expecting. He didn't understand much of the language, he didn't understand any of the culture, the legal system was a mystery but eventually he was told he could stay and was given a small flat. He had a new home. Penniless, confused, alone, hurting – but safe.”*

# WHAT NEEDS DO REFUGEES HAVE?

Leaving everything to travel to an unfamiliar land brings with it a host of challenges.

- ▶ **Physical needs:** Where will they live? Where will they source medical attention and legal support? How will they travel around? How will they afford to buy clothes? Where will they obtain furniture and food?
- ▶ **Emotional needs:** How will they process recent traumas? How will they deal with the grief of so much loss?
- ▶ **Community needs:** Where will they find new friends? Who will help them integrate into their new home? Where can they find others who will truly understand what they have been through?
- ▶ **Language needs:** How will they learn or improve English?
- ▶ **Employment needs:** Once they've been given permission to seek work, how can they move towards getting a job through which to support their own family? What training is available?
- ▶ **Spiritual needs:** How can they find a place to worship where they will be welcome? How can they make sense of a broken world and the God who runs it?



# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

There's a school of thought that says the Old Testament is full of stories of wars not welcome but the truth is far more nuanced. Of course, there are stories of battles where God's enemies are fought but there are also glorious words of tenderness towards those who have experienced oppression and need a place of safety.

The Israelites knew what it was to be enslaved. They had experienced oppression, injustice and pain for no other reason than their nationality. They had experienced liberation too – that wonderful moment when God, through Moses, led them out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land. And so their laws included injunctions to welcome the alien and stranger and to do so because they knew just what it was like to be one. The law commanded the Israelites to love the stranger in their midst because that is what honours God (Leviticus 19:33-34).

It's worth digging even deeper - there are exciting words to be found! The law expected:

- ▶ Freedom from oppression (Exodus 22:21) and subjugation (Exodus 23:9)
- ▶ Freedom from economic exploitation (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)
- ▶ Freedom to rest (Deuteronomy 5:14)
- ▶ Freedom from injustice (Deuteronomy 24:17)
- ▶ Freedom to access dignified charity (Leviticus 19:10)
- ▶ Freedom to participate in faith festivals if they had chosen to convert (Exodus 12:43-49)

Of course, such laws were never enacted perfectly by God's rescued people - no laws ever are - but there is evidence of the laws in action. How much did Ruth benefit from the ability to glean corn in Boaz's field (Ruth 2:17)? How wonderful to hear the Psalmist recall that the LORD watches over strangers (Psalm 146:9). How terrifying to read of God's anger when the laws were flouted (Zechariah 7:8-12). How sobering to hear God's call to his disobedient people to change their attitudes to those in need (Jeremiah 7:6).

The call to welcome refugees and asylum seekers rings clear in the New Testament too. How could it not? Christians are those who follow the Saviour who fulfilled the law. Christians are those who follow the Saviour who himself knew what it was like to be a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15). But even more than that, Christians are people called to love their neighbour in the manner of the Good Samaritan – generously and with no prejudice (Luke 10:25-37). Christians are those who have received and who share the message of undeserved grace that reaches across ethnic boundaries – those who are called to put in strategies to ensure that the needs of the vulnerable are met with equity (Acts 6).

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

Biblical principles are never designed to stay on a page. Truth is to be lived by individual Christians and by churches across the land. So how can we put this calling into action? Maybe something on this list captures your imagination:

**1** Praying for refugees and asylum seekers – and the countries from where they come – in your services and prayer meetings.

**2** Helping people learn English – by providing formal classes (maybe someone in your congregation could train as a teacher of English as a foreign language?) or by offering opportunities for conversation over coffee (for individuals or groups). Maybe you could invite people to practise their English and learn about Christianity by working through the simple English version of Christianity Explored or other suitable course?

**3** Providing articles of furniture / clothing / food for local charities working with refugees. Some churches have even started to refurbish bicycles so these can be used by asylum seekers to help them get around – sometimes the asylum seekers themselves love to help with the refurbishment and including them is a great way to build up friendships.

**4** Lobbying parliament to ensure wise laws that offer asylum seekers true justice at every stage of the process. Asking refugees how they are impacted by different laws can be a real spur to action.

**5** Offering hospitality to asylum seekers down your street – through invitations to homes or church events where the food and drink offered is culturally sensitive. That may mean avoiding alcohol and pork (or at least having a vegetarian alternative available). It's good to accept invitations to their homes too and to take an interest in their family – people will often love to introduce you to a traditional dish from their culture. As part of casual conversation you ask what they believe and how they came to believe it. They will probably be interested to hear what you believe in return.

**6** Giving advice to those who are struggling – emotionally or practically. It's not wise to offer to complete every piece of immigration paperwork (some of which must be completed by a certified professional) but being able to describe the asylum process and being willing to help people write CVs, job applications, housing forms and register with a GP can be a real step of love. Listening to their stories and helping them to rebuild trust can be liberating.

**7** Providing literature about Jesus – and your church – in a range of languages. People may be really touched that you have gone out of your way to find something they can understand with ease and many new arrivals in the UK are genuinely interested to find out about the person of Jesus (even if they have previously been taught that he is just a prophet or a fairy tale) – it's part of getting to know the country they are now in.

**8** Offering opportunities to hear the gospel in simple English. Maybe you could set up a simple English Bible study? Or an opportunity to play sport and then read Scripture afterwards? It's best to stick to just a few verses at a time – big passages are hard to grasp when you are just learning a language.

**9** Facilitating refugees within your congregation to share their experiences in the form of testimony. We will pray more intelligently when we understand what their lives are really like.

**10** Giving generously to charities working in the UK and overseas, supporting those who have had to flee their home.

If you know a refugee or an asylum seeker, the best way forward would be to talk to them, listen to their experiences and ask how you can support them more. If you don't, why not look at your local census data to find out which nationalities live near your church? Or contact a local charity which provides support for refugees and ask if they have any ideas on how you can get involved. No individual can hope to meet the needs of hurting communities but when a congregation works together – or a group of churches joins forces – lives can be transformed both now and for eternity.

A photograph showing a person's hands holding a large, white sign with the words "REFUGEES WELCOME" printed in bold, blue, sans-serif capital letters. The sign is held up in front of a crowd of people, some of whom are seen from the back or side. The background shows trees and a clear sky, suggesting an outdoor setting. The sign is the central focus of the image, conveying a message of hospitality and support for refugees.

**REFUGEES  
WELCOME**

# SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH THE LEAST REACHED SINCE 1835

London City Mission exists to serve the Church of London in sharing the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ with the least reached of London.

Our staff go to those those living in poverty, on the margins of society or from other cultures. We show God's love in practical ways, continuously seeking opportunities to share the life-changing gospel message. We work in partnership with churches, to ensure that individuals who make a commitment to follow Christ are embraced by a loving church family. The gospel is at the heart of all we do.

## BECAUSE LONDON NEEDS JESUS



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