

disheartening. If many have come to believe unconsciously in justification by work or success, or that Christianity is a technique to achieve automatic success, then many ministers will be broken-hearted.

If we read the gospels we do not find the picture of inevitable success that we find in descriptions of management techniques and sometimes of 'Christian' techniques. Jesus' church has no members by the end of his life. Everyone has deserted him. There is no heavenly kingdom on earth. He dies horribly, asking why God has forsaken him. Yet we consider this the greatest victory in the universe, the victory of love. He forgives the people who kill him. Here is our victory by which we are justified, at peace with God and so with ourselves.

I would rather see full churches than empty churches, but in the last resort there is no point in a church large or small that does not love. There is every point in the church, however small and failing, that does love. If the minister loves, he is ministering. If he or she doesn't love, it won't matter how good the techniques are.

Jesus does not promise us success to our projects. One minister may have tremendous success on his hands, another what appears to be a failure. They may both be equally doing God's will, equal in faith and love. Even where it is our fault that we are failing, he loves us. He justifies our existence by grace, by the love shown on the cross. Ministers need to believe that and act that out. We are saved by God's grace and we save by pointing to God's grace. The grace of God is the controlling idea for pastoral oversight.

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WORKING WITH ASYLUM SEEKERS

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Writing in *The Bible in Transmission* (Bible Society, Autumn 2004), John Atherton mentions the importance of social capital for individual and communal flourishing and the contribution

churches can make in this respect. Quoting Ann Morisy,⁸⁵ he cites the various kinds of relationships that constitute social capital which include bonding social capital (the social 'glue' that enables mutual support within groups); bridging social capital (commitment to relationships with strangers outside the chosen community); and brave social capital (moves beyond bridging social capital into caring for strangers as threat or menace). Atherton suggests that Christians and churches who move into this latter area are reflecting the prophetic dimensions of Biblical faith.

One issue for British society at the beginning of the 21st century is the presence of refugees and asylum seekers. The two categories need to be distinguished. Asylum seekers become refugees when their application for asylum is accepted by the government, and they then become entitled to social security benefits until they obtain work. If the asylum application is refused, they become failed asylum seekers and face possible removal from the country, and in the meantime may well be left destitute and homeless.

Asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers are not allowed to work, although many do so illegally. Some social security support is available for failed asylum seekers, but to obtain it they must sign a paper stating they are willing to return to their own country. Understandably, most are not willing to make any such undertaking. There are some countries to which the British government will not remove anyone (for instance, Iraq at the present time). Support is available in such circumstances, but to obtain it asylum seekers must agree to carry out community service work. But as such work is also an alternative sentence for offenders, to ask asylum seekers to do it appears to criminalise them - and they are not criminals! Often, they just disappear into the underground economy.

The treatment meted out to asylum seekers by the government is harsh, to say the least, and often appallingly inhumane. For example, it is not unknown for single women with young children to be taken to an airport as early as 4.00am with a view to their removal from the country. In one or two cases known to me, this has been a mistake and the people concerned have eventually

⁸⁵ *Journeying Out: A new approach to Christian mission* (Morehouse, London 2004)

returned to the place where they have been living. Other asylum seekers, desperately afraid that the same thing might happen to them, have been known to leave their homes with their children and stay overnight at the town's bus station. These people are frequently vilified in the tabloid press, which fosters prejudice against so-called 'bogus' asylum seekers who are accused of being a drain on the economy and on the social security system.

In the face of such trauma and stress, it is not surprising that asylum seekers feel vulnerable and insecure. Constant worry and anxiety frequently leads to clinical depression, which has a high incidence among asylum seekers. Here, then, is an opportunity for the churches to demonstrate something of the compassion of Christ, and to develop some 'brave social capital' by acting prophetically on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers.

How can this be done? The first thing might simply be to welcome asylum seekers and offer them some support. At New North Road Baptist Church, Huddersfield, we have our REACH Project which operates mainly through a weekday lunchtime drop-in centre. This work, begun a year or so before I became the minister, was prompted by asylum seekers from a Christian background turning up to Sunday worship and it being discovered that they were alone and friendless. The drop-in was started as a means of enabling asylum seekers to meet others in the same situation as themselves, particularly those from their own country. We are fortunate in having as a church member someone who over the years has been active in social service in the town, and who has the contacts to establish and maintain a project such as REACH.

Each week up to twenty people on average, mostly of African origin, attend the drop-in centre, although there are considerably more names on our books. These are mostly women and children from a Christian background, from both Anglophone and Francophone African countries. Recently we have had an influx of four or five African men, one or two of whom are Muslims. Occasionally, asylum seekers from other countries come to the drop-in. Recently, there has been contact with some Iranian women, who started attending Sunday worship on a regular basis and have asked about Christian baptism. Other members of REACH also attend on Sundays regularly and come to other church events. As well as baptisms we sometimes get requests for infant blessings. Another spin-off from the work of REACH has

been the formation of a French-speaking Congolese congregation that uses the church on Sunday afternoons, and this is the kind of development that others who wish to get involved in working with asylum seekers may also find occurring in their own situations.

On Tuesdays we provide food, clothing where needed, furniture in a few cases, finance for travel, information, and an opportunity for asylum seekers to network together. We have also acquired a couple of computers for the use of our members. Often prayer support is requested and provided before attending tribunals and sometimes we have accompanied people to their hearings or appeals. In addition, I have been asked to write letters of support for asylum seekers to help them in the process of obtaining leave to remain in this country. All this work is financed by money from the Against the Stream Fund, part of Baptist Home Mission set aside for social and community projects, and by grants from the local authority. We are extremely grateful for this support.

From January last year, a social work student from the local university is on placement with us for four days a week. The social work practice teacher for the placement is our own leader of the project, and I act as the placement supervisor. The student liaises with the local authority's reception centre and hostel for asylum seekers and is able to offer information to new arrivals, including information about REACH. She also works with a local voluntary agency, Kirklees Refugees & Friends Together, and with the Whitehouse Health Centre next door to the church which was established by the health authority to meet the needs of, for example, homeless people and asylum seekers, who are unable to register with a general practitioner. The student will be in touch with other local voluntary agencies who work with asylum seekers, particularly those who work with women, and she will also undertake some home visits as well. Last year's social work student also spoke French fluently, which was a great asset in connection with asylum seekers from Francophone countries.

Why do asylum seekers come to Britain? Undoubtedly some are economic migrants, but many will be traumatised by what has happened to them in their own countries. It might be too painful for them to talk easily about their experiences. However, some things do come out, when they are ready to talk about it. We have women who have been the victims of gang rape, and have arrived pregnant, not knowing the identity of the baby's father. The risk in

such cases is that the mother will reject the baby, and in at least one case the staff of REACH have been able to help the mother bond with her child. Others come here to escape political violence.

Not a few women come out of fear of what is euphemistically called 'female genital mutilation'. Understandably, they are not willing to talk to a male minister about such things! One woman came from Kenya for this reason. Kenya is not normally thought of as an unsafe country - Europeans go there on holiday. One Kenyan woman, who has since been given leave to remain in this country, saw two female children bleed to death and, when she became pregnant a third time, felt she had to leave her country in case the same thing happened again. This time the child was a boy, and in 2003 I was asked to conduct a service of dedication for him.

Another important policy in dealing with asylum seekers is not to give advice if, for instance, they should ask us whether they should try to get a job. It is against the law for asylum seekers to earn money through working for it. What we do in such circumstances is suggest the various courses of action open to them (which might indeed include the illegal option), point out the consequences of each, but leave it to them to decide in the light of such information what they will do. But we will not tell them what they should do.

Offering hospitality and accommodation to homeless failed asylum seekers in local homes is controversial. It cannot be done for all, so it might be better to do it for none. However, in Huddersfield, following models established in other towns, a Short Stop scheme has been set up, with a number of local, vetted people who will offer bed and breakfast for a limited number of nights to those who have had their benefits and entitlement to housing withdrawn, but have not yet been removed from the country.

Working with asylum seekers is a rewarding ministry. There might not be much in it in terms of numerical church growth, but there is the satisfaction of knowing that in a few cases we have been able to demonstrate the love and compassion of Christ to people in need who have not been given a universal welcome to this country. This is also a ministry that churches in many places have become involved in as a result of the government's policy of dispersing asylum seekers to different parts of the country.

There are some good resources available. Churches Together in Britain & Ireland have produced *Asylum Voices* which tells of

experiences of asylum seekers. It deals with such questions as 'Why did you leave?' and 'Why the UK?' It has an appendix listing organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees, although these are all in the London area. The Churches' Commission for Racial Justice offers help for anyone seeking to work with asylum seekers, as also the Evangelical Alliance. There is the *Welcoming the Stranger* resource pack published by the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Churches can become involved in the asylum issue is by protesting about the government's harsh and inhumane policies – policies which are probably supported by the majority of people in the country. The Baptist Union of Great Britain at its Cardiff Assembly in 2004 passed a resolution on this issue, but little seems to have come of it.

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