



Churches' Refugee Network: Report for 2022

At the Churches' Refugee Network (CRN) Steering Group meeting on 16 December 2021, it was agreed that the CRN should continue to meet via Zoom as this would enable greater attendance and participation. However, it was also agreed that at least one of its four (annual) meetings should be in person to ensure that the networking dimension of its work continues.

Therefore, the CRN's first meeting for 2022, took place on 24 January 2022 via Zoom, which focused on the nexus between the climate emergency and the global refugee crisis. The CRN sought to have a global/local - 'glocal' approach to this work which included contributions from speakers from Nepal, Indonesia, the Polynesian islands and Bangladesh as well as school students from Birmingham, England.

Our young students, who attended St Dunstons and St Vincent Catholic Primary Schools in Birmingham, alongside their teachers, spoke about several school 'arts-related' projects which explored how the climate emergency was connected to the refugee crisis. The young people spoke about how they became involved in the project and how this work had made them more aware of the issue, and more committed to being changemakers.

Also, via Zoom, our four international speakers spoke about how the climate emergency had impacted life in their countries and had exacerbated the living conditions. It had seen lives and livelihoods adversely impacted, with people becoming internally displaced as well as being forced to leave their respective countries.

We then opened the meeting to questions which saw robust and challenging conversations on what more the churches could do to address this issue, in partnership with other actors and agencies.

The actual meeting coincided with the publication of the inaugural 'CRN E-Bulletin' which provided a round-up of news, information and activities emanating from those connected to the network. The bulletin was the work of the CRN Advisory Group, which consists of Barbara Forbes, Jake Oakes, Nadine Daniel and Richard Reddie. One of the key issues mentioned in the bulletin was the then 'Nationalities and Borders Bill', which was still wending its way through the British Parliament. The CRN took a critical line on the Bill,

which it regarded as unfair and unacceptable in the way it sought to deal with those who are some of the most vulnerable in our society.

The CRN was also a signatory to a JPIT letter which raised concerns about the Bill, which among other issues, would make the UK a more hostile place for those seeking sanctuary.

The Russian invasion of the Ukraine in February of this year resulted in, among other issues, a massive spike in people leaving the invaded country. On 17 March 2022, the CRN Chair, Bishop John issued a statement which called on churches, parachurch organisations and Christians to open their hearts and homes to those Ukrainians who were seeking sanctuary in Britain and Ireland. At the same time, the CRN was mindful that all refugees should be treated equally and fairly and was concerned about the apparent double standard showed to Ukrainians compared to those from Syria, Afghanistan and other parts of the globe.

In early April 2022, the CRN's Richard Reddie once again attended an online (Zoom) meeting for Refugee Week (RW), which served as a curtain-raiser for RW in June 2022. Richard spoke about how various churches marked this significant event, and how the CRN would seek to promote RW to its network.

On 26 April 2022, the CRN hosted its second meeting, again this was online. The meeting was an opportunity to hear about the work of 'stories of Hope and Home' – a Birmingham-based organisation in England that works with refugees and asylum-seekers. The organisation gives these women and men spaces and opportunities to tell their stories, and in doing so, this creates a better understanding (and empathy) of what it means to be a refugee on these islands. The format of this meeting chimed with the CRN's rationale of creating spaces and opportunities to hear the lived experiences of those for whom seeking refuge is not an existential situation but a reality.

In May, the CRN issued the second edition of its e-bulletin, which explored topics such as the UK Government's 'Rwanda Scheme', the new 'Nationalities and Borders Act', Community Sponsorship and the 'World Day of Migrants and Refugees'.

From 20-25 May 2022, the CRNs Richard Reddie was asked to participate in the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and World Council of Churches (WCC) 'Pilgrim Team Visit to Italy'. The visit focused on migration and refugee matters in Italy and was an occasion to express solidarity and accompaniment with the refugees and migrants arriving in Italy, and to strengthen support to those who work in seeking peace and creating conditions to overcome injustice and violence.

In October 2022, CRN's Richard Reddie attended a two-day CCME pre-conference gathering on asylum which explored community sponsorship in various parts of Europe, especially since the Ukraine crisis.

Life Beyond Borders – 8 November 2022

At the 16 December 2021 meeting, the CRN Steering Group agreed that the CRN should focus on the issue of 'borders' for its annual conference in June 2022. With the arrival of the new CTBI general secretary, Dr Nicola Brady in January 2022, it was agreed that CTBI would work with the CRN to host a conference that explored the local, national and international implications of borders and how they adversely impact the most vulnerable in society. It was decided to host the event in Liverpool and move the date from June to 8 November 2022 to allow greater time for planning and delivery. In lieu of this, the CRN/CTBI established a planning group which spent the next five months working on what would be the first church-related conference to explore the historical, socio-political and cultural impact of borders. The Life Beyond Borders conference featured speakers from the four nations as well as from Europe, and also had a networking dimension that brought together organisations and groups working with refugees, asylum seekers and those in need of sanctuary. More information about this successful conference is available on the CTBI website.

The way ahead

The CRN would very much like to build on the momentum and energy created by the Life Beyond Borders conference and networking event. One of the clarion cries of that conference was the need for greater collaborative work and partnerships, which are very much the CRN's raison d'être. Over the coming year, the CRN would like to unpack the themes discussed at the conference at its various meetings.

Message of appreciation

Over the years, the CRN has worked with, and alongside, the churches in Britain and Ireland, and we are thankful to God for his ongoing mercy, grace and provision as we do this. We are also very appreciative of the prayers and support we receive from the churches and Christian agencies to carry out this important work. We would like to single out Churches Together in Britain and Ireland for its ongoing assistance over the years. Our joint conference this year is a testimony to the benefit of this partnership, and we pray that this successful collaboration continues, as together we help the churches to better respond to migration-related issues both here and overseas.