THE BULLETIN

Latest news, views and information from Churches' Refugee Network (CRN) Advisory Group



Welcome

Welcome to the fourth edition of the **Churches' Refugee Network's (CRN) Advisory Group's** bulletin. This bulletin aims to provide those within the CRN's network with the latest information, developments and activities linked to immigration, asylum and refugee issues in a British and Irish context.

The General Election

With a General Election (GE) on the horizon, it's up to us to hold our politicians to account and remind them that millions of us want our country to be more welcoming towards people fleeing for their lives. As people of faith, with a range of traditions all inherited from the Biblical imperative to "welcome the stranger", we should not be shy about standing up for the rights of those who are seeking sanctuary and safety.

Our faith is based on compassion and justice, and the current treatment of asylum-seekers falls short on both these points.

The recent "Illegal Migration Act" (which is itself in violation of international conventions) is the culmination of the punitive policies of a series of governments and is an attempt to put a stop to anybody at all seeking asylum in this country.

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This obviously has to be challenged, but it is important for us not just to criticise, but also to offer alternatives. Whatever the political landscape will look like at the exact time of the GE campaign, we can be fairly sure that the "hostile environment" will still be in the ascendancy.

Once we know who the main candidates are in our constituencies, we can write to them, tag them in social media, and ask questions at hustings. Here are some suggestions for points which could be raised.

- Our politicians frequently refer to "safe and legal routes" – but unless you come from Ukraine or Hong Kong, there are no such routes – there is almost no way to get permission in advance to travel to the UK. For desperate asylum seekers, this increases the risk of dangerous journeys, exploitation and slavery. In 2022, 45,755 people arrived in the UK by small boats, mostly from Iran, Albania, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. 61% of the those who arrived on small boats between 2018 and 2022 were eventually granted refugee or humanitarian protection status or other leave to remain once they got their initial asylum decision – showing that most of them have a strong claim to asylum in the UK. Under the new legislation, asylum claims of people who are deemed to have arrived "illegally" will not be accepted. **People should not be punished for coming on irregular routes if no safe routes exist.**
- **In an ideal world,** the fee-free permission to travel to the UK used for Ukrainian and Hong Kong nationals would be extended – but as things stand, we should accept asylum claims from everybody who arrives, no matter how they get here. By March 2023, 169,300 Ukrainians had come to the UK on the special visa scheme, and over 160,000 eligible people from Hong Kong applied under the special visa scheme. Compare this with the much-vaunted "warm welcome" for some Afghan citizens, which turned out to be chimera; and the treatment of people fleeing from the war in Sudan. It doesn't take a lot of thinking to come to the conclusion that people are treated differently depending on their origin and ethnicity.

- **Give asylum-seekers the right to work.** Currently asylum seekers may not work until their claim has waited for 12 months and then they can only work in jobs on the (very restrictive) 'Shortage Occupation List'. Nearly all asylum seekers are desperate to work – they want to use their skills, integrate into society, and give something back to the community in which they find themselves. As it is, they are kept in limbo, living on less than £7 per day. In March 2023, 128,812 people had been waiting for more than 6 months for a decision on their initial claim and many can wait for years – up to 20 years in some cases. Refusing the right to work is losing tax revenue, doing nothing to ease the labour shortages which employers are facing, and putting asylum-seekers at risk of exploitation and even slavery in "unofficial" work situations. A YouGov poll in 2022 found that 81% of the UK public supported the right to work of people seeking asylum.

- **Improve the living conditions of asylum-seekers.** There have been regular reports of sub-standard housing, of asylum-seekers being made homeless after being evicted from hotels, being penned into military barracks and floating prisons, and possibly also being made to sleep in marquees. The numbers involved are because of the backlog in dealing with applications. The process should be speeded up and asylum-seekers should be given access to legal aid. At the same time, the government should actively encourage local councils to increase their social housing capacity.

- **Immigration Detention (keeping people in prison-like conditions) is unjust and inhumane.** In the UK there is no time limit for such detention and the current removal and detention centres are widely seen as a disgrace. It has been described as "torture" by those who have experienced this and has been criticised by international human rights bodies. Alternatives have been piloted but it needs political will to create a more humane system.
- Housing for asylum-seekers, and immigration detention centres, are outsourced to private companies, who are making millions from this industry. **We should challenge the government to remove these contracts from the private sector and at the same time challenge the dehumanising use of language in which asylum-seekers are described as being "processed".**
- **Reduce the extortionate fees which have to be paid by thousands of people.** Those whose asylum claim is rejected and who are put on the ten-year route to permanent settlement, have to pay fees to renew their visa every two and a half years. Recently, the government announced an increase in these fees – which apply to every member of a family, including infants. For a family of four, this amounts to approximately £68,000 over the ten years. Most British residents would find that impossible, so why expect it from people who by definition are vulnerable and insecure, and unlikely to be in the kind of employment which would provide that level of income? For years, the government has been open about using these fees to support the immigration estate as a whole, but there was an outcry in July 2023 when it was suggested that a rise in the level of fees could help to pay for public sector pay increases. Many public sector unions stated their opposition to this – although the fee increases had already been proposed before that particular suggestion. **The ten-year route should be cut back to five years as it was in the past, and the price of the fees should reflect the true administrative costs** – a fraction of the current charges. At the moment there is a very complex fee waiver procedure which however does not apply to the final stage, the application for permanent settlement. This also needs to be changed.

The attitude of this and previous governments can make us despair. However, we have a duty and a calling to make our voices heard and we can do this by challenging our local candidates so that the next government will restore protection for refugees and uphold our obligations under international law.

WE CAN SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES

- **We can correct the lies** which some politicians and parts of the press will use to spread misinformation.
- **We can challenge the language** used when speaking about migrants and asylum seekers, not just when speaking to politicians but also in our churches and other social groups.
- **We can refuse to turn the protection** of vulnerable individuals into a divisive political issue – we can refuse to accept the use of fear as a means to achieve a hollow political victory. '*That which is morally wrong cannot be politically right.* '(Gladstone)
- **We can help refugees** to have their voices heard – there are experts-by-experience all around the country who can be invited to events and even introduced to some of our politicians. Find out via City of Sanctuary, Migrant Voice, or Freed Voices.

"Sing and rejoice ye children of the day and the light; for the Lord is at work in this thick night of darkness that may be felt: and the Truth doth flourish as the rose, and lilies do grow among the thorns and the plants atop the hills, and upon them the lambs doth skip and play."

(George Fox)

Article by Barbara Forbes



***Lift the Ban display from St Ambrose Barlow RC Primary**

Birmingham Schools of Sanctuary

As people of faith, many of us will find inspiration in our scriptures and writings by a whole variety of theologians. Sometimes we are inspired by particularly uplifting services or sermons. Often, we are inspired by actions – our lives speak for what we believe, and a faith without action is a dead faith, as we can read in the Letter of James.

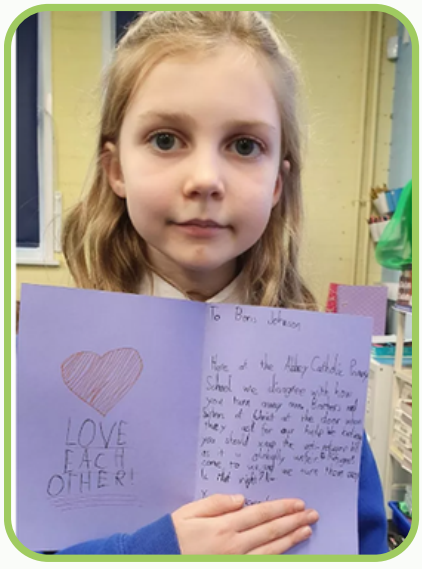
In relation to asylum-seekers and refugees, we are often inspired by members from many different faiths, those who show courage and resilience even when faced with unbelievable hardship, danger and hostility, and those who show hospitality and welcome and who go above and beyond any mere call of duty.

We all know that children have a very strong sense of fairness and justice, and all across the country, schools are becoming involved in the City of Sanctuary movement to help build a culture of hospitality and welcome. The work of pupils and staff can be inspiring, and none more so than in the Catholic Primary Schools of Birmingham! Of the seventy-plus schools in the local network, around half are Catholic schools, mainly primaries but with a few amazing secondary schools as well. Children read and reflect on stories about the lives of refugees, invite asylum-seekers into schools and cover their buildings with posters and orange hearts. They write stories and poems (one pupil from St Bernard's Primary received a phone call from Benjamin Zephaniah, and Brian Bilston commented very favourably on some of the poems produced by pupils at St Ambrose Barlow). The pupils at Our Lady & St Kenelm invited parents and members of the public to view a stunning art installation in their school hall, produced an exhibition for a local art gallery, and put up a display in their local shopping centre. Many pupils write to their MPs, invite them into schools to ask quite searching questions (and I have heard at least one veteran MP taking great care to respond thoughtfully and appropriately to 10- and 11-year-olds who are outraged by the government's policy towards asylum-seekers), and they also write to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary.

Some schools even go beyond that and have quite rightly been mentioned in local and national media.

In spring 2022, we encouraged our schools to send messages to their local MPs on Valentine's Day, asking if they "had a heart for refugees" and if they would oppose the Nationality and Borders Bill then going through Parliament. One school, Abbey Primary, featured in the local press, and pupils at another school, St Dunstan's Primary, were thrilled when their MP, Tahir Ali, actually mentioned this initiative and held up one of their Valentine's Day cards in the House of Commons during the debate. The fact that they then very soon had to learn that the Bill had been passed was a hard learning process, but they also learnt that people will listen to them and take note of what they say.

Pupils from St Dunstan's then took to the streets in spring 2023 in collaboration with the 'Lift The Ban' campaign – they visited local shops and businesses to persuade them to support the call for asylum-seekers to be given the right to work. Pupils from nearby St Ambrose Barlow did the same (and the school also put the City of Sanctuary logo on their sports kit!).



Pupil from Abbey RC Primary with Valentine's Day card for MP.

Perhaps the most remarkable development in the academic year 2022-23 took place right at the end of the summer term. Outraged by the news that Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick had ordered cartoons in children's reception centres to be painted over, pupils from St Gerard's and St Dunstan's promptly started producing posters and welcome messages which they sent to those reception centres and also to the Immigration Minister himself with a request that he deliver them. This caught the imagination of Change.org which teamed up with City of Sanctuary to produce a petition (with now over 120,000 signatures) and developed into the *#CartoonsNotCruelty* campaign.

Looking forward to the new academic year, we're confident that these schools will continue their exemplary campaigning work and that they will be an inspiration to others.


INDEPENDENT

Primary school children take action after murals at refugee centre painted over

Pupils at a primary school in Birmingham were left feeling 'angry' and 'ashamed of their country' after hearing the murals were painted over.

Hannah Cottrell • Saturday 22 July 2023 07:00

Report in Independent about response from St Gerard's RC Primary to murals being painted over.



But the question remains: why do Catholic schools embrace this vision so whole-heartedly while we sometimes struggle to inspire such a level of commitment in other denominational and faith schools?

Perhaps the answer lies in the role of Catholic Social Teaching and the fact that all leaders of Catholic schools are strictly required to be active in their churches. Catholic teachers have told me that "this is who we are"; they are enjoined to "love the stranger" and are proud that their pupils are "keen to live their virtues for the common good". The vision of being a place of welcome and sanctuary is so entwined with the fabric of their faith, that for them it is self-evident that they commit to this work. They are not timid in their approach!

Here in Birmingham we welcome all schools into our Schools of Sanctuary network and it was wonderful to experience our Celebration Day in July, when one of our Catholic primaries opened their doors to a dozen other schools, including other Catholic schools but also non-religious institutions with a high proportion of Muslim students.

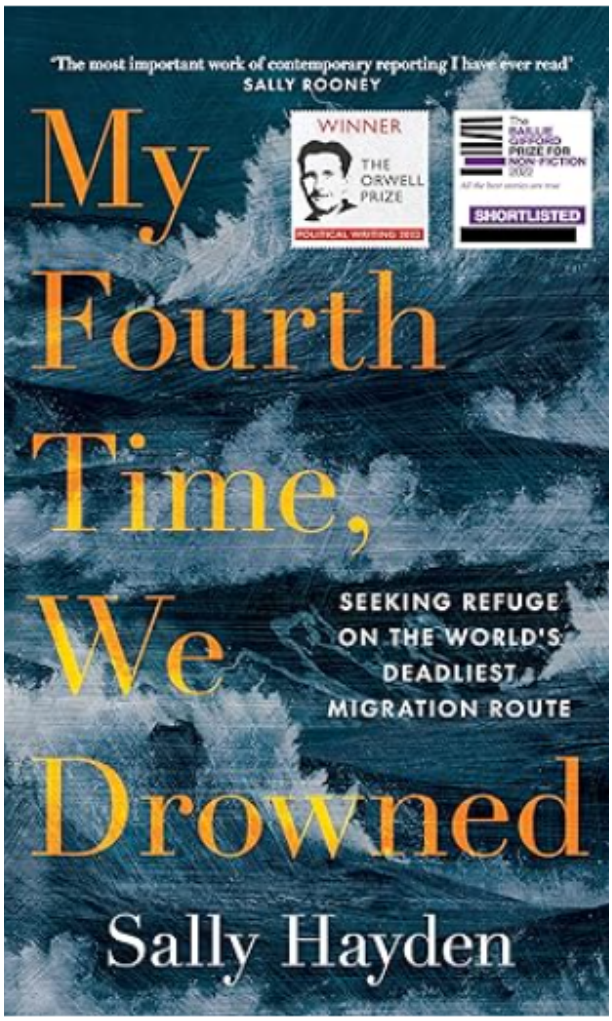
All these children came together to share their skills and their passion, and to make friends with each other.

We hope that this model can continue on an annual basis. As John Cotton, currently Leader of Birmingham Council but formerly Cabinet Member for Social Justice and Equalities, has said on several occasions, the commitment and vision of these children is wonderful to see – they are our future.

FIND OUT MORE

https://schools.cityofsanctuary.org/

Article by Barbara Forbes



Book Recommendation

"**My Fourth Time, We Drowned**" by Irish journalist Sally Hayden documents her investigation into the shocking experiences of people arriving in North Africa to try to continue their journey to seek sanctuary on the other side of the Mediterranean. It exposes the negligence of NGOs and corruption within the United Nations, and the callous and casual attitude of politicians and decision-makers. It is a harrowing documentation but is essential and life-changing reading and raises urgent questions about how so many deaths are being ignored and have become normalised.

The book is being used as evidence in a legal submission to the International Criminal Court calling for named European politicians and EU officials to be investigated and potentially prosecuted for their alleged involvement in crimes against humanity, including former EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini; Italian Deputy PM Matteo Salvini, the current and former Prime Ministers of Malta, and the former head of the EU border agency Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri.

In 2022 the book won the Orwell Prize and was short-listed for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction. Since its publication, the book has been debated in the Irish Senate and the Scottish parliament, spoken about by the Irish president, and referred to by prosecutors of smugglers.

"**My Fourth Time, We Drowned**", **published by Fourth Estate 2022.**

Film Review

Don't call me a racist! Refugees and their resettlement in the film The Old Oak.



*Scenes from the film 'The Old Oak'

When do so-called 'legitimate concerns' over the location and accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees, spill over into what can be described as racist attitudes or behaviours? That is one of the themes in the latest Ken Loach film, The Old Oak, which is set in 2016, and explores how a fictional, former mining village in northern England responds to the arrival of Syrian refugees.

With the exception of a handful of residents, all the inhabitants in this virtually all-white village appear hostile toward the Syrians. Their grouse is a combination of not being pre-warned about these newcomers, and the council not appearing to care about the effects of this sudden influx on the poverty-stricken village; in short, there has been no (community) impact assessment. At first sight, such concerns appear bona fide. However, what is impossible to justify is the way the local residents articulate their worries, and then put them into play. It is noteworthy that they do not take to task anyone from the 'body' that made the decision in the first place; all their fire is turned on the hapless new arrivals; people who no doubt faced real trauma while fleeing their homeland. (Such a scenario reminds me of the Bible verse from Amos 5:19 – '*It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear…*'.) Equally, the locals all too easily lapse into language and use tropes that are crude stereotypes at best, and downright racist at worst. The Syrians are invariably described in racist terms, and declared to be potential dangers to the public (would-be terrorists). The irony is that the locals do not believe that their language or behaviour is racist or offensive. Indeed, they even say they are 'not racists' and are concerned that 'outside racist agitators' may come into their village to stir up real trouble!





*Scenes from the film 'The Old Oak'

The film's heroes, and the village's moral compass are two locals: TJ Bannatyne, landlord of the eponymous pub, The Old Oak, and Laura, another local resident who helps the Syrians to resettle in the village. They are helped by Yari, a young Syrian woman with a penchant for photography, who now lives with her mother and younger, school-age siblings in one of the tiny houses in the village. Together, they seek to break down barriers, dispel misconceptions and challenge stereotypes through encounters. They agree that food is the best medium to bring communities together, and they fix up the rundown room at the back of the pub, and invite Syrian families and hard-pressed local ones to have meals together. While there is some resistance at first, most warm to the idea, and help with the repairs to the building, and assist with donations of food and cooking equipment. On one particular occasion, they all enjoy an afternoon meal together, and then a photographic slide show which mixes old photographs from the village's mining heyday with contemporary photos taken by Yari of Syrian families and locals. Two Syrian men then show the villagers an amazing modern coat of arms they have made for the village, which fuses the old with the new, and contains certain English and Arabic phrases.

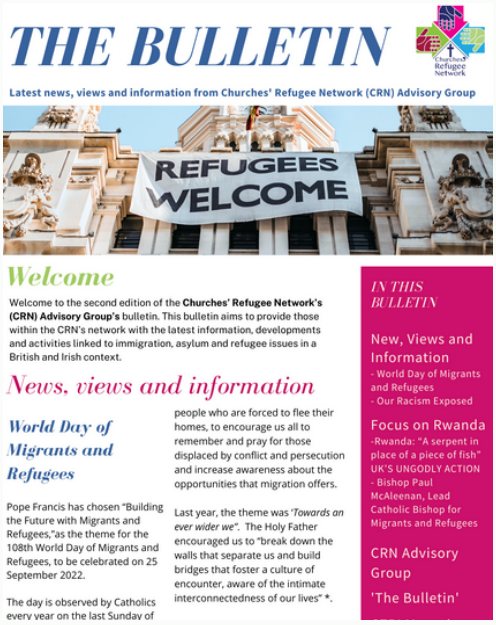
As this is a Ken Loach film, one should not be surprised to know that there is no Walt Disney-like ending to proceedings. However, one of the things that the film tells us is that it is 'best practice' to create opportunities for communities to encounter and engage with one another. It is only through 'meetings' that we can start to build relationships.

Read the full film review on 'The Old Oak' on the CTBI website.

Article by Richard Reddie

CRN Advisory Group

- **Nadine Daniel BEM**, Campaigns and Strategy Lead for UK Welcomes Refugees.
- **Barbara Forbes**, Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN), Secretary of the Committee of Birmingham City of Sanctuary.
- **Jacob Oakes,** Policy and Research Analyst (International Affairs) within the Policy and Research Directorate of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.
- **Richard Reddie,** Director of Justice and Inclusion, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI)


THE BULLETIN

Latest news, views and information from Churches' Refugee Network (CRN) Advisory Group

REFUGEES WELCOME

Welcome

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News, views and information

World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Pope Francis has chosen "Building the Future with Migrants and Refugees,"as the theme for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, to be celebrated on 25 September 2022.

The day is observed by Catholics every year on the last Sunday of

people who are forced to flee their homes, to encourage us all to remember and pray for those displaced by conflict and persecution and increase awareness about the opportunities that migration offers.

Last year, the theme was *'Towards an ever wider we'*. The Holy Father encouraged us to "break down the walls that separate us and build bridges that foster a culture of encounter, aware of the intimate interconnectedness of our lives" *.

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CRN Advisory Group

'The Bulletin'

CRN Advisory Group Bulletins

Issues of 'The Bulletin' will be published on the CTBI website, featuring news, updates and resources submitted by the CRN Advisory Group.

To read and download previous editions, visit the CTBI website.


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CTBI

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CTBI Magazine

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