

What role should the churches play in supporting asylum seekers, migrants and refugees?

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Steven Saxby – Walthamstow Library

I am grateful for this opportunity to be alongside friends from other faith communities and with many good people of Waltham Forest to address the question, “What role should faith groups play in supporting asylum seekers, migrants and refugees?” I speak as someone who’s been engaged in supporting asylum seekers, migrants and refugees for a number of years and not least, most recently, as the parish priest of St Barnabas Church and as a founding member of the Walthamstow Migrants’ Action Group.

My contribution will focus on the role of the churches in London and I will use some examples from my experience to illustrate the ways in which many churches are already supporting migrants (including vulnerable migrants such as asylum seekers, refugees and those who are undocumented). In doing so I hope my contribution might be of use to other churches and indeed to other faith groups and I am glad of this opportunity to learn from others today so that we can develop our own work at St Barnabas. I know others, including Christian charities, mosques and other faith groups do similar and other things, but I offer today five ways in which I think churches make a massive contribution in supporting migrants.

First, for those migrants who are already church-goers, finding a church in London is a means by which migrants connect with an important aspect of their identity. The church is, of course, an international organisation and in London it is possible to find practically every branch of the Christian family.

So at St Barnabas we have a congregation consisting of people from many parts of the world. This includes a large group of fellow Anglicans from the Philippines, Anglicans from Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean, Christians from Uganda and other parts of African, Pakistani Christians, Roman Catholics from Ireland, Hungary and other parts of Europe, Pentecostal and Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe, the former Soviet states, and all over, who all come to St Barnabas because it is the church in the neighbourhood where they live and provides them with a place to fulfil their spiritual needs, to come and worship God and bring to God all the joys and struggles associated with their lives, including their experience as migrants.

Secondly, churches are places where migrants can build community with others. This is so important for people who are often arrive in London alone and lonely and sometime after a great deal of trauma. Social isolation is a big issue for migrants and often a cause of depression and despair. This is why migrants will often seek out people from their communities back home and why in London we have so many ethnic church congregations, ranging from the Ethiopian Orthodox to Chinese Pentecostals, from Lithuanian Catholics to Burmese Baptists. Anglicans from the Philippines have made St Barnabas their UK spiritual home, as they worship alongside others of many cultures. It is great to see the real joy of an isolated Filipino when they discover people from their own community and, indeed, find that much of the cultural life of back home is represented within community gatherings here in London. The same is true for African gay and lesbian Christians, many of them here as asylum seekers for fear of death or torture at home because of their

sexuality, who worship with us once a month as part of the House of Rainbow Fellowship at St Barnabas.

Thirdly, this fact of the church being an international community has something powerful to say to those who would wish to put up boundaries to stigmatise migrants. It is because the churches are communities where people of many nations come together with a common identity that we can bear witness to central tenants of our faith, namely that God loves all regardless of nationality and therefore that churches should be places of welcome for all. In churches there is no such thing as immigration status since we are all co-citizens of heaven. Since our faith teaches us that God welcomes all, that the Bible teaches us that God wants us to welcome the stranger, that Jesus himself was forced to live as a refugee in Egypt during his childhood years, that the final vision of peace, the New Jerusalem, in the Bible is one where all nations come together, we are compelled to welcome the migrant. Maybe that is what inspired those who named an obscure village “welcome place” (or “Walthamstow”) as people moved here from elsewhere many years ago and that is why our church is committed now to Walthamstow as a welcome place for all.

Fourthly, because the churches, who are communities of migrants and non-migrants, are compelled by the Christian faith to welcome the stranger and to care for the vulnerable, it is no wonder that churches are often at the forefront of practical initiatives to support migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees. I first became involved in migrant support through the

Newham Churches Immigration Support Group about fifteen years ago. We undertook a number of actions as migrants and non-migrants supporting asylum claims in particular. These included writing letters, making petitions, attending court hearings, accompanying people when reporting at police stations, and setting up places of sanctuary in case they were needed. Much of this work goes on across London, not least the work of the Jesuit Refugee Service and others. Practical work also includes projects like our local Christian Kitchen, providing vital help to homeless migrants. And practical initiatives also flow from listening to the experience of migrants and working together in churches to address the needs of migrants in the congregation. At St Barnabas, where as members of London Citizens we have conducted listening exercises among our congregation to identify our needs, this has included workshops on helping migrants access health services, help with accessing legal advice and on how to react if subject to stop and search by immigration officers.

And finally, churches can be engaged in taking political action to try to support the plight of migrants, especially those who are vulnerable. This is why St Barnabas has teamed up with others in trying to address migrant issues in Walthamstow and has helped form the Migrants' Action Group. It is also why we are part of London Citizens working with communities across London to try and challenge injustice in the capital not least on migrant issues and why we are involved with Migrants Voice, the Migrants Rights Network, RAMFEL, Kanlungan, the London Churches Refugee Network and others in challenging some of the unjust proposals contained in the government's Immigration Bill. It also why we've been active in resisting the

aggressive stop and search tactics of immigration officers, not least here at Walthamstow Central, and resisting any collusion with the government agenda that suggests migrants should “Go Home!”

On various levels then many churches are supporting migrants and I pray that many more churches will join with others to develop our support, especially at a time when migrants are under so much attack from racist elements of our society as well as the media and our very government. As we prepare for Christmas, churches prepare to welcome the one who was born a homeless stranger and became a child refugee... may we show that we care for migrants, just as God shows his love and care for us.

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