ASYLUM REFLECTIONS

IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES – THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

By Dr Anthony Harvey

And

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM - A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

By Rev Dr Carrie Pemberton and Fr Raphael Armour

A theological companion
to *Asylum Principles:*
A Statement for Churches
Working on Asylum Issues

IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES - THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

By Canon Dr Anthony Harvey

1) "You shall love the alien as yourself"

The natural starting point for Christian reflection on migration and the treatment of people seeking asylum is the clear command in both the Old and the New Testaments to act humanely and compassionately towards the stranger *in our midst*. It is an obligation accepted by all three Religions of the Book as well as by many others outside those faith communities, and has been argued for as given, not merely by revelation, but also by Natural Law — that is to say, as one of those moral principles which are capable of being recognized by all human beings. As such, it requires no further theological support. Refugees and people seeking asylum are beyond doubt the most obvious class of the strangers to whom this command applies in our society today, and Christian churches, along with Jewish and Muslim communities, have shown themselves particularly critical of legislation and administrative procedures which are bearing hard on the 'strangers', and have invested considerable human and physical resources in offering them relief and assistance.

The classic texts supporting this command are in the Hebrew Scriptures. The verse in Leviticus, 'The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself' (19.34), is typical of the humane attitude towards 'foreigners' which is found in the Law of Moses. In the same vein the prophet Malachi pronounces the judgment of God against those who 'thrust aside the alien' (3.5), and Jesus stresses the same obligation when he appears to identify himself explicitly with strangers in need of hospitality (Matthew 25.35). These biblical texts are foundational for Christians. But it is important not to take them out of context, and assume that they apply without any adjustment to a modern situation. It must be remembered that in the time of Christ non-Jews did *not* have equal rights in law with Jews, and that the biblical legislation, which enjoined a humane attitude to strangers, also approved acts of conquest and subjugation of neighbouring states that would be totally abhorrent today. To base Christian imperatives unquestioningly on isolated passages such as these is to risk being open to the charge of selectivity and mis-appropriation of biblical texts.

Christians are now well aware of the unfortunate way in which such texts have been used in the past to support slavery or apartheid. We must be careful not to lay ourselves open to the charge of doing the same with texts which seem to relate to refugees. The biblical writers were never confronted by the social and economic pressures created by a global population of over 17 million refugees and by the immense disparity in standards of living between north and south. The scale of migration in today's world has no parallel in the world of the Bible, and biblical texts cannot be invoked as authoritative arbiters of public policy in the face of them. Nor should we make too much of the example of Jesus' parents fleeing to Egypt as refugees with their baby. This story may be excellent devotional material; but it occurs only in Matthew's gospel (2.13—15), and it is recorded by the evangelist, not to make a point about Jesus as a refugee, but to show how the words of an Old Testament prophet were being fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Hosea 11.1).

2) The Bible and Migration

On what basis, then, are we to construct a theological rationale for action with regard to refugees today? If we cannot appeal directly to biblical texts, we may nevertheless be able to use the Bible to point us towards attitudes and actions that are implicit in our faith. It is often, and correctly, remarked that migration and exile are recurrent biblical motifs. As a matter of history, the people of Israel began its existence as a nomadic community which then settled in Egypt and was forced to leave under considerable duress. It was compensated for this by God's apparent permission to settle in Palestine by conquest and even to indulge in what would now be called 'ethnic cleansing' (Deuteronomy 7.2; 20.13—15 etc.). But the later exile to Babylon, and the subsequent occupation, first by Hellenistic rulers and then by the Romans, revived the sense of being a people with only uncertain rights in their own land. This experience strongly reinforced the metaphor of a nation of migrants, lacking the security of a permanent home of their own and therefore forced to seek a more permanent 'home' in an otherworldly kingdom instituted by God. The values they shared were guaranteed, not by territorial possession, but by their religious tradition. It is this sense of an enduring religious inheritance that has sustained the Jewish identity through many centuries of forced diaspora following the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of Jews from Palestine in the first and second centuries of our era.

A similar experience befell Christians from very early days. The background to the Letter to the Hebrews appears to be the predicament of Jewish Christians who had come "out of the camp" (13.13) — that is, who had deliberately excluded themselves from the Jewish community in which they had formerly found their identity and their security — and now felt bereft of the social and religious support which such a community provided. To them, the example of Abraham, who 'set out, not knowing where he was going' (11.8), had a particular resonance; and by way of reassurance the writer reminded them that they had exchanged their former citizenship for the supernatural assembly of those 'enrolled in heaven' *(apogegrammenoi,* a technical administrative term for the registration of citizens and taxpayers, 12.23). Similarly, the Christians in Philippi, a Roman colony with a notably strong sense of Roman nationality, had to be strengthened in their confession of a "Lord" who was *not* Caesar and in their proclamation of a "gospel" or "good news" which was *not* like those regularly issued by or on behalf of the Roman emperor.

Accordingly Paul reminds them that their *polite uma* (which means a "commonwealth" or "colony" such as their fellow citizens in Philippi were members of) is now in heaven — they are, in that sense, exiles, refugees, persons bereft of the social support provided by an established ethnic or cultural community (3.20). The consequence of their conversion to Christianity was that they had to relinquish the support which comes from an inherited civic, social and cultural identity and to discover deeper resources in the *koinonia* created by Christ and in the expectation of a world order fundamentally different from that which was taken for granted by their pagan or Jewish fellow citizens. In the language of John's gospel, Christians are "in the world, but not of the world" (17.11,14).

It follows that an element of detachment from that sense of security and privilege which goes with membership of a civilized nation or established society is a significant element of biblical faith and experience; indeed it is another facet of that detachment from material goods and readiness to sacrifice the advantages of wealth which has always been regarded as inherent in Christian discipleship. The presence of strangers among us not only invites our hospitality and concern; it is a reminder to ourselves that leaving the security of one's earthly citizenship, like accepting a life of relative poverty, may be a part of the calling of a Christian.

Indeed, it is this necessary detachment from the security given by national and ethnic identity which gives Christians a vantage point from which to judge the value of some of the institutions which derive from it. This judgment should certainly have its positive side. People seeking asylum are benefiting from the existence of national frontiers, in that by travelling to a territory with a different jurisdiction they can expect protection from their persecutors. In this sense, the existence of the nation state may contribute to their well being. But there is another aspect which is much less positive. If people seeking safety find that they are refused the right to enter or to stay in the country in which they had hoped to take refuge, they become victims of a system which serves also to reinforce the citizens of the host country in their belief that they have a natural right to enjoy its resources themselves and to exclude uninvited aliens from their territory. A system, which may have such dire consequences for innocent victims of persecution and destitution, must surely arouse serious moral questions.

Such a re-assessment is timely in any case, since political theorists are now calling the whole concept of national sovereignty into question. It is, after all, a relatively modern concept, which has never been accepted, for example, in Islamic political thought and which is being progressively eroded by modern international treaties and institutions and by the power of multi-national companies. In the light of this, the Christian understanding of human existence as the progress of a pilgrim people with their eyes fixed on realities beyond those of the material world provides a further motive for challenging some of the restrictions on human liberty and cross-border movement which exist only as a consequence of the assumed rights of the nation state.

3) "Economic Migrants"?

These restrictions are most evident in the border controls imposed by many industrialized nations. In the poorer parts of the world — particularly in Africa, where huge numbers of refugees move from one country to another — frontiers are necessarily porous; but wealthier countries feel committed to maintaining a high level of social welfare that cannot easily be extended to large numbers of destitute immigrants; they fear that an influx of people of different cultures may threaten social harmony and cohesion; and so they regard the control of immigration as an essential element of public policy. It is also one that lends itself to political exploitation — governments believe they can gain popularity by not being 'soft' on refugees.

It is certainly true that, in global terms, migration is on the increase. World-wide, it is calculated that there are now 175 million people — three per cent of the world's population — who are migrants, that is, people defined as those who live or have lived away from their place of birth for a period of one year or longer, having crossed the boundary of a political or administrative unit. Not, of course, that there is anything new about migration itself, which has been described as "the oldest action against poverty". Since the beginning of history people have left their own countries, not only because of poverty, but also when fleeing from oppressors, persecutors, natural disasters and famines, when aspiring to a better life than they could have at home, or even when moved by a spirit of adventure or discovery.

These movements necessarily have consequences for the receiving nations or communities, and often arouse active resistance or long-term friction; and the behaviour of both the incoming and the resident population has at times been the subject of moral and religious censure and concern. From the protests of Las Casas against the cruelty visited by the Spanish invaders on the Amerindians to the massive opposition of the mainline churches to the apartheid regime in South Africa, there has been a consistent Christian witness against the abuses of our common humanity which immigrant peoples have both committed and suffered. This witness is even more necessary today, when in countries such as our own the pressures of migration are widely felt to constitute a threat which must be met by punitive and inhumane measures of control and exclusion.

Do all migrants deserve the same welcome and sympathy? Those who are voluntary migrants, and have freely left their home countries or districts and legally entered another in order to seek a better life, may reasonably be expected make their own way without receiving special care or protection from the receiving country. Similarly, those who have forfeited their rights in their own country by criminal activities cannot expect immunity or security when they migrate. No one questions the right of a nation to regulate the entry of such people across its borders. It is when migrants are forced to leave their own countries under duress that a conflict of obligations arises, and it is these migrants whose increasing numbers are now causing concern.

In order to control them, a distinction is made between those seeking asylum in the face of "a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality etc", whose right to be received by other countries is protected by international conventions dating back to 1951, and those who are fleeing conditions of extreme poverty and hardship, who are classed as 'economic migrants', who are protected by no international convention and who can legally be denied access and forcibly repatriated. Huge administrative and judicial resources are poured into the effort to uphold this distinction so as to limit the number of immigrants who can claim admission as of right; and the process often involves the claimants in long periods of anxious delay, enforced idleness and poverty, separation of families and even detention.

It has to be said that from a Christian, and indeed from a humanitarian, point of view this distinction is hard to justify. To have to leave one's own country under any form of duress is a traumatic experience for most of those who are forced to do so. The motive in each case is likely to be fear for one's life, and it makes little difference to the moral (as opposed to legal) case for reception by another country whether this is caused by political or religious persecution, by starvation or by acute hardships created by corruption and injustice. Indeed in many cases there will be a combination of such factors. To take a biblical example: the people of Israel were forced out of Egypt by a combination of racial persecution and physical starvation: it would have been impossible to say whether they were 'people seeking asylums' or 'economic migrants'. They were typical of those who undertake the arduous and often hazardous venture of leaving their own country under duress. The Christian duty to receive such people with generous hospitality cannot be compromised by arbitrary distinctions between one kind of duress and another. Indeed there are strong moral grounds, recognized also by many outside the Christian faith community, for protesting against policies which are based on this distinction and which are causing untold suffering to those who have already endured the trauma of being forced to leave their homes by circumstances beyond their control. It is acceptable, and may be necessary, to deny entry to those who have voluntarily chosen to migrate in search of better opportunities or amenities, and therefore to develop procedures to distinguish them from those who have left home under duress.

But to refuse and expel those who have left home because of conditions of acute destitution for themselves or their families on the grounds that they have not been able to prove that they were subject to actual persecution cannot be justified from a Christian or indeed from any moral point of view.

4) A Conflict of Rights

We have already seen that nations may arguably have a right to protect their borders against certain classes of immigrants; and it is understandable that there should be considerable popular resistance to a large number of immigrants coming to these islands, who are not entitled to enter for specific employment or family reasons. Social trends are already moving in the direction of a polarization between those who have adequate wealth, security and freedom of choice and those who have none of these things. The former increasingly move into areas, and even protected estates, where they feel securely separated from the presence of those less fortunate; the latter tend to be marginalized and tempted to crime as the only means of surviving or bettering their situation. The arrival of large numbers of refugees is perceived by the majority as a further threat to their security, their jobs and the social benefits which they claim in return for their taxes, and these fears are fanned by the popular press and exploited by government for political purposes.

Yet the reality is far removed from these apprehensions. Rather than being 'swamped' by an inexorable tide of immigrants, our countries now have substantial numbers of *emigrants;* far from being a threat to jobs, many people seeking asylum are highly skilled and educated and fill existing vacancies in many professions, or else do manual work that our own increasingly educated population is no longer willing to do; far from being a drain on our social benefits, they are typically keen to work; and migrant workers in industrialized countries not only contribute to the economy of their host country but also send more money home and do more for the

economic development of their own countries by their remittances than all our ‘aid’ budgets put together. If these and other factors which work to the long-term advantage of both the receiving and the sending nation could be made better known it would be possible to remove some of the fear and instinctive apprehension which lies behind the xenophobic climate often fostered by politicians and the press.

Those seeking asylum, however, are not mere objects of charity. They also have rights. Under the UN 1951 Convention on Refugees, those whose claim to asylum is accepted have the right to formal recognition as refugees in the host country, implying access to the support and amenities available to other citizens and the further right in due course to receive full citizenship. Those whose claim has not, or not yet, been accepted also have rights simply as human beings. The concept of ‘human rights’ possessed by every human being is not explicitly stated in the Bible and was slow to be accepted by the churches. But it is now well established in Christian theology, and is routinely founded on the doctrine that all human beings are created in the image of God and have the ‘right’ to be treated with the respect which follows from their dignity as God’s creatures. This effectively prevents any Christian from treating a stranger or an alien as in any way inferior, and is reinforced by Paul’s insight that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3.28). And the church itself, in theory and often in reality, is a worldwide community in which all ethnic and cultural barriers are overcome and in which all can make their distinctive contribution.

The language of rights, however, has its dangers as well as its benefits. To say that someone has a ‘right’ to something may suggest a claim that is absolute: to deny the person this right may be represented as an offence against the person’s human dignity. But in practice very few ‘rights’ have this absolute character. Even among ‘human rights’ there are very few (such as the right not to be tortured) which could be called absolute. The majority are either conditional on normal peaceful conditions (states have a right to derogate from their obligations under the convention in times of national emergency), or else cannot be satisfied because of a lack of national resources (such as ‘the right to work’ in a situation of high unemployment). Moreover, there is a necessary distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ rights. The former inhere in a person, and may be claimed whatever the circumstances; but the latter flow from an objective account of justice in the state, such that it may be unjust for one person to enjoy a right if this is to the detriment of another. In practice the rights of some may conflict with the rights of others, and to claim that any ‘rights’ are absolute, or that the rights of one class of persons override those of another, can lead to serious friction. The residents of the receiving country, for example, may well protest if their own right to be assisted with housing is perceived to have been set aside in favour of the ‘right’ of refugees to be immediately housed.

There is, of course, an ‘objective’ right to fairness in the distribution of housing which should result in everyone being housed; but in practice the state may be unable to provide immediately for all who are in need, with the result that some will necessarily go without and find that their rights are far from absolute.

Moreover the modern use of 'rights' language has tended to neglect the element of obligation which is inherent in any philosophically acceptable theory of rights. The right to enjoy the advantages of citizenship entails the obligation to observe the constraints and duties which are laid on all citizens; and residents of the receiving country may legitimately expect strangers to accept this obligation. But their own right to occupy their territory and enjoy its advantages is also subject to some obligation towards others. The scholastic doctrine of the sanctity of private property implied the recognition that all that we have comes from God and that our possession and use of it must be for the common good. That is to say, when we balance the rights of immigrants against those of resident citizens we must not give absolute priority to the latter: according to the Christian moral tradition, the possessions which we rightfully hold are ours, not merely for our enjoyment, but for sharing with those in serious need.

5) Opportunities for Christian Witness

Yet however much we may recognize that there is a genuine conflict of rights created by the arrival of so many hopeful immigrants on our shores, the routine infringements of basic human rights involved in processing their applications and the acute personal sufferings inflicted on those seeking asylum in Britain and Ireland, as in other countries of Europe, are already sufficient cause to rouse Christians to action on their behalf, along with members of other faith communities and many other people of good will. But there are also grounds for Christian concern at a deeper level. To a great extent (as Archbishop Rowan Williams has said) the refugee problem is a problem of our own making. Not just the slave trade, but the systematic exploitation of the resources of newly colonized countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, often accompanied by Christian evangelization, have made the western world a permanent debtor to the developing nations.

Refugees from poor countries may now be seen as people coming to reclaim the inheritance of which they were robbed during centuries of foreign rule and domination by those who claimed a superior religious culture. They are also people who are the primary victims of the policies of the more powerful nations which have not only failed to establish peace with justice in other continents but have often actually contributed to conflict and to the changes of climate that bear hardest on the very poor. It is they who (in the Archbishops words) 'must hold the human race to account', and 'who bear the real cost of war, oppression, brutality, greed and power'. Christians cannot feel at ease with themselves and with the world if they have both failed to accept responsibility for past actions done in the name of the gospel and have acquiesced in further injustices visited upon those refugees who have struggled to reach our shores.

In all this there is one factor to which Christians may feel particularly moved to respond. When confronted by immigration officials and adjudicators, applicants for asylum find themselves in a situation totally uncharacteristic of normal British and Irish legal procedures. Instead of being regarded as innocent until proved guilty, they are assumed to be fraudulent unless they can prove that their stories are true. But whereas in a court of law the truth of a story will normally be judged by the material evidence and independent testimony which support it, people seeking asylum have nothing but their own word to offer.

In most cases they can appeal to no evidence that they have been persecuted other than the general knowledge, presumed to be in possession of the immigration officials, of the turbulent conditions in their countries of origin; and they can call on no 'witnesses' to vouch for the truth of their statements. As a result, they find themselves systematically disbelieved; and even the legal representation which might help them may not be forthcoming, since (in the United Kingdom) Legal Aid, now severely curtailed, is conditional upon approval by the Legal Services Commission on the basis of a written 'case' that they have had no chance to present in person or to check for accuracy.

This problem — of getting ones testimony believed in the absence of supporting witnesses or evidence — is one that was familiar to the ancient world, which tended to have an approach to legal proceedings different from ours. Rather than seeking the support of circumstantial evidence, a person who appeared in court would look for a 'witness' who was highly regarded in society and whose word would be believed.

With such support, the defendant's own testimony had a good chance of being accepted as true. And this, of course, has many resonances in the New Testament, particularly in John's gospel, where 'witnessing' to the truth is the calling of John the Baptist and the first followers of Jesus and becomes the specific task of the apostles and those whom they commission (1.34,49). Witnessing to Jesus being the Son of God (a proposition not open to proof by western standards of evidence!) means witnessing to the truth (15.27); and the 'truth' to which Jesus followers are called to witness may be not only the divinity of Jesus Christ but the honesty of the innocent person in the dock in whom Jesus is present. It follows that a specific and distinctive calling of the Christian today is to befriend those seeking asylum, to elicit and assess the truth of their stories, and to offer personal witness to them in official proceedings where these people are otherwise systematically *disbelieved.*

Beyond this opportunity for personal witness there is also a distinctive Christian stance towards refugees which derives both from a doctrine of God and from the example given by Jesus. Our belief in the Trinity implies that a relationship between individuals belongs to the very nature of a God who is recognized in the dynamic of our personal and social relationships when they are informed by his love. And these relationships are not confined to friendships between equals, nor do they depend on the conventions of class and status. They embrace a love shown equally towards all fellow human beings and especially those who are suffering and oppressed. Jesus welcomed to his table those whom the society of his time despised or distrusted, and forged from the community of his followers a society bound by the bonds of a generous and self-sacrificial love. For Christians today, the presence among us of individuals who have been systematically deprived of the rights and advantages enjoyed by our fellow citizens, and whose personal stories are often such as to inspire intense compassion and concern, can be nothing less than a challenge to express our faith through action, hospitality and friendship.

Besides all this, nonetheless, there are wider issues that trouble the Christian conscience and demand Christian action. The conditions which have forced people seeking asylum to leave their home countries are a scar on the record of our western civilization. We have failed to eliminate what the UN Charter of 1945 called 'the scourge of war', and it is war that has created the majority of the 17 million refugees in the world today. The great majority of these refugees are living in almost total destitution in neighbouring countries in the poorest parts of the world, while the richer countries are willing to accept only a fraction of that number. Our economic policies, often subservient to opportunist political alliances, have failed to reduce the poverty of two thirds of the world; and it is this poverty which has increased the flow of migrants to the richer countries of the west. Even in our own countries we have a widening gap between the rich and the poor and have failed to achieve the kind of harmoniously integrated society that can extend a genuine welcome to refugees and immigrants. We believe, in faith, that all these things can be changed; we have a vision of a society in which these gross inequalities are recognized to be unacceptable; in which for citizens of even the poorest countries there is (in the words of Christian Aid's slogan) 'life before death'; in which all human beings can meet and interact with dignity and mutual respect; and in which a diversity of culture, religion and background is valued for what it can give to the larger community. We commit ourselves as individuals, as churches and as members of a 'Christian' society to work for refugees by every means open to us and to join with those of other faiths and none who share our yearning for a compassionate society, for peace, and for a just distribution of the world's resources.

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM - A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Rev Dr Carrie Pemberton and Fr Raphael Armour

We are a pilgrim people. 'Here we have no permanent city' **(Hebrews 13.14)**

'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell therein', writes the psalmist. (Ps 24:1). This world and the countries in which we live do not belong to us: we are stewards of what God has given us, stewards who will be required to give an account of our stewardship.

The life of the People of God starts with a journey. Abraham hears the call of God and sets out on his journey from Haran (Genesis 12: 1-4). Abraham, the writer to the Hebrews tells us, is the father of faith. Sarah who accompanies Abraham on his journey is made particularly vulnerable. This is a story repeated in the lives of so many women when they leave their homelands and the protection of their women's networks. Although Sarah becomes the mother of a future nation giving birth to her child Isaac whilst in migration, she endures two episodes of sexual exploitation, placed in concubinage with the complicity of Abraham with the King of Gerar and the Pharaoh of Egypt. There is much in the story of Sarah and her maidservant Hagar which gives us insight into the particular risks and challenges which confront women in migration today.

As a result of the calamity of famine, the second generation leave the land of settlement and migrates afresh to Egypt, in order to obtain food (Genesis 43).

After several generations settled in Egypt, the Israelites become embroiled in bonded labour, and a liberation leader emerges from one of their number who has been integrated into the hierarchy of the nation. Moses, inspired and enabled by God leads the children of Israel from their captivity in Egypt and undertakes the long and hazardous journey to the Promised Land. After forty years transit across the wilderness, however, they discover a land - not empty, but occupied and prosperous. The construction of the new nation, Israel, in the land of Canaan was filled with warfare, disputes and bloodshed. The new land for liberated slaves was contested and disputed. This has been the story of every migration and occupation recorded in modern times. Whether we look at the Americas, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa there are few areas of the earth whose occupation by migrants, blow-ins or liberated slaves will not be contested.

This history of faith, shows movements of people due both to political oppression and to physical and economic necessities. We also note that there are particular strains and processes of exploitation which are endured because of difference in gender. Women experience migration and settlement differently from men. Our faith history has indications of this difference and the damage endured which will repay enquiry and considered reflection.

Movement from one country to another is the experience of several of the member churches of CTBI. Many of the African-Caribbean Churches trace their foundation to those who came to this country in the 1950's and 1960's, responding to the call of the 'Mother country' to help with the infrastructural needs of the main Island and with some hopes of improving their economic and educational lot.

The Russian Orthodox Diocese in the UK and Ireland was founded by those who had been expelled from the Soviet Union - following the October Revolution of 1917, and by the displacement caused by the Second World War - and by their children and grandchildren. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain includes many people who came to the UK following the loss of their homes and livelihood resulting from the Turkish invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus, in 1973. People from Ireland, Catholics and Protestants alike, has populated extensively the United States of America and Canada in movements stimulated by land shortages, famine and lack of political autonomy. Currently some 60 million North Americans claim Irish heritage whilst the sending country itself is under populated with a mere 5.5 million citizens. It has become for the first time in modern history a land of immigration. The religious communities of Ireland have been responsible for vast swathes of Christian missionary, educational and health care activity across the two thirds world.

How does all this apply to the UK and Ireland's present experience with asylum seekers and economic migrants? How do we respond to the terms of abuse which cluster around the use of 'bogus' appended to asylum seekers, or 'scroungers' appended to those in economic migration?

How do we appropriately recognise the criminal activity which is occurring around benefit fraud, trafficking of bonded labour and smuggling of persons into the UK and Ireland's grey economies and yet maintain an appropriately hospitable, neighbour affirming, common history acknowledging openness to those who seek safety, shelter and a future within our shores?

The task is not simple, as the pressures now being exerted through the global movement of people across widely divergent economic, political and religious realities are intense and extensive. There are, however, some paradigmatic principles which we can generate from our faith history which will be of assistance to us as a council of churches seeking to give leadership and guidance to our faith communities and to our national governments at this time. This is required as the complex of fear generated by terrorism and difference, and economic protectionism triggered by unprecedented wealth and prosperity seems to have a substantial portion of media, public opinion and political representatives in its grip.

'We are the Israel of God', the Apostle Paul teaches us. By our baptism into Christ, the whole history and experience of Israel becomes our own – the deliverance from affliction, the giving of the Torah, the neglect of the commandments, the stoning of the prophets, the turning away from God, and the experience of two exiles. The experience of exile and escape from fear and persecution is not limited to the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the experience of the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself.

It is because of the danger of assassination by Herod that Joseph and Mary flee with the Lord Jesus to Egypt. Our salvation depended upon hospitality being given to a family of refugees – a family who had fled to an alien culture.

Fleeing from political oppression was also the lot of the earliest church in Jerusalem, when persecution resulted in the believers being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1b). It is partly that forced migration which gave the impetus for the early geographical spread of nascent Christianity. Paul's early mission benefited in part from the previous exile of the Jewish Diaspora across the gentile trading world.

The principle to care for the stranger within our gates is embedded deep within the Torah, since the Exodus injunction to care for widow, alien and exile because of their own experience of slavery, forced migration and salvation (**Exodus 22:21-24)**. Since the self-understanding of the church is that we are the newly constituted Israel of God, the command to 'care for the stranger within your gates', is said every bit as much to us as to the Children of Israel almost 3000 years ago.

In terms of dominical mandates we need look only to the Lord's parable of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46). Here it is those who neglect to

- feed the hungry,
- give drink to the thirsty,
- clothe the naked,
- visit the sick and those in prison,

who, in turn, are excluded from the presence of the King of All.

It is, in part, members of our churches - both lay and ordained - who work or visit in a voluntary capacity at immigration removal Centres, providing spiritual nourishment and pastoral care to people of all faiths and none, in response to this injunction. Many of the residents within these centres face repatriation to countries of origin which, as even the UK Foreign Office website acknowledges, are politically or economically unstable and are physically dangerous. Despair and fear is present for a large number of detainees even if their countries are designated by the Home Office and Immigration Directorate as 'white' or safe countries for return. There is a challenge here to provide some sort of accountability for the safety of those who are repatriated

Often those ministering as chaplains in these centres can feel as much abandoned by the churches as do those for whom they try to care.

It is vital that the Churches – both the Church of England as the established Church in the United Kingdom with seats in the Upper House, and the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland - put into place a network for chaplains working in these centres to discuss appropriate forms of supervision, care and reflection for each other, and to feedback to their mother churches the insights and concerns which affect them in their day to day work within the centres. It is also needful that appropriate theological research, chaplaincy training and support alongside policy development surrounding immigration issues and custodial institutions be undertaken with urgency.

The riot at Harmondsworth (July 2004) and the devastating fire at Yarl's Wood (February 2002) are the public tip of an iceberg which can take all hands down when hit, and is a challenge for all who have to negotiate it - public sector servants, detainees and their families, voluntary sector support agencies, politicians, and religious leaders alike.

The Christ to whom and in whose name we minister is the One who - in the asylum seeker, the victim of trafficking and the economic migrant - comes to us.

This short paper is in no way the detailed theological reflection on Asylum and Immigration which awaits development across the various denominations which constitute the CTBI. We offer it, however, as an initial springboard for further reflection and a foundation call for action by our member churches. It is offered by two ministers – one Anglican, the other Orthodox - who have been marked by participation as chaplains in two of the removal centres in the Immigration and Removal estate which currently holds 1,200 people in detention pending removal.