

## **REFUGEE AND MIGRANT WORKING GROUP**

Since the last General Synod, members would be aware there has been considerable attention given to the matters of Refugees and Asylum-seekers.

In fact, the compelling nature of this matter has meant that the General Synod Refugee and Migrant Working Group has not been an adequate container for all the activity.

Members have kept in touch over service-delivery and advocacy but the partnerships which have evolved, both ecumenically and within our Anglican Church of Australia, have been the primary instrument for activity.

For example, the Australian Churches' Refugee Taskforce of the National Council of Churches in Australia as well as Anglican-auspiced refugee agencies and the refugee ministries of local Anglican Churches.

This was anticipated and endorsed in Motion 55/14 at the last General Synod.

### **RESPONSES TO REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

The Very Reverend Dr Peter Catt moved, Bishop Philip Huggins seconded,

That, acknowledging the Federal Government's constitutional authority to administer orderly immigration policy; recognising the moral complexities of the task; remembering the daily difficulties endured by defence force personnel; and accepting that 'people trafficking' is an insidious social evil:

1. this Synod nonetheless affirms the basic human right to seek asylum as expressed in the UN Convention, and affirms Australia's past positive record of providing refuge and asylum;
2. urged by the compassion of God, the Synod therefore respectfully calls upon the Federal Government to honour Australia's international obligations, and urges Government and Opposition to reconsider and revise some aspects of their current policy, including;
  - arbitrary treatment of people under the Migration Act (1958) depending on their mode of arrival, not upon their status as asylum seekers;
  - emotive use of the term 'illegal' to describe asylum seekers whose refugee status has yet to be determined;
  - continuing recourse to off-shore detention facilities;
  - continuing instances of immigration detention of women and children;
  - continuing instances of periods of detention greater than three months, which put detainees at clear risk of serious mental illness;

- imbalance of fiscal priorities toward border patrol and detention services, and away from diplomacy, regional capacity building and international refugee foreign aid;
  - arbitrary and retrospective discrimination against family stream applicants who have received permanent visa, passed the relevant tests and paid the relevant fees, but who were maritime arrivals;
  - the suppression of information about maritime operations involving refugees;
  - the secrecy surrounding the operation of offshore detention centres;
  - risk of alienation, and barriers to integration, from lack of access to government services under limited visa conditions; and
  - the rapidly changing policy environment that often leaves asylum seekers and their advocates uncertain of how to proceed;
3. the Synod urges Government and Opposition to work with regional neighbours and the UNHCR to develop a compassionate and workable regional response to refugees and asylum seekers, also to enable quicker processing and acceptance of greater numbers of refugees located in UN refugee camps close to the countries of origin they have left and to develop immigration policies that are more just and compassionate, so that they can be remembered with pride by future generations of Australians, while appropriately protecting the current generation of Australians;
  4. the Synod also recognises with gratitude the work of Anglican auspiced refugee agencies; existing refugee ministries of local churches; it encourages more local churches to engage in loving refugees with practical care and sharing Christ's love, and commends study resources and work of the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRIGHT - [www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce.com.au](http://www.australianchurchesrefugeetaskforce.com.au));
  5. requests the Primate to advise the Prime Minister, Minister of Immigration and Border Protection, and the Leader of the Opposition of the contents of the motion.

That motion also anticipated that we could continue to be engaged as regards both the plight and future of those in off-shore detention as well as the search for more humane and durable regional responses. This Australian focus in a context of now some 65 million people displaced globally. As I recall, when General Synod last met this bewildering number was under 50 million.

A glance at the media statements by our Primate and by many of our Synod members evidences our persistent advocacy in this bleak context of failed States and human suffering.

Our context, since the last General Synod has also included the cruelty of ISIS and the amplified suffering of Christians and other minority groups in many countries. The Syrian crisis has stretched the resources of UNHCR and the NGO sector like no other recent crisis.

In our own Australia we are all aware of how the political choices have been conveyed by the major political parties.

In fact, looking back now on our Motion 55/14, it looks somewhat romantic as regards how we hoped Federal policy might evolve.

In this context, briefly sketched, the need for a Refugee and Migrant Working Group is as great as ever. Because of the limited budget we have not had any national meetings of the Working Group.

Instead, we have each and together continued to make what contribution we can through the evolving partnerships, such as those mentioned above, keeping in touch along the (busy) way.

We have learned afresh that simple things matter: the banner on St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne "*Let's fully welcome refugees*". It was funded and facilitated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in partnership with the Cathedral and has had a huge impact.

Likewise, simple initiatives like English Conversation Classes for new arrivals have created bridges, fostered friendships, nurtured belonging. Many parishes are offering such services. They sit alongside bigger issues like education/employment pathways for those on-shore; advocacy and support for family reunions. (At the time of writing there is a backlog of 30,000 awaiting consideration for spousal reunion), as well as the work of our Aid and Development agencies to prevent more people needing to become refugees and asylum-seekers.

Because the issues are so volatile, it is hard at this time of writing, to know quite what Motion the Working Group will bring to this year's General Synod. Suffice to say, this motion and the ensuing debate will be an opportunity for the General Synod to consider how we can now, in 2017, express the Gospel as regards our Church's work with refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants.

Bishop Philip Huggins, Convenor