

REFUGEE AND MIGRANT SUNDAY 30 AUGUST 2015

Statement for the Mosman/Neutral Bay Inter-Church Council

Jesus described himself as a stranger, waiting to be invited into our hearts and our community (Matthew 25:35). Tragically, millions around the world are today living as strangers in foreign lands, having been forced to leave their homes because of persecution, war or hunger. The situation has been described as a global crisis and many governments have responded by strengthening their borders to protect their own people. While they have the right to do so, as Christians we believe that the human rights and dignity of the “strangers”, the refugees and asylum seekers, must be respected, and this duty of care may sometimes come before national interest.

“Jesus Christ is always waiting to be recognized in migrants and refugees, in displaced persons and in exiles, and through them he calls us to share our resources, and occasionally to give up something of our acquired riches,” wrote Pope Francis in his message for Migrant and Refugee Sunday 2015.

Recently newspaper and television stories have featured thousands of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East daily risking their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean to find haven in Europe. Compared with those numbers, Australia’s problem of “boat people” is miniscule, yet we are the only developed country in the world with a policy of compulsory detention of asylum seekers and of linking the numbers accepted for resettlement from “unauthorised arrivals” with our overall quota for refugee intake.

Australia received 8,960 requests for asylum in 2014, less than one percent of all such requests worldwide. (By comparison, there were 60,000 overseas visitors to Australia who overstayed their visas and thus became “illegal immigrants”, mainly from developed countries like the UK and NZ.) Under Operation “Sovereign Borders”, asylum seekers who attempt to come to Australia by boat are either turned back to their place of origin or placed in offshore detention centres in Manus Island or Nauru. In March this year there were 989 asylum seeker men on Manus Island and 718 men, women and children on Nauru.

In March 2015 there were 1,509 children in some form of immigration detention facilities including in Australia and Nauru, and the average time spent by children in detention is 14 months, despite several enquiries and reports to the government urging faster processing and more compassionate treatment. The director of the Australian Centre for Public Christianity, the Reverend John Dickson, points out that the Bible “places the highest demands on believers to honour and protect children, especially orphans, as special examples of God’s own precious children.”

You can find useful sources of information on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia online, including the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre www.asrc.org.au and the Refugee Council of Australia www.refugeecouncil.org.au. Some policy statements by Christian churches include <http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/social-teaching/issues/110-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>; <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/refugees-and-asylum-seekers>. Campaigns supported by the Refugee Taskforce of the National Council of Churches in Australia are listed at <http://www.acrt.com.au/campaigns/>.

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