



Embracing the Stranger

Challenges and Opportunities
for NI Churches

—
Emma Soye



‘I was a stranger

and you invited me in’

Matthew 25:35



1.0 Introduction

This report was commissioned by EMBRACE NI, an interdenominational Christian committee which aims to support churches in welcoming asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers to Northern Ireland (NI).¹ The report seeks to:

1
provide an overview of the work that churches across NI are doing to welcome newcomers in their local communities;

2
give insight into the challenges and opportunities churches experience in welcoming newcomers²;

3
offer recommendations for the work of churches in welcoming newcomers (specific recommendations for EMBRACE NI are provided separately).

The research took the form of desk research and 29 interviews conducted with church staff and congregation members; people working for church-funded and Christian organisations; and current and previous members of the EMBRACE NI committee. Interviews with church staff and congregation members covered a range of denominations including Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist, Catholic, and independent churches. Potential interviewees were approached directly or through local government councils, who forwarded emails to churches. Interviews took place in person where possible, or via phone call or Zoom. All interview participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses.

It should be noted that by nature, qualitative research involves a selection bias. The report does not seek to document the efforts of every church across NI in welcoming newcomers. Rather,

¹ An asylum seeker is someone who claims asylum from persecution in their home country. While their claim is being assessed, the person is considered as an asylum seeker. If permission to stay is granted, that person is considered as a refugee.

² The report sometimes uses the term 'newcomer' as an overarching term for people from asylum seeking, refugee, and migrant backgrounds. However, it should be recognised that these groups are highly diverse, not only in terms of immigration status but also place of origin, socioeconomic status, age, educational background, religion, and number of years in NI.

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it gives a broad overview of the *type* of work that churches are doing and provides examples of their work. It was generally easier to access specific information, both directly and online, about the work of churches in Armagh, Down, and Antrim (particularly Mid and East Antrim). Churches are also doing valuable work with newcomers in North Antrim, Tyrone, Fermanagh, and Derry/Londonderry. The report should not be viewed as containing an exhaustive list of the work that churches across NI are doing to welcome newcomers. Nor should it be understood as entirely representative of the views of people working in this field. Another limitation of this report is that it does not include the perspectives of asylum seekers, refugees, or migrant workers themselves; their experiences of 'welcome' from the church present an important area for further research.

The following section gives background on the NI context of immigration and asylum, public attitudes, and organisational support for migrant workers, refugees,

and asylum seekers. Biblical and academic conceptualisations of hospitality and welcome are then briefly explored before the research findings are presented – the research found that churches are working in three key areas: providing community spaces and initiatives; facilitating English language learning; and supporting basic needs. The research also found that churches experience challenges and opportunities in four main areas: responding to need; building relationships; working together; and fostering diversity. The final section of the report briefly discusses limitations of the research and offers recommendations for churches for their future work with newcomers.



2.0 Context

2.1. Migrant workers

Over the past 25 years, the number of people migrating to the UK and Ireland has increased to historically high levels. In 2021, six million people, or 9% of the UK's total population, had the nationality of a different country.³ From 2021-2022, the Republic of Ireland had a total net migration of 61,100 – its largest population increase since 2008.⁴ According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 3.4% of NI's population in 2021 belonged to minority ethnic groups.⁵ This is around double the 2011 figure and four times the 2001 figure. Belfast had the largest number of ethnic minorities, followed by the Boroughs of: Mid Ulster; Lisburn and Castlereagh; Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon; and Antrim and Newtownabbey.

2.2. Refugees

The UK is signatory to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol, which define who a refugee is and set out the protection that all refugees should receive without discrimination. Refugees in the UK are permitted to work and access social benefits and housing. Alongside other UK countries,

NI participates in the United Nations Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Schemes (VPRS) for Syrian, Iraqi, and Sudanese refugees. A new visa scheme was introduced for Hong Kongers in January 2021 and the UK opened the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme in January 2022. It also launched the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme – 'Homes for Ukraine' – in March 2022. As of April 2022, almost 600 visas had been granted to Ukrainian refugees hoping to come to NI.⁶ Belfast had the highest number of visa sponsors under the scheme, followed by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough, and Newry, Mourne and Down Borough. NI is the only country in the UK which does not have an official Refugee Integration Strategy; a draft Strategy was circulated for comment earlier in 2022.⁷

2.3. Asylum seekers

There were 44,190 asylum applications in the UK for the year ending September 2021. This accounted for 8% of total asylum applications across the European Union (EU) and UK combined over that period.⁸ Although the UK Home Office collects asylum data nationally, it does not publish disaggregated data for NI. The shared

³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/>

⁴ <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/ireland-experiences-population-growth-due-to-increasing-immigration-rates/>

⁵ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-1-statistical-bulletin-ethnic-group.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61275004>

⁷ <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/teo/refugee-integration-strategy-for-northern-ireland/>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2021/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to>

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border with the Irish Republic also makes it difficult to ascertain numbers of people claiming asylum or arriving with a visa.⁹ Murphy and Vieten (2017) estimate that there are 200-300 new asylum seekers per year to NI from different locations.¹⁰ There are currently over 1,800 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq living in the country, including 200 children (many of whom do not have a school place).¹¹

Asylum seekers in the UK are not permitted to work. The Home Office employs private contractors to provide accommodation to asylum seekers in the UK. Since 2019, there has been a large increase in the number of asylum seekers living in 'initial' or 'contingency' accommodation (including hotels and army barracks) for long periods of time. The private contractor Mears Group has a £113 million contract in NI and currently provides accommodation to asylum seekers in 14 hotels in the province, mostly in and around Belfast.¹² Conditions inside these hotels have been described as 'dire', reflecting findings from recent reports on initial and contingency forms of asylum accommodation in

England (Red Cross, 2018; Doctors of the World, 2022).^{13 14} Another recent report by the Refugee Council (2022:10) highlights



⁹ <https://theconversation.com/what-life-is-like-for-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-northern-ireland-88125>

¹⁰ Murphy, D. F. and Vieten, D. U. M. (2017) 'Asylum seekers and refugees' experiences of life in Northern Ireland' p. 120.

¹¹ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/oppressive-posters-in-asylum-seeker-hotels-in-northern-ireland-not-from-us-says-operator-41879936.html>

¹² <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/doctors-fear-for-refugees-health-because-of-dire-accommodation-programme-in-northern-ireland-41863518.html>

¹³ British Red Cross (2021) *Far from a home: why asylum support accommodation needs reform.*

¹⁴ Doctors of the World (2022) *'They just left me': Asylum seekers, health, and access to healthcare in initial and contingency accommodation.*

¹⁵ Refugee Council (2022) *Lives on Hold: Experiences of people living in hotel asylum accommodation. A follow-up report.*

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that living in the hotels is ‘mentally and emotionally exhausting for all involved. Often suffering from physical and social isolation, clients struggle to integrate into their local communities due to a lack of access to local opportunities, clothing, public transport, mental health support and English classes’.¹⁵

2.4. Public attitudes

Research shows that attitudes towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in NI are diverse. Murphy and Vieten (2017) and Michael and Devine (2018)¹⁶ describe attitudes towards newcomers in NI as positive, but also note that asylum seekers and refugees have experienced racist violence and intimidation in their neighbourhoods, including arson and criminal damage. Variation in attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers is linked to a number of different factors. Lippard and McNamee (2021) find that less welcoming attitudes towards Syrian refugees in NI are associated with having lower socioeconomic status, having no minority friends, and having a dis-preference towards Muslims. Identifying as Protestant, Unionist or ‘More British’

(compared with ‘More Irish’) and being of an older age are other factors.¹⁷ Lippard and McNamee also point to the significant impact of social deprivation, noting that direct competition for resources (such as social benefits, employment, and housing) is likely to influence attitudes towards refugees.

2.5. Support for newcomers

A broad range of governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) support migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers in NI. These include Migrant Help, Bryson Intercultural, Law Centre NI, Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC), Refuge Language, the Northern Ireland Council for Racial Equality (NICRE), Belfast Multi-Cultural Association, Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum, Barnardo’s, Extern, City of Sanctuary, the Trussell Trust, Drumcree Community Trust, Migrant Centre NI, Advice NI, NI Hyatt Ltd, Homeplus, Horn of Africa People’s Aid NI (HAPANI), and the British Red Cross. The Causeway Coast and Glens Borough runs an Ethnic Minority Support Project. There are several refugee-led groups, such as Northern Ireland Refugees and Asylum Seekers Women

¹⁶ Michael, L. and Devine, P. (2018) *A welcoming Northern Ireland? Understanding sentiment towards asylum seekers and refugees*. ARK.

¹⁷ Lippard, C. D. and McNamee, C. B. (2021) ‘Are refugees really welcome? Understanding Northern Ireland attitudes towards Syrian refugees.’ *Journal of Refugee Studies*, February.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) was a refugee led organisation based in Belfast; NICRAS is no longer running.

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Association (BOMOKO) and Anaka Women's Collective.¹⁸ Faith-based organisations and groups working with newcomers include Belfast Islamic Centre, Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association, Trócaire, St Vincent de Paul (SVP), Belfast Jesuit Centre, Jesuit Refugee Service, the Migrant Support Service, Aid to the Church in Need, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Catholic Chaplaincy, Mornington Community Project, YMCA Carrickfergus, Acacia Path, All Nations Ministries, Belfast City Mission, Storehouse, and Kiltonga Christian Centre. Welcome Churches is a UK-wide, interdenominational organisation which

partners with churches in welcoming refugees into local communities and helping them to access vital services such as GPs and schools. Organisations and groups provide a range of support to newcomers, including drop-in centres, advocacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision, and legal, housing, and food support.



3.0 Encounter & integration

The mandate to welcome newcomers or 'strangers' is clear throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, God commands the Israelites not to mistreat or oppress the foreigner, reminding them of their own status as foreigners in Egypt. Rather, God tells them to treat foreigners 'as your native-born' and to 'love them as yourself' (Leviticus 19:33-34; Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Strangers are to be welcomed into the community and invited to contribute to its collective identity. Jesus' words in the New Testament present a further call to welcome the stranger: 'And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?' (Matthew 5:47). In Matthew 25:35, Jesus lists 'inviting in' the stranger as a mark of the righteous, and the New Testament contains other directives to 'show hospitality to strangers' (Hebrews 13:1-2). Practical approaches towards 'welcoming the stranger' are commanded in the Bible: God is described as 'loving the foreigner [...], giving them food and clothing' (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

Issues of justice are also central to Biblical conceptualisations of welcome: 'Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice' (Deuteronomy 24:17); 'I will be quick to testify against [...those who] deprive the foreigners among you of justice' (Malachi 3:5).

Theological ideas of welcome are echoed in academic studies of migration and diversity which point to religious institutions as potential sites of *encounter and integration*. Amin (2002:972), for example, suggests that spaces of 'prosaic interaction', such as religious institutions, can provide 'openings for contact and dialogue with others as equals, so that mutual fear and misunderstanding may be overcome and so that new attitudes and identities can arise from engagement'.¹⁹ Similarly, Wilson (2017) notes that encounters with unknown others in spaces of propinquity and routine (including religious institutions) can shift attitudes and inspire social transformation.²⁰

¹⁹ Amin, A. (2002) 'Ethnicity and the Multicultural City: Living with Diversity.' *Environment and Planning A*.

²⁰ Wilson, H. F. (2017) 'On the Paradox of "Organised" Encounter.' *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. Routledge, 38(6) pp. 606–620.

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These studies emphasise equality as a key condition of encounter. Another body of literature highlights religious spaces as potential sites of 'integration', which at the interpersonal level involves the complementary development of social 'bonds' (connections with people who are 'like' you) as well as social 'bridges' (connections with people who are 'unlike' you) (Ager and Strang, 2008).²¹ Integration is emphasised as a two-way process involving 'mutual accommodation' (Berry, 1997:11).²² While integration has historically been conceptualised in ethnonational terms, recent policy formulations recognise that

Our approach needs to go much further than simply integration between different nationalities, ethnic groups or faiths. It must also take account of other important aspects such as age, social class, employment status, sexuality, gender and disability. It is about social integration in a wider context – our bonds as citizens, and how we interact with one another.

(Greater London Authority, 2018:4)²³

Ager and Strang (2008) note that integration is influenced by functional resources such as employment, housing, education and health; facilitators such as language, cultural knowledge, safety and stability; and foundations in relation to rights and citizenship. They argue that a multidimensional view of integration helps to avoid the assumption that social cohesion can be achieved through social connection alone.



²¹ Ager, A. and Strang, A. (2008) 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework.' *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2) pp. 166–191.

²² Berry, J. W. (1997) 'Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation.' *Applied Psychology*, 46, January, pp. 5–34.

²³ Greater London Authority (2018) *All of Us: The Mayor's Strategy for Social Integration*. UK: Greater London Authority.

4.0 Forms of welcome

Churches across NI are welcoming asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers in many different ways. Some churches have been working with newcomers in their local communities for many years. This is especially the case in Belfast, which historically has been the most ethnically diverse part of NI. Churches in more rural parts of the country have had less experience of welcoming newcomers but have been particularly responsive to the Ukrainian crisis. There are a number of diaspora churches in NI, including African and Chinese churches in Belfast, and Portuguese, Bulgarian, and Lithuanian churches in Portadown and Lurgan. Although this report mainly focuses on support from indigenous churches, the work of diaspora churches in welcoming newcomers presents an important area for further research. Based on the research findings, support for newcomers is thematised as: community spaces and initiatives; ESOL provision; and supporting basic needs. It should be noted that churches often provide support in more than one of these areas through overarching projects or initiatives.

4.1. Community spaces and initiatives

A number of churches across NI provide community spaces and initiatives with the aim of encouraging social connection and building community. As one respondent said of 'church': 'It's not just Sundays. It needs to be every day'. Some churches run community initiatives such as after-school clubs, women's groups, and parent and toddler groups. These initiatives fill a significant gap in government provision for local community centres. Respondents noted that community initiatives led by the church often have a high number of newcomers in attendance. A respondent in Carrickfergus pointed to extremely high levels of need among single newcomer mothers, who are often 'falling through the cracks' and suffer from poor mental health. Windsor Baptist has previously run a parent and toddler group at Fane St Primary School, an ethnically diverse primary school in South Belfast with a large number of newcomers. Emmanuel Church runs weekly drop-in 'Connect' cafés in Lurgan and Portadown. These are attended by diverse members of the local community (at least 10% of Portadown's population now comes from outside NI).²⁴

²⁴ <https://www.jesuit.ie/news/still-building-the-peace/>

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Several churches, including City Church Belfast and Ballynafeigh Methodist, have community gardens. A number of respondents pointed to the impact of fuel poverty on wellbeing, noting that for many individuals in their local communities, church buildings would be vital ‘warm spaces’ this winter.

Some churches have social initiatives which specifically aim to welcome newcomers and help them to integrate into local communities. The Church of Ireland parish of St Paul and St Barnabas partner with All Nations Ministries to run a drop-in centre in North Belfast.²⁵ The centre is open to everyone in the community but is attended primarily by asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. The group has a collaborative relationship with Ulster University’s Widening Access Community Development Programme. The programme gives students an opportunity to learn academic writing skills and prepares them for advanced learning with an access route to university degree level four. This programme was offered firstly to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The group also formed a ‘Storyboards and Drama Project’ which records the stories of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants living in North Belfast, with the aim of

highlighting their issues and dispelling misconceptions.²⁶ In East Belfast, ‘Globe International Café’ was established by members of Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church to form a welcoming place for newcomers to NI. Orangefield Presbyterian run a weekly drop-in for asylum seekers and refugees. Every Nation Church has a ‘Global Café’ which provides newcomers to Belfast with hot meals, toiletries, food, and clothing. Saintfield Road Presbyterian hosted a ‘Hong Kong Friendship Festival’ earlier in 2022, which had around 500 people from Hong Kong and the local area in attendance.

The International Meeting Point (IMP) is a Presbyterian Church Ireland (PCI) initiative located in South and North Belfast which reaches out to asylum seekers and refugees. In addition to a parent and toddler group and ESOL classes, IMP has a drop-in centre where newcomers can go for help and support. City Church Belfast is home to Common Grounds, a shared community space which holds regular activities including Belfast Friendship Club, a weekly event for people who are new to the city. City Church have held trainings for asylum seekers including barista and food hygiene trainings. St Anne’s Cathedral in Belfast has previously

²⁵ <https://connor.anglican.org/2020/10/28/refurbished-hall-a-boost-for-st-paul-and-st-barnabas/>

²⁶ Steel-Hawthorne, I., Trotter, S., Bryne, S. and Morgan, M. (2018) ‘Breaking the Cultural Silence

Imposed upon Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants: A Snapshot of the Current Faith-Based Project in Tigers Bay (North Belfast).’ *Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*. AONTAS The National Adult Learning Organisation.

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partnered with the Migrant Centre NI to deliver training sessions for its Belonging Project workshops; these help participants to interact with people from diverse backgrounds in schools, workplaces, and local communities.²⁷ In June 2022, St Anne's collaborated with the British Red Cross, Belfast Friendship Club, and NICRAS to host a 'Welcome Fest' concert as part of Refugee Week.²⁸ QUB Catholic Chaplaincy works with Somalis in Belfast to provide them with conference and exhibition space. Belfast Jesuit Centre has been exploring the possibility of partnering with a group such as the Jesuit Refugee Service to offer a course to Ukrainian refugees.²⁹

In Carrickfergus, members of Woodland Presbyterian Church run 'The Olive Tree', a meeting place for women from overseas to join together, participate in group activities, and practice English. St Colman's Church of Ireland in Carrickfergus provide a weekly social and recreational space to asylum seekers living in the local hotel. Some churches have organised day trips for newcomers; several respondents noted that while enjoyed by many and valuable in expanding people's horizons beyond the local area, day trips are also expensive and difficult to organise. The Migrant Support Service was established by the Jesuits and local migrant workers to assist migrants in

Portadown. They provide information and advice, particularly in relation to Universal Credit and the EU Settlement Scheme. They also run daily ESOL classes. The Jethro Centre in Lurgan, funded by the Shankill Parish Caring Association, has a broad remit but also supports specific newcomer 'groups' with capacity building, training, and workshops, such as on writing grant applications. It also hosts cultural events, including a Ukrainian dance workshop and a Syrian AGM (in collaboration with NI Hyatt). Some churches have held coffee mornings with the aim of facilitating connections between Ukrainian refugees.

4.2. ESOL provision

Respondents consistently pointed to the English language as a key facilitator of social connection. Churches and Christian organisations across NI have recognised and responded to the need for ESOL provision, particularly for migrant workers from the EU and asylum seekers who have no access to language support from the government. At least 30 churches across NI are currently providing ESOL classes to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers. Some ESOL classes are for women only. A number of churches in more rural areas have classes specifically for Ukrainian refugees. The Christian organisation Acacia Path partners with

²⁷ <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/supporting-asylum-seekers-refugees-09.17C.pdf>

²⁸ <https://focusonrefugees.org/welcome-fest-in-belfast-cathedral-thu-23-june/>

²⁹ <https://www.jesuit.ie/news/welcoming-ukrainian-refugees-dreams-for-belfast-jesuit-centre/>

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Mears and several churches to provide ESOL classes to asylum seekers in hotels. Acacia Path also provides ESOL classes to refugees and asylum seekers at North Belfast Christian Fellowship. YMCA Carrickfergus is working with a number of local churches in the area to provide a Welcome Centre and ESOL classes for asylum seekers living in a local hotel. The Welcome Centre and ESOL classes are supported by volunteers from Carrick Elim, Carrickfergus Vineyard, St Nicholas RC, Joymount Presbyterian, Whiteabbey Presbyterian, Glenabbey Church, Crosslinks, and All Nations Ministries. QUB Catholic Chaplaincy partners with St Mary's University College to provide English language courses to Ethiopian and Eritrean Coptic refugees in Belfast. Emmanuel Church previously helped to provide Syrian refugees with transport to ESOL classes run by SVP in Lurgan.

Churches generally hold ESOL classes during term-time only, with some exceptions – Lisburn City Church ran a five-week ESOL class for adults and children twice a week over the summer of 2022. Acacia Path also holds a women's group in the summer months for informal English language exchange. One respondent described working with NI Hyatt to prepare Syrian refugees for the English test for British citizenship. In addition to English language learning, ESOL classes often provide valuable local and cultural knowledge: one respondent reported that during the pandemic, ESOL classes

were an important source of public health information for people who did not tune into local or national news. However, another respondent highlighted a lack of awareness among newcomers of the ESOL support available from churches and suggested that an updated list of classes should be shared with the ESOL coordinator at Belfast Metropolitan College. Childcare was noted as a key challenge to attending ESOL classes. Several interviewees also said that it could be difficult to find volunteers to help with ESOL provision. A number of respondents described ESOL classes as opportunities for 'befriending' and connection. At the same time, they also emphasised the importance of boundaries in these relationships and the need for guidelines in this area. This theme is further explored in section 5.2.



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4.3. Supporting basic needs

A large number of respondents described support for basic needs as critical to carrying out the Biblical mandate to 'love the stranger'. As one interviewee said, 'If they don't know that you care, they don't care that you know'. Churches often work with other local or national organisations to provide practical support to asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers in their local communities. Local Christian organisations include All Nations Ministries, Belfast City Mission, Acacia Path, and Kiltonga Christian Centre. These organisations offer a range of support to asylum seekers and refugees, from ESOL classes and advocacy to providing people with bicycles, furniture, and clothing. At least 30 churches are now partnering with Welcome Churches in NI. Across the board, respondents emphasised that 'relationship' should be at the heart of churches' approaches to supporting basic needs. One pastor noted that for many people, the church is 'just another service provider', and stressed the need to move away from service-based models of support. The need to work 'with' and not 'for' local communities is further explored in section 5.2.

A number of churches provide practical support to **asylum seekers living in hotels**, including in Belfast, Carrickfergus, Bangor, and Glengormley. Glenabbey Church in Glengormley ran an information evening on asylum seekers living in hotels which was attended by members of other local churches, local council staff, and representatives from Barnardo's and Kiltonga Christian Centre. The church also partnered with Mears to run a summer scheme for asylum seekers living in a hotel in Belfast. Carrickfergus Baptist have been collecting clothing for asylum seekers living in the local hotel. Jordan Victory Church in Carrickfergus run the local food bank (with the Trussell Trust) and provide the local YMCA with food parcels for asylum seekers living locally. A minister described partnering with All Nation Ministries to advocate for families who had lived without heating in a Belfast hotel for over a month during the winter. He noted that asylum seekers in hotels are often hesitant to make complaints about their accommodation out of fear that doing so will result in being moved to another site. Similar cases have been reported in southeast England, with asylum seekers being told that making complaints about their accommodation would affect their asylum claims.^{30 31} In this instance, the minister was able to act as a mediator,

³⁰ Townsend, M. (2021) 'Asylum seekers in Napier barracks "face blacklist threat for speaking out."' *The Observer*. World news.

³¹ Soye and Watters (2022) *Newcomer Wellbeing and Placemaking in Southeast England*. IDS Policy Briefing. UK: Institute of Development Studies.

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effectively removing the burden of complaint from families and framing their concerns as legitimate points of collective discussion with hotel management. Welcome Churches run trainings for churches on supporting asylum seekers living in hotels.

Several respondents pointed to the social isolation that asylum seekers living in hotels experience. One minister talked about facilitating opportunities for asylum seekers to volunteer in local charities but noted that even with these opportunities, asylum seekers were still spending huge amounts of time on their own. Others pointed to the impact of xenophobia: a minister described how a team from his church had accompanied asylum seekers walking from their hotel to a local ESOL class as they feared harassment on the street. The same respondent highlighted the need for mental health support for people living in hotels, particularly single people and those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Research confirms that PTSD among asylum seekers may be exacerbated by post-migration stressors, including poverty, social isolation, lack of employment, racism, and the asylum process.³² Christian clergy

members from several denominations collaborate in providing a Religious Advice Service to people in the Immigration Detention Centre in Larne.

A number of churches are involved in supporting **resettled refugees** in NI through government schemes.

The Community Sponsorship scheme enables community groups to support a vulnerable refugee family with housing, employment, medical care, and English language for several years. Ballynafeigh Methodist Church is currently partnering with local community groups to sponsor a refugee family in Ormeau ('Ormeau Refugee Partnership'). Several churches in Whitehead are also involved in community sponsorship ('Whitehead Small World'). A number of churches support Ukrainian refugees under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme.³³ Churches are supported in this work by various groups and networks. Irish Baptist Networks has an online document which offers guidance and outlines processes for churches and families considering engagement in the scheme.³⁴ Starfish Ukraine has been involved in helping churches in Ukraine for around 20 years and aims to place people in safe, sustainable, and supportive homes in the

³² Silove, D.; Steel, Z. and Watters, C. (2000) 'Policies of Deterrence and the Mental Health of Asylum Seekers', JAMA 284.5: 604–11

³³ These include Shankill Parish Lurgan, Carrickfergus Baptist, Glenabbey Presbyterian, Ballymena Elim, Hebron Free Presbyterian, Ballynahinch

Baptist, Dundonald Elim, Kilbridge Presbyterian, Hillsborough Presbyterian, Lagan Valley Vineyard, Dungiven Presbyterian, and St Finnian's Parish Church.

³⁴ <https://www.ibnetworks.org/home-for-ukrainians>

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UK. Sunago is a network for Christians serving refugees on the island of Ireland. The Catholic Church is currently exploring whether some of its unused buildings on the island of Ireland can be repurposed to accommodate Ukrainian refugees.³⁵ Several church staff emphasised the need to support Northern Irish families who are hosting Ukrainian newcomers, noting that being a host requires a huge amount of time, resources, and energy. One respondent felt that there had been ‘a bit of romanticism’ about the idea of hosting and pointed to the need to educate families on the realities of hosting and to support them in this role. The Welcome Network, a Welcome Churches initiative, is a network of churches around the UK who are committed to welcoming refugees.

St Malachy’s Parish and St Brigid’s Parish in Belfast both partner with SVP to provide material assistance to people in the local area, including refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers. A number of churches collaborate with other churches or local organisations to provide food support to people in their local communities. Respondents noted that asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers often make up a significant

proportion of the people receiving food support. Emmanuel Church Lurgan runs a ‘Renew’ clothing project and partners with other local churches and Craigavon Area Foodbank to provide short term emergency food for individuals and families in crisis. Emmanuel also partners with ‘Your Local Pantry’ to provide a Freedom Food Pantry: in exchange for a small weekly subscription, members of the pantry can shop for food including fresh fruit, vegetables, and store cupboard items. Lisburn City Church runs a similar programme and has a food bank. Several Belfast-based churches partner with the Trussell Trust and Storehouse. Ballynafeigh Methodist and City Church Belfast hold weekly community meals; City Church hold a free Christmas meal every year at Common Grounds. Other churches have specific initiatives for newcomers. St Paul and St Barnabas Parish partner with All Nations Ministries to provide a food bank and clothes bank for local asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers. Redeemer Central delivers fresh fruit and vegetables (‘Farmboxes’), as well as supermarket vouchers, to asylum seeking and refugee families across Belfast every fortnight.

³⁵ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/catholic-church-explores-using-unused-buildings-to-house-ukrainian-refugees-41454092.html>

5.0 Challenges & opportunities

Respondents described the challenges and opportunities of their work in welcoming newcomers in four main areas: responding to need; building relationships; working together; and fostering diversity.

5.1. Responding to need

Several interviewees highlighted that the immigration context in NI is changing rapidly and felt that churches need to ‘lift their eyes’ and be responsive to shifting local demographics. Yet one minister observed that churches ‘generally haven’t been good at reaching out to anyone in the community, let alone newcomers’. Another respondent at a Christian organisation noted that the refugees who receive support from churches are usually those who have come to the church and identified themselves as being in need, adding, ‘This isn’t a good development model’. It was felt by many that rather than imposing their own assumptions, churches need to listen more to newcomers about what their needs are. Several interviewees cautioned, however, that this also raises issues of representation, emphasising that representatives speaking on behalf of entire ‘communities’ can homogenise a diverse range of voices, identities, and experiences in their narratives.

A number of interviewees highlighted that the issues affecting newcomers’ integration often stem from a lack of government support, as well as government failure to secure basic rights in a number of

areas. Consequently, many interviewees viewed advocating for the rights of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers as fundamental to their mission to ‘welcome’ newcomers. Only three centres provide immigration advice in NI (Migrant Centre NI, Law Centre NI, and Advice NI). Furthermore, under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 it is illegal to give immigration advice unless the person giving the advice is specifically permitted to do so. Interviewees described this as a significant challenge in their work with newcomers. Some respondents suggested that churches could run trainings for Christian lawyers working in immigration to encourage compassion and fairness or hold workshops on being ‘ethical landlords’. A number of respondents also underlined the importance of ensuring that ‘welcome’ on behalf of churches was not contingent on media or political attention but rather informed by local realities. Several pointed, for instance, to the contrast between recent efforts to welcome Ukrainian refugees, and an historically less enthusiastic response to asylum seekers and refugees from other parts of the world.

Church workers observed that working with asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants requires a complex understanding of immigration status and relevant rights and entitlements. According to one pastor, it was important to ‘have the right information in front of you’. He

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noted that this involves careful research and a comprehensive understanding of immigration and social welfare policy. Several respondents working at churches were open about the fact that a lot of the time they had ‘very little idea’ of what they were doing. One minister said, ‘We’re on a steep learning curve on how to respond’. Another respondent described feeling confused about the rules and regulations around refugee status, including indefinite leave to remain and acquiring British citizenship. A number of respondents also mentioned language barriers as a key challenge in their work with newcomers. Other interviewees highlighted the importance of being adaptive.

For example, one church member said that she was considering setting up an initiative for Ukrainian refugee women in her local area but pointed to the need to be flexible in terms of timing since so many of these women were working. A pastor talked about how his church had introduced board games to their community café in order to meet the needs of a newcomer who was deaf and spoke very little English. Several respondents also emphasised the merits of ‘drop-in’ approaches over appointment-based systems.



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5.2. Building relationships

A pastor observed that churches have historically used a 'service-based welfare model' and consequently are seen by many people as 'just another service provider'. He noted that when churches see a gap in service provision, they tend to operate in the same mode of service provision; this creates a defined 'gatekeeping' process and replicates the 'welfare power dynamic'. He argued that churches need to break the mould, suggesting that the question should not be, 'How do we help people?' but rather, 'How do we *embrace* people?'. Other respondents talked about the need to build relationships with newcomers rather than conducting large 'projects'. As one interviewee observed, 'We need to stop doing "projects" and start doing "life" with people'. Although many respondents emphasised the value of relational models, several also pointed to the need for churches to be more strategic in their approaches to welcoming newcomers.

A number of respondents highlighted the difficulty of getting church congregations on board with relational approaches, noting that people often find it much easier to 'help'. One minister observed, 'We are very consumer-led and want church life to be comfortable and safe'. Others noted that while there is often a lot of financial goodwill among congregations,

it can be more difficult to get people to commit their time to relationship-building. One staff member at a Christian organisation highlighted the value of facilitating relationships between people from different backgrounds, such as a Sudanese refugee who now plays golf with a local church member from NI. At the same time, several respondents noted that advocating relational models also necessitates separate discussions around boundaries and cultural sensitivity, including awareness of gender norms, body language, and different modes of expression such as eye contact. There are divergent views around the role of evangelism in these relationships. One respondent also stressed that real 'inclusion' would require a shift from patronising views of asylum seekers and refugees as inherently vulnerable (and in need of 'support'), towards relationships based on mutuality and reciprocity.

As noted in section 4.1., a number of churches have held events and initiatives with the aim of connecting newcomers who come from the same country. These events can help to maintain national and ethnic 'bonds' in the host context and provide people with the opportunity to speak the same language and exchange news from their home countries.³⁶

³⁶ Ager and Strang, 2008.

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Several respondents emphasised, however, that it is important not to assume that newcomers from the same ethnic or national backgrounds will necessarily want to connect with each other. In the words of one Syrian lady (reported to an interviewee), 'These aren't the people I'd hang out with at home'. Rather, the identities of both 'newcomers' and 'hosts' must be seen as multiple, complex, and fluid. Relatedly, a number of respondents felt that NI's increased ethnic diversity is an opportunity to reframe historical understandings of peace and reconciliation and to widen traditional approaches to 'cross-community' work. Several interviewees suggested that community spaces which are visibly linked to the church, such as church halls, can be alienating, and highlighted the benefits of 'neutral' locations which may be seen as safer and more welcoming.

5.3. Working together

It was emphasised that churches could do more to collaborate with other churches and organisations. Respondents suggested that a coordinated approach among churches could help to give newcomers access to as much support as possible and avoid duplicating work on policies and procedures. Several people emphasised, however, that collaboration among NI churches is often limited by a competitive culture in the context of an overall lack

of funding. As one respondent observed, 'Churches are all doing their own thing'. A number of people proposed that an overarching code of church practice be established in relation to welcoming newcomers. However, they also recognised the dangers of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and pointed to the importance of adapting policies to fit local contexts and of working on a case-by-case basis.

Several respondents proposed that churches in rural areas of increasing ethnic diversity could partner with urban churches with more experience of welcoming newcomers. Some churches are already doing so: for example, Hillsborough Parish partners with Willowfield Parish in East Belfast. Other interviewees highlighted emerging opportunities to connect and work with diaspora churches in NI. Intercultural Churches UK is leading in this area. QUB Catholic Chaplaincy provides Ethiopian and Eritrean Coptic refugees with a worship space. Several respondents felt that more interdenominational events were needed to facilitate dialogue among churches about approaches to 'welcome' and to share and discuss examples of good practice. One interviewee observed that these events have often been limited in their remit to Belfast churches and suggested that the reach of such events be expanded in future. Another pointed to the challenge of finding a 'neutral'

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location in which to hold this type of event, noting, 'Location always comes loaded and a properly neutral space is hard to find'. Some interviewees felt that interdenominational events should prioritise learning through constructive criticism.

A number of respondents suggested that churches could do more to signpost support from NGOs rather than feeling the need to 'reinvent the wheel'. However, they also felt that church staff themselves should be made more aware of the support available from secular organisations so that they can point people towards it. It was also noted that churches can collaborate with organisations outside the church sector to share learning and expertise. For instance, the British Red Cross ran trainings at City Church Belfast on the asylum-seeking process. Lisburn City Church was involved in the Peace IV Programme on cultural diversity, while Emmanuel works with the Community Intercultural Programme in Portadown. One minister suggested that working with secular organisations often presents valuable opportunities to see things from a different perspective, and to look beyond what is often an insular church 'bubble'. Churches can also support grassroots initiatives. For example, Redeemer Central

hosts Anaka Women's Collective, a refugee-led group which educates, supports, advocates for, and celebrates women who are refugees and seeking asylum in Belfast. A number of churches are involved in Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum.

5.4. Fostering diversity

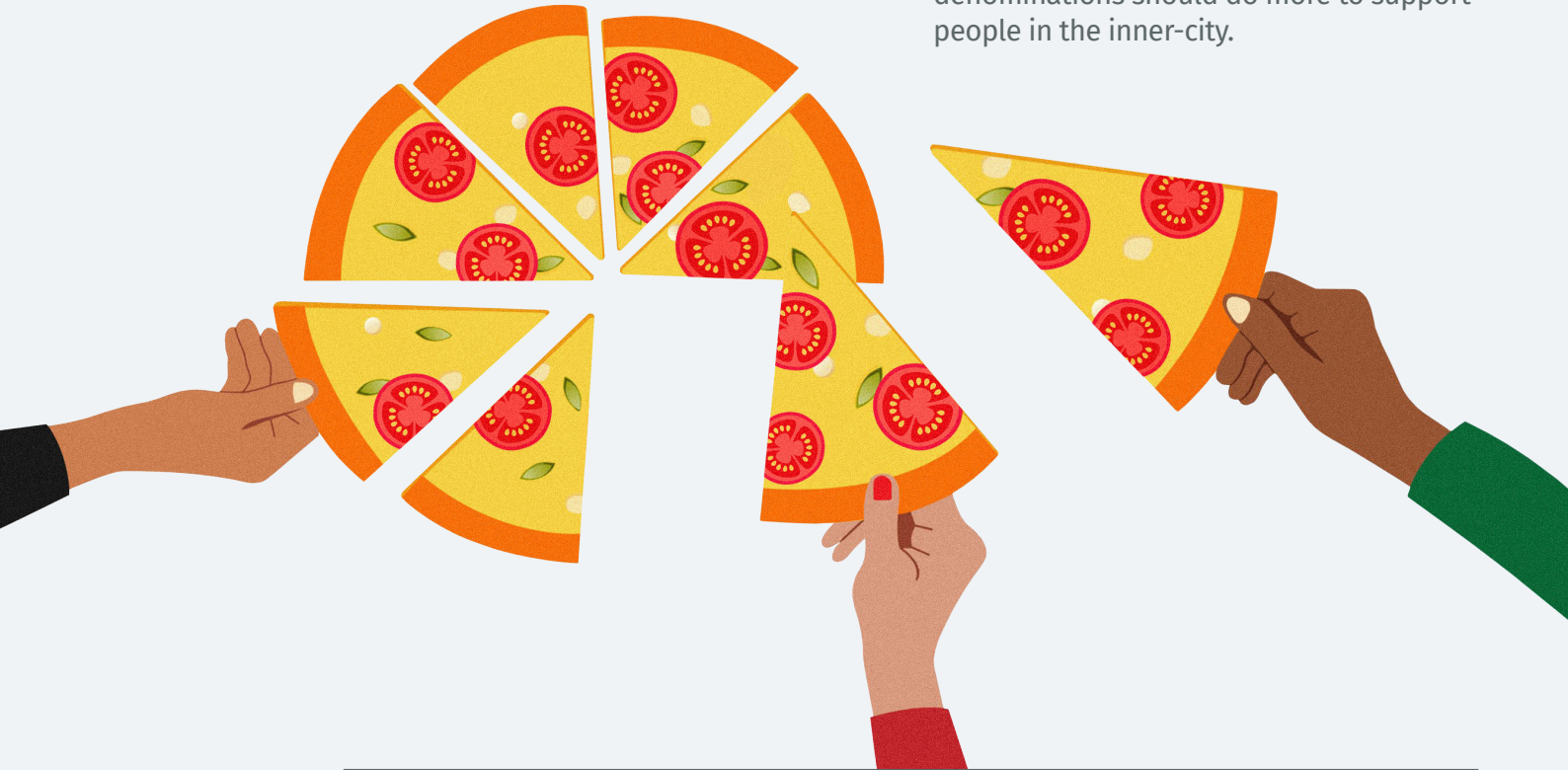
Fostering diversity within churches was highlighted as a key challenge. According to one respondent, 'The church in Northern Ireland needs to work on being a better "community" – and not just with people who are like them'. The same respondent pointed to the need for an 'intercultural' rather than 'multicultural' model of church: while multiculturalism can lead to separate and bounded 'groups', interculturalism involves dialogue with difference.³⁷ OMF's Intercultural Ministries is helping to resource and encourage churches in valuing difference in their local congregations. Welcome Churches also provides churches with resources in different languages. One respondent felt that there was a need to engage in more interfaith work, noting that churches have been reticent to do so in the past.

³⁷ Amin, 2002.

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Several interviewees emphasised that church events which explicitly aim to celebrate diversity tend to be poorly attended by Northern Irish people. It was suggested that bringing people together from diverse backgrounds to work collaboratively towards a common goal (such as community safety) might be more effective.³⁸ A number of respondents also pointed to the importance of ‘telling

stories’ about the refugee experience as a means to challenge stereotypes and dispel myths, particularly in rural and inner-city areas. Interviewees stressed the need to address racism in loyalist areas in particular, which also tend to be areas of significant disadvantage.³⁹ The leader of an independent church highlighted the link between pressures on housing and xenophobic attitudes, suggesting that large denominations should do more to support people in the inner-city.



³⁸ This is in line with academic studies which emphasise that ‘solidarity’ emerges through practices such as political struggles, which can establish bonds across difference (Mohanty, 2003). Mohanty, C. T. (2003) *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press.

³⁹ Purdy, N., Finn, P., McDade, B., Harris, J. and Winter, F. (2021) *Loyalist and Republican Perspectives on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College.

6.0 Recommendations

Churches across NI are welcoming asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers in a number of ways. Many are using relational models of support while also addressing the structural barriers that newcomers face to ‘integration’, including issues of language, housing, and deprivation. A number of churches are working closely with local and national organisations to support newcomers in different areas. Churches are experiencing challenges (as well as opportunities) in how they respond to need, build relationships, work collaboratively, and foster diversity in congregations and local communities. Relevant recommendations for churches’ work in these areas are listed below.

Recommendations for churches

1. Responding to need

- Be proactive about outreach.
- Innovate in mapping and assessing needs.
- Prioritise listening to newcomers’ own wants and needs – be wary of broad representations of ‘community’ needs.
- Respond to structural barriers to integration by advocating for (and alongside) asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers.

- Ensure that responses to newcomers are centred on the Biblical mandate to ‘love the foreigner’, regardless of their origin, rather than on political or media attention towards specific groups.
- Be aware of the impact of different migration statuses on rights and entitlements.

2. Building relationships

- Prioritise relationship-building while recognising the importance of overarching strategy.
- Encourage congregations to invest in relationships while promoting boundaries and cultural sensitivity.
- Move away from depictions of asylum seekers and refugees as inherently vulnerable and in need of ‘support’.



Recommendations

3. Working together

- Establish a shared code of practice among churches for welcoming newcomers, while recognising the contingency of 'welcome' on context.
- Partner with churches in rural/urban areas to share learning.
- Signpost newcomers to the work of other churches and organisations.
- Collaborate with organisations outside the church sector, sharing learning and expertise.

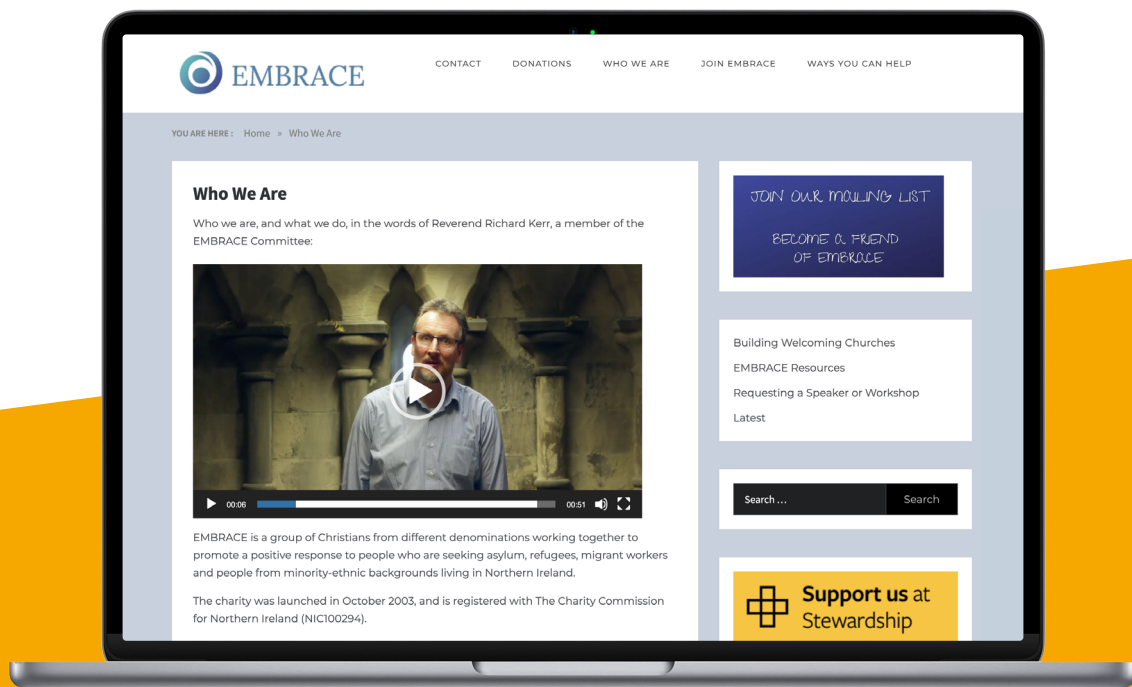
4. Fostering diversity

- Adopt 'intercultural' models which promote dialogue with difference.
- Make resources inclusive.
- Consider more engagement in interfaith initiatives.
- Encourage 'story-telling' as a means of challenging stereotypes.
- Recognise and address the conditions in which racism emerges.



Further information

To find out more about EMBRACE you can visit us online and download free resources, search our archives, become a Friend of EMBRACE and learn how to make Northern Ireland a more welcoming community.



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