

Affirmations on Migration, Diversity and Interculturalism



Mervyn McCullagh Executive Officer of the Irish Council of Churches and The Irish Inter-Church Meeting, Fr Irenaeus du Plessis, Sr Joan Roddy, Adrian Cristea, Denise Wright and the Lord Mayor, at the launch of the Affirmations in Belfast City Hall.

The Irish Churches' Affirmations on Migration, Diversity and Interculturalism document was launched at Belfast City Hall on 8th September. The Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Pat Convery gave the document a warm welcome:

I am both amazed and impressed at the innovative role that Churches and faith-based communities have played in providing a positive response to migration and supporting the integration of new communities. ... Within this City, Churches and faith communities have had a long tradition of hospitality and inclusiveness. Following the recent increase in migration to Belfast they were one of the first to quickly apply this tradition of welcome to new communities. Within a short space of time, many Churches were providing advocacy and support initiatives. English language classes were organised. Opportunities to encourage dialogue and understanding between communities were developed. Much of this work was going on below the radar, without funding and dependent on the good will of volunteers.

The role played by the Churches and faith-based communities in facilitating the participation of people from a migrant background in local activities has been immense. I find it quite strange that despite this pivotal role, played by Churches, Churches are not even named in the consultation document around the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. (See www.ofmdfnni.gov.uk/index/equality/community-relations/content-equality-newpage-csi.htm)

I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the practical work the Churches and faith-based communities have played and the volunteers behind that work. These initiatives, and this resource, being launched today are a valuable, long-term investment in the future health and well-being of our society. The fact that so many Churches are co-operating in this endeavour is also significant. I would like to finish by wishing you success in the work you are doing to support migrants and to promote respect for the different cultures, faiths and traditions within this island. (Read more on Page 3.)

The Affirmations

The Irish Inter-Church Committee and its constituent churches, in issuing these *Affirmations*, recognise the significant changes over the past decade in the fabric of our Church communities and of society as a whole. We are seeking to ensure that the following *Affirmations*, founded on Gospel values, will inform and drive the plans, processes and programmes of our Churches as they, individually and together, strive to live out the mission of Christ in an increasingly diverse and intercultural society. We affirm our commitment as Christian Churches:

1. To recognise and appreciate cultural and ethnic diversity as gifts of God, and to ensure that these gifts are reflected in the life of the Church.
2. To foster faith communities where the rights of each person are respected and where scope is provided for each person's potential to be realised.
3. To work towards inclusive communities, paying particular attention to addressing racism and xenophobia in attitudes, actions, practices and policies.
4. To explore and adopt ways of worship, systems of administration and other structures so that they fully respond to and reflect the Church membership.
5. To defend the rights of migrants in accordance with international and national laws and standards on migration.
6. To advocate for the rights of all migrants, and in particular their right to family life.
7. To support and assist migrants in appropriate, practical ways in their efforts to integrate in Church and society.
8. To establish networks with migrant-led Churches and chaplaincies by fostering co-operation and collaboration with them in providing pastoral care and support to migrants.
9. To seek the development of appropriate services for migrants and to draw attention to the need for public services generally to be responsive to the circumstances of migrants.
10. To work together as Churches and to network with people of other faiths and none to promote a greater understanding between denominations and other faiths and none, ensuring the growth of a society based on respect, dignity and equal rights for all its members.

'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for in doing so some have entertained angels unawares.'

Hebrews 13: 2

'We say, "Gość w dom, Bóg w dom" –

**"When a stranger comes to our home,
God comes to our home." '**

A Polish member of the Belfast Friendship Club

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REFUGEE & IMMIGRATION ISSUES

Volunteering with Refugees

Refugees in Time of Need (RITON) is a new project initiated by two NI refugee charities, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) and the Refugee Action Group (RAG). They have already had a very good response to an appeal for volunteers and held their first training session at the Law Centre. The RITON volunteers will be providing support by

- Accompanying asylum applicants to Tribunal hearings
- Accompanying asylum applicants when they report at police stations or UK Border Agency premises
- Undertaking research for ongoing asylum cases

You do not need any legal skills to be a volunteer. Language skills and access to transport could be useful but not essential. You do need to be a compassionate and calm person who can volunteer a few hours per month and be prepared to face traumatic situations. You will gain an insight into the asylum system and experience of working with refugee charities. If you want to find out more see www.refugeeactiongroup.com or phone NICRAS on (028) 9024 6699. There are other volunteering opportunities with NICRAS (e.g. one-to-one language or computer tuition, sorting clothes donations or helping at reception) and with the Red Cross (028) 9073 5350 or nmkitrick@redcross.org.uk

The NICRAS/ Corrymeela Inclusive Neighbourhood Project runs regular events and training sessions for facilitators and participants from the refugee and host communities in the areas of Belfast where refugees and people seeking asylum live, in North, South and West Belfast. For further information contact Ann Marie White (028) 9050 8080 or email amwhite@corrymeela.org.

NICRAS News on Destitution and the Difficulty in Accessing Funds

Once again we need to communicate the continuing difficulties experienced by people who become destitute at the end of the asylum process when their benefits stop, and for others, at different stages in the asylum process, who suffer because of glitches in the support system or because their complex needs are just not met by the low level of cash allowances. Some destitute people are totally below the radar, relying on the charity of friends, but when people do come forward, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) finds it harder to support them because charities are running short of funds. NICRAS is also struggling to find money to support the payment of college fees for their members.

Let them Work

Some of the problems for people seeking sanctuary would be alleviated if they could work. Amnesty International has asked local MPs to sign a petition to allow people to work if they have not had their asylum claim resolved within 6 months, or their asylum application has failed but they are unable to return home. They are encouraging others to contact their MPs. As this newsletter goes to press the following MPs have supported this initiative: Gerry Adams, Alasdair McDonnell, Margaret Ritchie and Ian Paisley Jr. Two campaigns are dedicated to highlighting the plight of people who have been refused asylum and are living in poverty: Still Human Still Here <http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/> and Let them Work <http://e-activist.com/ea-campaign/clientcampaign.do?ea.client.id=121&ea.campaign.id=2672>

New Migrant Centre Funded in Belfast

A partnership between the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), the public service union UNISON, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU NI), and the Polish Association has secured funding for a Belfast Migrant Centre, to undertake a range of activities including capacity building for migrant communities and their organisations. Their bi-lingual staff members give immigration and integration advice and support victims of racist discrimination and harassment. To find out more contact Jolena Flett (028) 9023 8645 Email: jolena@nicem.org.uk www.nicem.org.uk/services/support-to-migrants

Research and Resources

New to Northern Ireland

The National Children's Bureau has published *New to Northern Ireland: A Study of The Issues Faced by Migrant, Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children* which you can download at www.ncb.org.uk/diani/menu_title.aspx

The topics covered include communication and language, education, racism and prejudice, social isolation and dealing with loss, and poverty. The report contains a valuable agenda for action.

Life as a Stranger

Dr Ruth McAreevey of Queen's University based her research for the publication *Life as a Stranger; the Personal Stories of Migrants to Northern Ireland* on interviews with migrant support groups and focus groups of migrant people in Mid Ulster. She found that local organisations in civil society were providing an important support role for recent newcomers and that English language classes in particular 'typically form a gateway to other types of social participation'. Dr McAreevey stresses the diversity of people and their experiences within and between national groups and the importance of recognising that family members adjust to change at different rates, 'with children typically adapting most quickly and easily'.

Social links and word of mouth are important in settling in and accessing services, and 'at a local level church groups were cited as being extremely positive in acknowledging newcomers'. To read more of the research findings see www.qub.ac.uk/home/TheUniversity/GeneralServices/News/PressReleases/Title,208534,en.html

Inclusion and Diversity Service for Schools (IDS)

The IDS web site deserves to be more widely known and used. Although it is a support service for schools, it includes resources that could be adapted by other sectors of the community. Their toolkits for diversity include such topics as intercultural awareness and pastoral needs. www.education-support.org.uk/teachers/ids/

Belfast Inclusion Festival Events (See also page 4.)

The Belfast Inclusion Festival in June 2010 included a wide variety of activities in many different venues. City Church in South Belfast, for example, ran two events. Let's Talk (also part of Refugee Week) provided an opportunity for the wider community to meet and chat to refugees and people seeking asylum. The church also hosted a Roma Tales evening when the film 'Gypsy Caravan, Where the Road Bends' was screened and there was an opportunity to learn more about Roma culture and listen to Roma people playing their own music. Read about the other events at www.belfastinclusionfestival.org/

CHURCH NEWS

The Irish Churches' Affirmations (continued from Page 1.)

The Affirmations are a policy statement by the 15 Christian Churches on the Irish Inter-Church Committee signalling their commitment to promote integration and interculturalism.

People of many denominations attended the Belfast launch and heard Sister Joan Roddy from the Refugee and Migrant Project of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference describe how each affirmation could be seen as a signpost on the road towards embracing diversity and interculturalism in churches. In view of the annual progress reports that the Churches have been invited to give, she suggested that each year there could be a focus on two of the affirmations. By spelling out some of the practical applications and evaluating how these were being followed up, the task would become easier each year, as the affirmations are so interrelated.

Fr Irenaeus du Plessis of the Antiochian Orthodox Church outlined the biblical undergirding of the practical theology within the document from the points of beginning in Genesis and John. We must look after the stranger, the foreigner.

We do that because we are indwelt by the Triune Godhead.

We are ambassadors of Christ and therefore, as he loves the stranger and the foreigner, we do that as ambassadors.

On 10th October BBC Radio Ulster's Sunday Sequence featured the Belfast launch of the Affirmations. Adrian Cristea of the Parish-Based Integration Project worked hard to bring the Affirmations into being. He explained to listeners

Statistics show that religion plays a very important role in migrants' life. Local congregations, local parishes are focal points where people don't just fulfil spiritual and pastoral needs. They are information centres ... social networks ... education places. Churches can have multiple roles to play in a migrant's life.

Nigel Jennings, community worker at City Church in Belfast, spoke about relationship building with newcomers, through the Churches' community garden project, for example, and the weekly lunches involving refugees and people seeking asylum. Opportunities for friendship and social activity also led to the acknowledgement and fulfilment of other needs. He went on to say that,

The church's role here is to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Denise Wright, EMBRACE Chairperson, Race Relations Co-ordinator of the South Belfast Forum and member of City Church, told listeners that the Affirmations provided a framework to measure your church against.

How, as a congregation do we measure up to this?

What do we need to pull our socks up on?

"What ... are we doing ... well"? How can we do it better?

New Translation Service for Church Notices

People respond best to an invitation in their own language so EMBRACE Development Worker, Aneta Dabek, has initiated a translation scheme for announcing church events and activities (up to 60 words). So far, this is available for Arabic, Bulgarian, Dutch, French, Hindi, Indonesian, Nepali, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish and Urdu. Maybe you would be able to offer your services in translating church notices into additional languages, especially Cantonese and Mandarin, Czech, Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Russian or Slovak etc.? You can contact Aneta at **0756 4969 976** or aneta@embraceni.org.

Migration and Mission Study Day at Newtownbreda

The Irish Council of Churches organised a gathering of Christians on 1st October, who heard keynote speaker Dr Afe Adogame give two wide-ranging presentations which included analysis of the relationship of religion to migration, the similarity in the processes of migration and mission, and the positive nature of reverse mission, as evangelists from Africa, for example, bring their gifts to what they see as the new 'dark continent' of Europe. The following members of EMBRACE contributed. Margaret McNulty outlined the recent migration experience in N. Ireland; Revd Richard Kerr and Aneta Dabek spoke on 'welcoming the stranger'; and Dr Scott Boldt explained the background to the Irish Churches' Affirmations (see page 1 and col. 1 of this page).

John Woodside of Drogheda Presbyterian Church demonstrated the remarkable expansion of his congregation through the arrival of Christians from other countries and the conversion of others who may have come to church at first purely for fellowship. Keith Preston of Presbyterian Mission in Ireland spoke about his drop-in centre for migrants on the Lisburn Road, Belfast and Pastor Chris Ifonlaja of the Redeemed Christian Church of God explained his Church's policy of church planting and how there can be clashes of worship culture. His congregation meets in the Europa Hotel, Belfast.

Extracts from Aneta Dabek's story

I am a migrant and I was a stranger. ... When you are a stranger you don't feel secure and safe – you don't know what to expect from the people around you and the place where you are. ... I am from Poland. My husband and I came to Northern Ireland six years ago ... we found a local church and started to go there regularly. I don't know for whom our presence at the church was more difficult, for the church or for us. Having someone in your congregation who doesn't speak and understand almost any English is hard, very hard. Understanding hardly any word from the sermon is hard too. Later on someone told me that at that time I was a 'funny' girl, because whatever I was told or asked I always just smiled. I couldn't even say a word – people at church didn't stop to talk to me. They invited us for meals and they tried to have contact with us – even though we didn't speak English very well. It was a struggle for both sides. But it was very good for us and allowed us to learn the language. And it gave us something more – this feeling that we were not alone, that someone cared about us, and the knowledge that if you are in trouble you can count on someone. It gave a kind of security to our lives. I felt, and feel, very welcome in this country and I found that local people are very nice.

Aneta recommended that churches invite migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum to church activities such as parent and toddler groups and make information available in places where migrants normally visit such as libraries and shops that sell national food, but people respond best to a personal invitation. She also suggested organising friendship clubs, language and conversation classes, homework clubs, computer classes and craft groups. She added,

Of course our prayers are very important. In addition to the challenges of living away from the support of family, speaking a language which may not be familiar, and differences in climate and culture, migrant people can face issues which are difficult to address and to live through. These are issues such as poverty and destitution, racism and discrimination, and a complex immigration system.

EMBRACE NEWS

EMBRACE Welcomes Mennonite Volunteers

Mennonite mission workers from the USA, Jenna and Peter Martin arrived in September to begin volunteering with the Reconciliation Programme at Edgehill Theological College, through the Methodist Church in Ireland. As part of this programme, Jenna and Peter will be able to give some time to EMBRACE activities. They say,



**Peter Martin and
Jenna Liechty Martin**

After a year of preparation and anticipation, we are excited to have arrived in Belfast to begin volunteering with EMBRACE through a partnership with Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church, USA. We attended Bluffton University (Bluffton, Ohio), a Mennonite University, both spending time studying abroad [Jenna in Derry, and Peter in Palestine/Israel]. Through these experiences a desire to live and serve abroad took hold.

During our time with EMBRACE, we look forward to learning about the challenges facing those entering Northern Ireland, as well as finding ways to assist churches and individuals in their call to provide a welcoming presence. As we settle into life in Belfast, we have been blessed by the warm hospitality extended to us. It is our hope that we can find ways of extending a similar welcome to others.

Be on the lookout for information regarding an EMBRACE prayer group, one of Jenna's first projects.

Mennonites are a group of Anabaptist Christians that formed almost 500 years ago as a movement that believed no one was born into the church, but instead that belief in Jesus was a voluntary commitment. Mennonites are known for their commitment to and involvement in peace building and reconciliation throughout the world.

Committee Activities

Members of the committee undertook the usual range of speaking engagements, conferences and networking events. For example, Denise Wright and Margaret McNulty led a packed workshop at the annual New Horizon conference in Coleraine in July. Margaret and Denise both continue to network within the Belfast Migrant Forum, the Black and Minority-Ethnic and Faith Network, and have been contributing to the draft Open Cities action plan for Belfast. They have attended specific minority-ethnic sector consultation events relating to the Executive's Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy document and the Belfast consultation of the Migrant Advisory Committee on the level of annual limits on economic migration to the UK. Denise also represents EMBRACE on both the new Immigration Sub-Group of the Racial Equality Forum at Stormont and on the main panel of the forum.

Committee Activities (continued)

Scott Boldt has spoken in Larne recently, to The Tuesday Group (building relationships between Larne Christian communities through co-operation and understanding) on 'Who is the Other: Challenged by Difference'. He also spoke to the Belfast Synod of the Methodist Church on 'Who is my neighbour? Ministry across cultural and ethnic boundaries'. In November he will be speaking to Carnalea Methodist Women in Ireland and to a cross-community Bible-study group in Portaferry.

Belfast Inclusion Festival events

EMBRACE hosted two events in the festival, a Global Café event on 12 June at Willowfield Church of Ireland Church, East Belfast and a Voices Together concert on 19 June at City Church in South Belfast, presenting songs from different countries, languages and cultures. A big thank you to Yvonne Naylor (who was also one of the singers) and to her helpers for organising and running these events.

EMBRACE on the Street and Emergency Fund

Both these projects continue to be active in providing for the needs of destitute people from other countries and for the exceptional needs of others who cannot pay for the essentials of life.

One anomaly that we face is the fact that all children are expected to go to school, but not all people born in other countries are entitled to normal benefits. So, their children may find themselves barred from school because their parents cannot afford school uniforms. (This is especially true for parents who are entitled to be here but are not allowed access to jobs, because they are seeking asylum or are from Romania and Bulgaria, for example.) The Emergency Fund has been assisting such pupils.

As the weather gets colder, keep in mind those who end up living on the streets, and consider collecting winter clothing and sleeping bags for EMBRACE on the Street. If your church is not on the collection rota and you want to find out more, phone Ashleigh Hunter on (028) 9068 6933.

Thinking of Joining Us or Making a Donation?

Continue to support the EMBRACE Emergency Fund and if you are not already a member of EMBRACE please consider joining us. Subscriptions are £10.00 annually per person and £20.00 for groups. Please write to us at the address below. If you would like to make a donation towards our work please send a cheque, payable to EMBRACE.

Your support is greatly appreciated.

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