Information Update Spring 2005

Beginning to Understand the Needs of our New Neighbours: Asylum and Immigration in Northern Ireland

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Contents

Preface

This information update gives a brief outline of the situation for immigrants to Northern Ireland and people seeking asylum here and some suggestions for Christians who want to make this a more welcoming place for incomers. Even if you do not read it all, please keep it as a document that you can refer to. Immigration laws and procedures are complex and change frequently, so, although we have tried to be as accurate as possible, please bear in mind the possibility of over-generalisation or inaccuracy. We will try to keep you updated about major changes.

Although this document highlights problems experienced by migrants, many people who bring their skills here, and add to the richness of our lives, do not face these difficulties. Migrants should not be seen as inevitable victims. Rather, we should try to ensure that they are invariably treated as people to be valued as we would like to be valued ourselves.

EMBRACE is a voluntary group of Christians, from all the main denominations in Northern Ireland. The primary role of EMBRACE is to provide information and resources for Churches and individuals, who want to know more about how they can support people seeking asylum and refugees in Northern Ireland, and to make this a more welcoming place for members of minority ethnic communities. We want to help to build a community that has moved beyond racism.

Members of EMBRACE, and the churches they represent, are also involved in a number of activities that support refugees. These include befriending, visits to detainees, advocacy, transport and providing food for social events such as picnics. These activities involve collaboration between churches, asylum seekers and other voluntary and statutory groups. Other practical initiatives include setting up a resource library in City Church and a database of volunteers willing to provide practical assistance.

There are not many people needing help at present but if you feel that you want to know more please contact Thérèse Fitzgerald tfitzgerald@nicem.org.uk or Denise Wright 028 9028 0060 Email denisewright63@hotmail.com.

Introduction

A Time of Change

Over the centuries people living on the island of Ireland became used to migration as a one way process, with thousands of people leaving for the New World, never to return, The last few years have seen change. In the south, labour shortages and dramatic economic expansion have been like a magnet to returning Irish exiles and people from other countries. In addition, links with other parts of the world have made Ireland a possible haven for people who feel forced to flee from their homes, or to seek economic security. The Troubles and high unemployment insulated Northern Ireland from these forces, until recently, but now we have a society that needs additional workers.

The 2001 census indicates that there were 26,600 people in N. Ireland, including children, who were born outside the UK or the Irish Republic. (These figures do not include settled populations from, for example, the Chinese or Indian communities who were born in this country.) It is likely that there are now many more. People come here for exactly the same reason as our young people still leave: for better employment prospects and better salaries. So, while we all see growing numbers of immigrants, many come for a short time to improve their lives and then leave, just as many of our young people return. The numbers registering with GPs between 1992 and 2001 indicate that, during this period, 1300 more people left Northern Ireland than arrived here. (*Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*, p.46.) Some people from other countries, however, make this their permanent home and we have a gradually increasing number of minority ethnic communities and populations.

Most migrant workers are needed in the academic, agricultural, food production, hospitality and catering, and health sectors.

People come here from many countries – just some examples:

- Portuguese speakers (from Portugal and its former colonies) in meat processing factories in Dungannon, Portadown, Ballymena and Coleraine.
- Healthcare workers in Belfast and elsewhere come from the Philippines, India, Malaysia, and other countries.
- Lithuanians working on mushroom farms.
- There have been Albanian chicken catchers in Co. Armagh.
- The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme included workers from Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine in 2003.
- Italian and Portuguese workers were involved in construction work at Ballylumford power station.
- Many ‘Indian’ restaurants employ people from other countries such as Bangladesh.

- People from the Baltic states, working in the Co. Down fishing industry.

The words we use… We can properly refer to, for example, the Indian, Chinese or Jewish 'communities' but incoming people from some countries are small in numbers and dispersed, so the word 'population' may be more appropriate. Some people are understandably also feeling uneasy at always being defined as part of an 'minority' ethnic group.

Languages

Some of the Languages Now Spoken in Northern Ireland: Albanian, Arabic, Bedawiye, Beluchi, Bengali (or Bangla), Bosnian, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Creole, Croat, Czech, Dutch, Edo, Estonian, Ewe, Farsi, Flemish, French, Fujianese, Ga, Greek, Grushi, Gujarati, Hakka, Hausa, Hindi, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Kannada, Kanta, Korean, Kutchi, Latvian, Lithuanian, Malayo, Malayala, Mandarin, Marati, Mina, Mirpuri, Oriya, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Pushtu, Romani, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Sindhi, Sohosa, Spanish, Sylheti, Tagalog, Tamazight, Tamil, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Telugu, Twi, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, Yiddish, Yoruba, Xhosa.

Questions asked about migrants and refugees

Q **Who is an asylum seeker?**

A Someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution by reason of their race, nationality, social group or political opinion, in their own country, and seeks refuge in another country.

The words we use… The term 'asylum seeker' is now regarded by many people as a depersonalising term of abuse, often associated with the word 'bogus'. In EMBRACE, we try to use the phrase, 'person seeking asylum'. Similarly, the broad-brush term, 'illegal immigrant' is best replaced by the more objective words, 'undocumented person'. How can a human being be illegal?

Q **Who is a refugee?**

A Someone who applies for asylum, and is successful in being granted refugee status, under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to Refugees. 'Refugee' is also the general term for all people who have been displaced from their own countries by persecution, war and civil unrest.

Q **Who is a migrant worker?**

A Someone who leaves their country with the intention of seeking work elsewhere. In practice the words are usually applied today to people who do not intend to remain permanently in the host country.

Q **Who is an immigrant?**

A This term has been applied to all people coming into the country to work, but it is now often applied to people who intend to settle and integrate here, as opposed to being a more temporary 'migrant worker'. It is important not to view as 'immigrants' people who are part of long-established ethnic communities and populations.

Q **Who is an economic migrant?**

A Anyone who moves from their home country to improve their economic situation can be termed an 'economic migrant'. This term is sometimes used in a derogatory way, to throw suspicion on people's motives in seeking asylum. This is complicated by the fact that poverty and economic deprivation, as well as violence, are tools of those who persecute individuals and groups of people.

Categories of Migrant Workers

European Economic Area Nationals do not need to ask for permission to move here to live and work. These include people from the European Union (EU), from the European Free Trade Area (including Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein), and from Switzerland.

Students from abroad (there were around 1300 in around 2001–2) are entitled to work part-time. There are also language assistants in schools.

Working Holidaymakers are not recorded by immigration officials.

Permit-Free Workers include several categories such as people working here temporarily, for example, as diplomats, airport staff, representatives of foreign firms, members of the foreign press, or clergy!

Undocumented Workers are impossible to quantify, but the Immigration Service has given a guesstimate of 2000 people (quoted in *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland,* p.29). Most of them have probably entered the country legally and overstayed their work permits or visitors' visas.

Social and Justice Issues Relating to Migrant Workers

These are only emerging but several are beginning to stand out:

- Racist abuse and attacks.
- The lack of regulation of agencies in home countries, who may charge large fees on the promise of high wages and good conditions, which do not materialise.
- The power of employers. They hold the work permit, and someone losing a job cannot look for another one or seek benefit. If sacked, they face destitution and deportation.

- Contract workers are often supplied with very cramped, poor quality, living conditions.
- All these issues are made worse by a lack of access to interpreters making it hard for people to communicate their difficulties, or to establish their rights.
- The possibility that local people may be disadvantaged by the exploitative use of 'cheap labour'.

> Why don't "they" just learn English? Research has shown that people may well want to learn English but that there are many barriers in accessing English teaching in Northern Ireland. *In Other Words*, p.12

People Seeking Asylum and Refugees

A small number of incomers here are people who have been forced to flee from their home countries, and this makes them particularly vulnerable, as there are often few, if any, other members from their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds to help them through the experience. There are no separate official figures published for N Ireland and the last survey reckoned overall numbers of refugees and people seeking asylum to be around 2000 people in 2002, with around 400 applications for asylum per year. The figures today may well be lower, and this is partly because the few successful applicants do not necessarily stay in Northern Ireland.

Asylum and immigration issues have risen to the top of the political agenda in recent years, partly because of the genuine fears of some people in the more overcrowded parts of Great Britain, and partly because of a climate of political and media hysteria. Immigration is already an important part of the general election campaign, with both Conservative and Labour vying to have even tougher policies. The UK does receive a large number of asylum applications (61,000 in 2003/4) but accepts nothing like the numbers of refugees as other countries, especially some of the poorest in the world. A high percentage of asylum applications are unsuccessful.

> The top 5 countries hosting refugees in 2004: Pakistan 1.1million; Iran 985,000; Germany 960,000; Tanzania 650,000 and United States 452,500. *Refugees by Numbers*, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, September 2004.

Asylum: the Application Process in Northern Ireland

Claimants are expected to make an Asylum Application as soon as they arrive here. In Northern Ireland male applicants spend the first 24 or 48 hours in Maghaberry high security prison. A Screening Interview establishes their identity and nationality and checks if another country should be considering their case. This process includes fingerprinting as a check of identity against an international database. Under a new process, known informally as Fast Track, some people, from countries thought to be ‘safe’, are immediately detained and transferred to Great Britain while their cases are considered. If the case is not deemed to be arguable, then the person may be deported swiftly. Or, they may be sent to other parts of Britain under Home Office dispersal arrangements.

Applicants undergo induction and are told about their rights and responsibilities. They are issued with an identity number.
If people seeking asylum cannot support themselves the *National Asylum Support Service* (NASS) can provide subsistence benefits (70% of normal social security benefits – between £30 and £39 per week per person, plus housing, where required). The *Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities* (NICEM) is currently sub-contracted by the Refugee Council (the main charitable British refugee support organisation) to facilitate advice and emergency assistance for asylum applicants who are over 18. Children and young adults are the responsibility of the appropriate Health and Social Services Board. Follow-on accommodation is provided by the *Northern Ireland Housing Executive* (NIHE), on behalf of NAAS. Most asylum applicants in Northern Ireland live in the community while they are waiting to have their claims assessed but they may be detained at any time. They are not allowed to undertake paid employment. Throughout the application process people may be asked to report to the authorities: immigration officials (at Belfast International Airport) or police stations. At any time during the application process people can ask for help to return to their home country voluntarily.

Applicants are usually required to complete a *Statement of Evidence Form* (SEF) which has to be completed in English. There is then an Asylum Interview at which people can submit additional information such as medical reports. Home Office officials come from Great Britain to interview applicants. Immigration officials at the Home Office in England Assess the Claim and make an Initial Decision, by looking at the consistency of the evidence, and relating this to background information on the country of origin, supplied by the *Country Information and Policy Unit* of the *Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate*. The claim may be allowed under the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or on human rights grounds under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Successful applicants are entitled to the same social and economic rights as UK citizens. If successful, they have full access to medical treatment, housing, education and employment, but most applications fail at this stage. (Home Office figures for 2003 show that of 64,605 initial decisions taken in that year in the UK only 3,880 were successful following their first assessment.)

Unsuccessful applicants normally have a right to an Appeal to a tribunal before an immigration judge. This takes place in a court setting in Northern Ireland. Applicants who fail at the appeal stage are able to apply for a review of the immigration judge's decision, if the earlier decision was wrong in law, and the error would have made a difference. If this is unsuccessful then a person may apply for Statutory Review. In some cases, people who have not been able to demonstrate that they fulfil the criteria, but who need protection, could be given Exceptional Leave to Remain. This has been replaced recently by the more

restrictive categories of Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave. Both these are rarely given. (In 2003 in the UK 16,070 appeals were successful and a further 7210 people were given either Exceptional Leave to Remain, Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave.)

In the past it has been common for the process described here to last for several years, but the Government has made strenuous efforts recently to speed up the process and also to attempt to remove a greater number of people whose applications have failed. The streamlining of the system has led to a diminution of legal safeguards in dealing with people seeking asylum.

The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) emergency out of hours number for people seeking asylum and in need of assistance is (028) 9024 2025).

Problems for People Seeking Asylum

Isolation: Many people have lost all contact with friends and family and a way of life where they had worthwhile jobs and status. People here are unlikely to understand their culture.

Language: The language barrier is a problem in the asylum application process, in daily life (including communication with doctors) and in developing a normal social life.

The Application Process: The process, described by Les Allamby of the Law Centre as, ‘a war of attrition’, include delays, difficulties with translation, and limited access to financial and other social support. There can be high levels of fear and anxiety. People who may have been tortured or abuse find the questioning difficult. It is also hard for most people to back up their cases with written evidence. Research has shown that people fleeing from repression often have difficulty in recalling the details of traumatic events. They do not always make the best witnesses.

Detention: There is a strong fear of detention and the humiliation it brings.

Harassment and Discrimination: Most people will experience verbal abuse either on racial grounds, or because of the stigma attached to being an ‘asylum seeker’. The sense of rejection can be powerful.

Not Being Allowed to Work: Enforced idleness makes hours of anxiety seem longer and people feel shame at living off the state. Some find volunteering beneficial.

Some examples from Bristol quoted in the *Tablet*, 12 Feb. 2005:
Consuelo: *'You don't know what to do all day' and Grace speaks of 'psychological torture, to drive you mad and make you want to go back.'*

Poverty: The basic allowance of 70% of normal benefit gives no leeway for emergencies, especially where there is none of the family support that exists for local people. There can also be administrative glitches that leave people temporarily without even enough to eat. A person who is applying for asylum receives £30.84 per week if they are under 25 years of age, and £38.96 if they are over 25. They also receive housing support.

Diet: It can take a while to adjust to cooking cheap, locally available, ingredients to replace a familiar diet. People end up with a poor diet and digestive problems.

Climate: Applicants often come from hot climates and find it hard to keep warm here.

Health: Pre-existing illnesses and injuries may be made worse by poverty, living conditions and climate.

Stress and Depression: Some people will be suffering from the after-effects of wounds and torture, or the death of relatives. Trauma and the worry about failing to achieve refugee status may easily contribute towards long-standing depressive illnesses.

Exploitation: Asylum applicants who work illegally, or failed applicants who stay and work in the underground economy are often exploited, in the hours they work, and the conditions in which they live and work. They are vulnerable to abuse by their employers.

Remember that international conflict, and trade and justice issues interact directly with migration issues. Campaigning around these issues will help to prevent the misery of people having to flee from their homes.

Update on the Immigration Detention Situation(February 2005)

Background

The situation of immigration detainees in Northern Ireland has given concern for some time. Immigration officers, acting on behalf of the Home Office, have the right to detain anyone waiting for a decision on an application to enter this country or awaiting deportation. In practice this may include people who have strayed across the border, people seeking asylum who live in the community but who are thought to have broken the Home Office conditions e.g. by spending time away from home or by getting paid work. Some people with valid papers have been detained, where immigration officers have not believed the reasons given for their visits. Detention periods may be very short or quite lengthy.

A recent report, (*Measuring Misery*, published June 2004) drew attention to the trend of detaining increased numbers of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. (Still a small percentage of the total number of people seeking asylum, total numbers detained rose from 19 people in 2002/3 to 48 in 2003/4. An increase in women detainees reflects the increasing number of couples seeking asylum.) The report also indicated that the reasons for detention here often fall outside the categories that are acceptable under United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) guide lines.

There have been anxieties around treatment and conditions but the major campaigning issue is around the stigmatising by imprisonment of people who have not been convicted of any crime. A number of bodies here, including the churches, have made representations to government over the years, and this update gives an indication of the present situation. It is mostly based on a Refugee Action Group (RAG) annual report. RAG is an umbrella group of interested bodies, including EMBRACE. Much of the information is from the first hand experiences of RAG volunteers, who visit detainees regularly.

Update

In early 2004 the Northern Ireland Prison Service announced that Mourne House (the section of Maghaberry Prison where women prisoners and Immigration Detainees were held) was to close down. All women prisoners were to be moved to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre while a number of options were considered for the male detainees. These included detainees being held in Maghaberry with remand prisoners or being sent to Magilligan. The Refugee Action Group put up a strong objection to all the proposed arrangements and complained about the lack of consultation and transparency. In June 2004, all women prisoners were moved to Hydebank Wood YOC and the male detainees

were sent to a dedicated wing in a small prison 'work out unit' on Belfast's Crumlin Road.

What people say about their experiences

Last year, during Ramadan, two Muslim men, normally held in HMP Belfast (Crumlin Road) were moved to Maghaberry for the weekend, apparently due to staff shortages: 'The two detainees say they felt that they were being treated like criminals, being told by one female prison officer when they requested hot water: *"You're not at home here, this is a prison,"* … *"Why don't you go back to your country?"* ' From a Refugee Action Group press release, 20 October 2004.

Belfast Crumlin Road Unit

The move has brought better conditions for male detainees than in Maghaberry prison. There is free association all day and no lock up in individual cells. Detainees have access to outgoing and incoming phone calls and the staff team is particularly dedicated and helpful. However, there are still many issues that have not been resolved such as the poor access to medical supervision, lack of psychiatric support and counselling, poor food provision, lack of activities, lack of daylight in the building etc.

Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre

The situation for female detainees remains similar to what it was in Maghaberry. Cells are smaller and without toilet facilities. Food is a constant source of complaint. There are difficulties in accessing culturally appropriate hair and skin products, etc. Although staff shortages are no longer an issue, female detainees still spend long hours, locked in individual cells, and do not have access to incoming phone calls. Access to a phone is possible only during free association time and is restricted to a 'pre-entered' list of numbers. This causes great difficulties in obtaining support and immigration advice. Staff have not been particularly understanding in terms of language and health needs and there seems to be difficulty in obtaining prompt legal visits. The Refugee Action Group has visited Hydebank on several occasions and will make further contacts to try to influence the current conditions.

A major concern about the present arrangements is the separation of families and the fact that female detainees are still held alongside convicted prisoners.

Maghaberry Prison

Maghaberry remains the place where male detainees are processed and assessed, before being sent to the Crumlin Road unit. In most cases they are held for 24 to 48 hours before being transferred. With detainees sent to, and held in the Crumlin Road complex, there have been no regular visits to Maghaberry by RAG since June. However, examples have recently emerged of people being

held for long periods in Maghaberry and it would appear that some detainees are never brought to Crumlin Road. Under the Government's recently introduced 'fast track' system, for new applicants for asylum, this could have worrying implications, as detainees could be returned or moved to fast track centres in England or to Scotland, without access to any legal representation here.

Problems Faced by Minority Ethnic Peoples in Northern Ireland

We are all aware of the physical and verbal racial attacks on people from minority ethnic groups. However, more subtle forms of racial discrimination, indifference and overlooking can exist throughout people's lives, in contacts with official bodies such as the police, in the schoolroom, job hunting and the workplace, medical and housing services, and socially.

Deprived of identity

'People threaten you saying they are UVF/UDA and may be or not, they tell you that they see you as "Indian" and think you don't know the difference'. A member of the Bangladeshi community quoted in *30 Years Seen but Not Heard.*

'Local people who want to do something for ethnic minorities tend to want to group them all together… Being put together with other ethnic groups can make us feel vulnerable unless we have enough support'. Julie Chiang Li of the Belfast Chinese Christian Church quoted in *lion & lamb: racism and religious liberty*, Autumn 2004.

School

'When my eldest first went to school he encountered some problems. He is quite dark and other little boys told him that his hands were very dirty. They were P1 children too young to know any better. The principal took action'. A mother from a minority ethnic community group quoted in *Fermanagh: Other Voices.*

The health service

A family did not know their 6-year old child was dying until the day he died because an interpreter was not offered to them.

'I have had to interpret for my wife, it was very serious, goodness knows what would have happened it I had not been there'.

Two examples from the Bangladeshi community quoted in *30 Years Seen but Not Heard*

Workplace

'Sometimes people will talk the bad language. Maybe call you Chinkie and maybe "go back to your country" just like that you know. Some… will not be friendly

you know, But most people is quite nice'. A Chinese woman restaurant worker quoted in *Into the Light*.

Officials
'They assume you are employed illegally'. A member of the Bangladeshi community, complaining about heavy-handed raids on restaurants. *30 Years Seen but Not Heard.*

Politics
'Everyone wanted you to take sides'… 'people should not expect you to be involved in their fight'. Extract from an interviewee quoted in an ICCM briefing for Church Leaders.

Links with Sectarianism
'*"Because I have darker skin"*, says Marizete, *"people think I am Portuguese and therefore assume I am a Catholic."* For this reason she avoids some parts of town.' From an interview with a Brazilian Baptist pastor's wife, Marizete Lara living in Dungannon, in *lion & lamb: racism and religious liberty*, Autumn 2004.

Subtle Racism
Stereotyping: People are asked questions such as: *'Are you a mail order bride?'*

Patronising: *'It really annoys me when people ask me "where did you learn English?" People take it for granted that I don't know many things and that in general Asian people don't know many things.'*

Women from a minority ethnic community group quoted in *Fermanagh: Other Voices*.

Church
'The local minister… provided tins of food and spoons to our home but did not invite us to his church. They [the Church] were saying we were poor. I was insulted. Would the same thing have happened if a white person moved into the area?' An African woman quoted in an ICCM briefing for Church Leaders.

The words we use… A recent American study of 10 ethnic communities has revealed the lethal power of language. *'The most astonishing finding was that ethnic immigrant groups subjected to more "hate speech" were more likely than others to commit suicide.'* Psychiatrist, Raj Persaud, *Independent*, 29 January 2005

The Christian Welcome

What the Bible has to say about welcoming outsiders

At last year's EMBRACE Annual General Meeting Sr Brighde Vallelly (now EMBRACE Vice-Chairperson) reflected how, in John's Gospel, while Peter warmed himself by a charcoal fire, in the in-group, Jesus was in the outgroup, among the demonised. After the resurrection, it was Jesus who cooked breakfast on a charcoal fire for the disciples, and Peter, following his earlier denials of Christ, had the opportunity to make his threefold response to Jesus' question: "Do you love me?"

Brighde then asked 'So what must we do?' and answered:

- Repent of sectarianism, racism and prejudice.
- Wash the feet of others.
- Churches and church communities should be communities of the inclusive charcoal fire.
- Be informed and learn to ask the right questions, of churches, politicians and policy makers.

God is portrayed in the scriptures as identifying with fallen and broken humanity. God revealed Himself as the God of the outsider when He intervened in the lives of the Israelites in Egypt. His liberation of His people from their oppression displayed His commitment to the marginalized and the vulnerable. And it is this concern, compassion and commitment that God holds up as a blueprint for His followers…

The Israelites themselves are portrayed as sojourners or tenants on the land that God has given them and their tenancy is linked to their obedience to God. Indeed, the way in which the stranger, together with the widow and the orphan, is treated, is an indicator of the Israelites' obedience to the law of God and it is this commitment to justice and the defence of the weak that the prophets highlight repeatedly. God does want lip service; He desires obedience. He requires us to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him.[1] The stranger provides the opportunity for the Israelite to reciprocate the heart of God for the downtrodden and the oppressed…

Jesus takes this a step further when he tells his disciples that what they do to the stranger, they do to Him. He is in the guise of the stranger, the poor and the weak and His call is to treat all people as we would treat Him. In the incarnation Jesus comes as a stranger into this world…

Jesus understands those who seek refuge and asylum and identifies with them. As the stranger on the road to Emmaus, He draws alongside and supports the weak. His great call is to hospitality, a central theme of scripture. Jesus epitomised hospitality in his welcome and treatment of those on the fringes of society. But it was more than a welcome. His hospitality was about reconciliation and the transformation from stranger to guest and from guest to friend.

Part of an article by EMBRACE chairperson, Richard Kerr, in *lion & lamb: racism and religious liberty*, Autumn 2004.

1. Micah 6:8

Pastoral Implications

Some pastoral implications of ministering to people with immigration or asylum problems, and members of ethnic populations.

In approaching people with a spirit of openness, acceptance and welcome and preparing to make people feel at home, there are some things to bear in mind. It is not always easy to understand people's feeling's of insecurity, bewilderment, loneliness, suspicion, fears, hopes and needs, when their stories are so different from ours.

- You may need to know where to access expertise – legal, social, and medical.
- You may be pressed to find a lot of time for people whose multiple problems leave them very emotionally dependent.
- You will need to be aware of special sensitivities, for example, regarding confidentiality. Someone left a church permanently because he felt shamed at being introduced as an asylum seeker by someone who probably only wanted him to be made especially welcome.
- Be aware that immigrants and minority ethnic groups are not homogeneous; there is great diversity, and sometimes animosity, within and between ethnic groups.
- It is important to listen empathetically. It can be a challenge to hear what someone is feeling and not just the words they are saying. Different cultures invariably express things in different ways, even similar words can be understood in different ways, and body language can be significant
- You may never know if what people tell you is completely true, and it is hard to measure up a story when the normal parameters do not apply. You have to take a certain amount on trust, and you may find cultural signals confusing. A failure to make eye contact may appear a sign of untrustworthiness or trauma, when in reality it may only be what is regarded as respectful in the country of origin.

- You will all make cultural mistakes, whether in your assumptions, language or behaviour, such as simply forgetting to remove your shoes in an Asian house.
- You may be hit suddenly by new unpleasant issues. For example, we already have a sex trade which uses children, and must assume that some young girls will be trafficked to Northern Ireland in order to be abused, or who have been sent ahead by desperate mothers who want them to escape abuse in their own country.
- You may find yourself acting at or beyond the edge of the law and uncertain where the moral and legal boundaries lie.
- Above all you will not be human if you do not experience frustration and anger, pain and guilt, as there is often little which can be done to assist in immigration cases which are governed by procedures that seem beyond influence.

Learning how to be more inclusive

Extracts from some suggestions by Rt Rev. Dr Ken Newell, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland:

Refocus on the life God calls you to live in your community: 'live a life of love'.

Assess your emotional involvement with the issue: 'Before Haleleni from Zimbabwe described the hell of racist abuse she had been put through in an estate in East Belfast, I felt emotionally detached from the problem of racism. After hearing her story of windows smashed, doors kicked in and dog's dirt shovelled in piles on her doorstep, I changed.'

Change your lifestyle: 'Become more socially inclusive. If you rarely have people from a different ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds to your home for a meal, why not adopt a different approach? Open your heart and your home. … There is nothing more powerful than your neighbours seeing you enjoy the friendship of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.'

Open up the issue in your church: 'Compile a dossier of racial attacks in your area. Share this material with your friends in church. Present it to your minister and church leaders. Ask them to discuss it and initiate a positive response in your area… Would Jesus be passive if he lived in your neighbourhood? He does!'

From *lion & lamb: racism and religious liberty*, Autumn 2004

- Encourage race awareness and anti-racism training.
- Invite members of minority ethnic churches to take part in special services.
- Hold special services for example, in Refugee Week, Anti-Racism Sunday, or Holocaust Memorial Day, and invite members of minority groups to speak or attend.
- Hold celebration meals such as harvest suppers where you might invite people from an ethnic group to cook for you.
- Celebrate festivals such as Chinese New Year.
- Visit cultural centres together. For example, people from a rural background, anywhere in the world, will find something in common at somewhere like the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.
- Visit the cultural centres of ethnic communities – such as the Indian Community Centre in Belfast, to learn, and affirm their presence as part of a shared society.
- Learn about other people's religious beliefs and practices by hosting an exhibition, (such as In Good Faith, which can be borrowed from the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure) visiting religious centres, or inviting members of other faiths to explain their religious beliefs.
- Encourage young people to study the languages, cultures and religions of people from local ethnic populations.
- Groups such as the Irish School of Ecumenics can provide and facilitate courses on the Abrahamic faiths.
- Find ways of celebrating and honouring the achievement of individuals and groups from ethnic populations in your community.
- Send a representative to your local anti-racism network if there is one.
- Use any forum, inter-church groups, Community Safety Groups, District Policing Partnerships, Community Dialogue, to make sure that even minor acts of racism are taken seriously.

The words we use… We need to find out what people want to be called, and to expect change – at one time 'coloured' was acceptable for African or Caribbean people, now, in almost all cases, it is not. People became proud to be 'black', but some may now prefer to be 'people of colour'. People from the far East were once happy to be called 'Asian' or 'British Asian' or 'Irish Asian' but now some prefer other, more precise, religious, ethnic or national names.

Some useful organisations

Amnesty International
Northern Ireland
397 Ormeau Road
Belfast BT7 3GP
Tel: (028) 9064 3000
Email: nireland@amnesty.org.uk
Web: www.amnesty.org.uk

Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM)
3rd Floor, Ascot House
24-31 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast BT2 7DB
Tel: 00 44 28 9023 8645 / 00 44 28 9031 9666
Fax: 00 44 28 9031 948
Email info@nicem.org.uk
Web: www.nicem.org.uk

Multi-Cultural Resource Centre (MCRC)
9 Lower Crescent
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Centre for Global Education
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Email: info@cge.uk.com
Web: www.globaldimensions.org.uk

Sources

Web Sites

Home Office, Immigration and Nationality Directorate
www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

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www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

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Please let us know if you have experience in building positive relationships with members of minority ethnic groups that we could help you to share with other people.

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