

# Building a Welcoming Community

Newsletter Number 5

Winter 05/06



## Inter-church Initiative on Racism:

### Major Conference at Dromantine

Church representatives from all over Ireland, were brought together by the All-Ireland Churches' Consultative Meeting on Racism (A-ICCMR) in November 2005 for a major conference in Newry, to listen to the experiences of minority ethnic people and to explore ways of living out the gospel by challenging racism.

The title of the conference was **Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment** and the keynote speaker Rev. Dr Sahr Yambasu, from Galway, focussed on the challenge of ignorance, in how we respond to the 'Strangers in our Midst'. Taking the example of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18 v11), he traced how racism and superiority were justified in the past by science and philosophy, in ways that have since been debunked. He also examined how Irish people had been implicated in racism elsewhere in the world, and in Ireland today.

He indicated how, in order to move forward, Christians must first acknowledge racism, seek to repent of it, and then, have at the centre, a theology of interdependence - the connectedness of all creation. We must be careful how we talk about others and not see people as mere labels. We should dispel our ignorance by having as much contact as possible with people from minority ethnic groups. Finally he stressed the importance of dialogue: of talking and listening and developing relationships.

Dr Yambasu concluded with prayers. This is an extract of one by Rabbi Harold S Kushner:

*Let the warmth and the brightness of the sun melt our selfishness, so that we can share the joys and sorrows of our neighbours.*

*And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see all people as neighbours.*

One follow-up meeting has already been held in Belfast so that people could start to network and explore the issues further. This was helpful in bringing people together who had different experiences to share.

If you want to be part of this process please contact Scott Boldt of AICCMR by e-mailing [scott.boldt@btconnect.com](mailto:scott.boldt@btconnect.com) or phoning (028) 9066 3145 Ext 27.



**In Christ's eyes everyone is someone special**

An illustration which Ken Newell has used to challenge racism.

His conference talk on racism and resisting racism, and other conference contributions can also be obtained from Scot Boldt.

*May God bless us with strength to seek justice*

*May God bless us with the vision to see God's image in everyone*

*May God bless us with love to bring forth new life*

*Let us go in peace to be witnesses to hope*

Blessing at the end of the conference

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## Contact Us

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## EU Enlargement Brings Destitution To Our Streets

Migrant workers have always faced problems but this has become more serious recently, with a very significant rise in the number of people coming to Northern Ireland from the countries that joined the EU on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004.\* Some facts:

- ❖ Northern Ireland has the highest % of migrant workers from these states of anywhere in the UK.
- ❖ They pay a £70 registration fee when they register for employment.
- ❖ Many are paid low wages for the type of work they do.
- ❖ They need one year of *uninterrupted* employment to be entitled to social welfare, other than emergency health care.
- ❖ People who lose their jobs are not entitled to *any* statutory support.
- ❖ If living in tied accommodation, the loss of a job may lead to homelessness.
- ❖ Private hostels for the homeless have limited spaces and have now been informed that beds paid for by the N. I. Housing Executive can not be used for destitute migrant workers. The providers must fund their beds themselves.
- ❖ St Vincent de Paul have been very supportive but are limited in what they can do.
- ❖ It is almost impossible for a homeless person to retain any semblance of normality and dignity, or to obtain and hold down a new job.
- ❖ Destitution can be related to increased problems of criminality, prostitution and domestic violence.

This information is from the N. I. Council for the Homeless and the Welcome Centre in Belfast, who are joining with church representatives, and others, in trying to find ways of addressing this problem. Rev. Richard Kerr, Chairperson of EMBRACE and Convener of the Presbyterian Race Relations Panel says: "We are deeply concerned at the injustice that forces people to sleep on the streets because there is no safety net."

Joe McGuigan of the Welcome Centre says that, thanks to donations, there is no barrier to welcoming migrants in their day centre, with

advice, care, food and blankets. Language can be a problem, and Joe was specially touched that the wives of Polish men, far from home, had gone to the trouble of getting letters of gratitude translated into English.

\*The new EU members are: **Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia,**

## Just One of the Myths about Migrant Workers:

*"They are costing the country money."*

**The facts:** The Home Office calculates that after subtracting benefits and public services from tax and National Insurance contributions migrants provide an annual surplus of £2.6 billion. One local factory, O'Kane Poultry, in Ballymena calculates that their migrant workers contributed £624,998 in National Insurance and £1,562,496 in Income Tax in just 2 years, while spending £2.2million locally.

Source: ANIMATE, a partnership support group in Mid-Ulster. For more information see their web site:

[www.animate-ccd.net](http://www.animate-ccd.net).

## One Person Can Make a Difference

Holocaust Memorial Day is held in the UK on 27th January each year, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. This year Enniskillen hosted a poignant ceremony attended by, among others, members of the Jewish community, some of whom suffered in the Holocaust.

The theme was "One Person Can Make a Difference" and Thérèse Fitzgerald of EMBRACE says:

'We were constantly reminded of this throughout the day through the personal stories of so many people who spoke of a smile, a helping hand, a caring gesture, making all the difference in their suffering. It was a privilege to be present at such a significant moment of remembering.'

A useful web site with excellent information is [www.hmd.org.uk](http://www.hmd.org.uk).

## Immigration Detention in 2005

The Home Office has the right to detain foreign nationals suspected of breaking immigration regulations or rules relating to asylum applications. N Ireland is the only part of the UK without special detention centres, and there has been controversy because of detention in Magilligan, and later at Maghaberry prison, alongside convicted criminals. Male detainees are now only processed at Maghaberry, before being moved to a special unit in Crumlin Road. Female detainees are still housed alongside convicted female prisoners, at Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre.

The Refugee Action Group (RAG) reports that in 2005 there were 120 detainees, 87 men and 33 women. 83% were detained for less than 1 month. RAG does not know what happened to them all, but of those they visited, 21% were released, 22% were transferred to detention centres in England or Scotland, and 34% were returned or deported. 50% reported that they had been arrested on entry, either at the airport or ferry. They came from 28 countries with an increase in people from African nations.

It is often a complete shock to people to end up in a prison situation because officials are suspicious of their documentation. Some extracts from the reports of volunteer visitors from the Refugee Action Group. (Anonymity has been preserved):

*'J was detained on Saturday. She is a full time student in England and her mum lives in Dublin. She has been travelling London/Dublin over the last two years but came via Belfast this time and got stopped. She has no visas etc. She's 20 years old and visibly shocked by the arrest and detention.'*

*'B said that one of the nurses told him that he had to be strong because he might be in there 5 months. Although he was still depressed he was definitely engaged and chatty and did not spend as much time with his head in his hands as he did the past couple of weeks'*

*'F works for an airline, and was over on a two-week holiday with a tourist visa to be in the UK. He flew to Belfast and was pulled aside by the authorities who asked him if he planned to visit Dublin, to which he said, 'sure', at which point he was detained. ... He says he did not realise his visa did not entitle him to travel to Dublin and is incredulous that he had spent most of his vacation in jail.'*

## Detainee Visitors' Expenses

EMBRACE is a member of the Refugee Action Group whose volunteers make regular visits to immigration detainees. This important humanitarian work would be helped by small amounts of money to cover items for detainees, such as foreign language newspapers, phone cards and toiletries, as well as volunteers' travel expenses. Would you or your congregation like to make a small contribution? Cheques should be made out to the Refugee Action Group and sent, either to EMBRACE or:

Ms Margaret Donaghy,  
Refugee Action Group,  
c/o MCRC, 9 Lower Crescent,  
Belfast BT7 1NR

## Where is All the Good News?

Looking back at the content of this newsletter, much of it is about the problems of racism, destitution and detention. We would like to make the next issue a much more positive one, with examples of good practice at local level, especially from within the Christian community.

At a recent event in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, to mark Chinese New Year, representatives of the Chinese community spoke about their experiences in N Ireland. Several of the younger speakers noted incidents of serious racism, but also how complete strangers had gone out of their way to help them feel at home here. Please let us know about *your* good news stories. Contact EMBRACE at 12-24 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GY, tel 07969921328 or email [info@embraceni.org](mailto:info@embraceni.org)

## EMBRACE News

**Consultation** continues with Churches and Christian groups. Most recently we have met with CCCI (The Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland) and the Evangelical Alliance.

EMBRACE continues to respond to invitations to give presentations and facilitate workshops etc.

**Sr Mary De Largy** retired from the committee in November. Richard Kerr spoke of her valued contribution to EMBRACE, from the outset. He thanked her and wished her God's blessing for her new work in Zambia.

For the last few years EMBRACE has hosted a **Christmas Party** for people seeking asylum, on behalf of NICEM (The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities). The 2005 party was held in City Church where about 40 people, including young families, had a really fun time. Thanks to everyone and especially members of the Religious Society of Friends for their help with the food and hospitality.

It is through bodies such as NICEM and the Refugee Action Group that EMBRACE maintains contact with people seeking asylum and the refugee community.

### Dates for your diary:

#### **Vision Day**

The EMBRACE committee met recently to share a morning of reflection and prayer together. Time was devoted to looking at the meaning and purpose of EMBRACE with particular attention given to the vision of EMBRACE. This meditative approach will be extended to our membership and the wider church community on 30th March 2006. We hope that as many of you as possible will attend, so that we can explore together the best way forward for EMBRACE as a whole, and our own personal place within it. If you are interested in attending, please contact Jill on 07969921328 or write to EMBRACE, 12-24 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GY

**EMBRACE AGM** will be held in Edgehill Theological College, Lennoxvale, South Belfast, on Tuesday 16 May at 7.30 p.m.

## EMBRACE Welcomes You

If you are concerned about making this a more welcoming place, if you want information about the current situation regarding asylum seekers, migrant workers or others from minority ethnic communities, if you want ideas and contacts for getting involved in practical ways of support...why not join us?

EMBRACE members are a key to building a welcoming community. We value member's ideas, knowledge, action, and prayer support. We offer our members information through our website, news sheets and annual Information Update. We provide opportunities to be involved in supporting people who seek asylum, refugees, migrant workers and minority ethnic people, in practical ways through our links with other organisations, and through events hosted by EMBRACE.

You may take out individual (£5.00 per annum) or group membership (£10). To find out more, receive a membership form, or pass on your good news or concerns, call Jill on 07969921328, write to EMBRACE, 12-24 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GY, or email [info@embraceni.org](mailto:info@embraceni.org).

*We need other people who will call forth what is most beautiful in us, just as we need to call forth what is most beautiful in others.'*

Jean Vanier

(Quoted on the CORI Justice web site [www.cori.ie/justice](http://www.cori.ie/justice), Thought for the Day)

*Every creature, every human, lives by God's grace;*

*Every family, man and woman, culture and race;  
Those whom fortune seems to favour,  
Those exploited for their labour,  
Those who need to know a neighbour  
Live by God's grace.*

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