

# Building a Welcoming Community



Newsletter Number 10

Autumn/Winter 2007

Charity Ref No XR92283

## Slavery, Rights and Equality

### Hidden Connections

This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Here, in Northern Ireland it still demands reflection, vigilance and a sharpening of the law to ensure that we can live up to the high ideals of the abolitionists.

William Wilberforce, a direct descendant of the great abolitionist was present at Rosemary Street Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church on 18 October for the opening event of the Linen Hall Library programme, Hidden Connections, Ulster and Slavery 1807-2007. This event highlighted the slavery archive in the Public Record Office NI. He brought with him a cast iron tobacco box made from the chains, manacles and neck braces that were removed from the first freed slaves.

The Hidden Connections talks can be downloaded as podcasts from [www.culturenorthernireland.org](http://www.culturenorthernireland.org).

### Jailed Here 'Because He is Black'?

Frank Kakopa, a structural engineer originally from Zimbabwe, who was working in England, brought his wife and children on a mini-break here in 2005. However, in spite of lots of documentary evidence that he was living legally in the UK, he was singled out by the Immigration Service and held for 2 days in Maghaberry Prison. He was strip-searched, isolated from his family and not allowed to make phone calls.

'I was locked up with convicted criminals, having committed no crime, while my wife and young children were left abandoned at the airport of a strange country worrying about where I was and how I was being treated.' Listeners to Radio Ulster's Sunday Sequence on 28 October were horrified to hear Mr Kakopa talk about his sense of humiliation. 'Being a former prisoner will always stick with me.'

He has just been awarded £7,500 compensation for wrongful imprisonment and Eileen Lavery of the Equality Commission who supported his case commented: 'Why pick on him? Other than, I think, because he is black.'

Unfortunately this is not an isolated case and local solicitors report other cases of people whose documentation and rights are ignored by immigration officers. A positive outcome of the case has been the agreement by Immigration Service that officers here will have training in racial equality awareness. To read more about this case see

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/7066077.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7066077.stm).



Learning about diversity through music at the Newtownabbey Methodist Mission, as part of a Motion Project workshop. For more see [www.beyondskin.net](http://www.beyondskin.net).

### NICEM AGM Highlights Equality Issues

10 years after the introduction of the Race Relations (NI) Order, racial discrimination law was the theme of the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities AGM. OFMDFM junior minister Gerry Kelly, Patrick Yu of NICEM and Prof. Barry Fitzpatrick all highlighted the importance of challenging racism through legislation. The topics discussed included the Bill of Rights and the need to amalgamate our complex legislation into one new Equality Act. For some, it was a shock to realise that Frank Kakopa (column 1) won his case on the grounds of unlawful imprisonment but the current laws would not have allowed him to claim against the Immigration Service on grounds of racial discrimination. Prof. Fitzpatrick emphasised the need to develop advocacy, lobbying, models, test cases, expertise and rights centres within the community.

### Rights and Righteousness

Rights are often seen as secular values, so it was timely that the NI Human Rights Commission joined with the Irish School of Ecumenics to stimulate discussion about the relationship between faith and rights. At the joint conference, Rights and Righteousness: Religious Pluralism and Human Rights, people of many faiths met in Belfast to examine whether conflict is inevitable between faith and human rights. Rev. Rebecca Dudley of the NIHRC has produced a background paper on the subject that can be accessed on [www.nihrc.org](http://www.nihrc.org) on their What's New page. Other conference papers will follow.

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## Immigration

### Animate Research Compendium Published

The Animate Project ([www.animate-ccd.net](http://www.animate-ccd.net)) ran from 2004 to March 2007 as a partnership between Dungannon and South Tyrone Council and the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (S.T.E.P). Its research covered key issues facing migrant workers, including racism, prejudice and discrimination, employment rights and exploitation. The findings have now been published as a compendium, *Issues facing Migrant Workers and their Families in Northern Ireland*. Here is one example from the research: a woman, dismissed by an employer because she was pregnant was told by an official in a Social Security Office. *"Go and ask the Portuguese Government to help you. ... And if you need money for the return ticket to Portugal, get a job."* For more see [www.animate-ccd.net/publications/R9\\_Research\\_Compendium.pdf](http://www.animate-ccd.net/publications/R9_Research_Compendium.pdf).

### Rooting Out Exploitation

Since the summer, the Gangmasters Licencing Authority has been arranging meetings with migrant worker and community organisations here in order to encourage workers to give the GLA the information to investigate abuse. Paul Whitehouse, Chairman of the GLA, has a message to all workers in sectors regulated by the GLA (so far, mostly confined to agriculture and food processing). *"Give us information directly or through others and we will act to stop exploitation."* To report your concerns phone **0845 602 502** or contact Crimestoppers, anonymously, on **0800 555 111**.

### International Organization for Migration

Not everyone who comes to this country is able to get a Work Permit or extend their visa and many people's applications for asylum fail. Others may have been brought here following false promises of employment. Despair can set in and there is a strong fear of the humiliation of being detained and removed by the immigration authorities. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) can arrange travel documents, pay for transport and help people to re-establish themselves back home. The main categories of people assisted are asylum applicants whose appeals are exhausted, people who have been smuggled or trafficked, or those whose visas have expired. Once home, they can be assisted further by grants, help for small business start-ups, vocational training and further education. IOM is able to do positive re-settlement work in surprising places such as Iraq and Zimbabwe, where they are currently helping the victims of internal displacement.

If you want to know more, phone IOM on **0800 783 2332** or contact EMBRACE for posters, forms and information. (See also page 4.)

## Refugee and Asylum Issues

### MAMA Award for Work at NICRAS

The NI Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers are delighted that Cassie McKeever has just won a Media and Multi-Cultural Award in Dublin for her NICRAS work.

NICRAS is finding it time-consuming and almost impossible to find legal aid solicitors to act on behalf of people who are in imminent danger of removal from the country, having been moved from here to detention in GB. In at least one case, friends have borrowed money that they can ill afford, in order to pay for legal advice. Anyone prepared to help defray these expenses should make cheques payable to NICRAS and send them to NICRAS, One Vision Offices, Unit 2, 129 Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT7 1SH. NICRAS will pass any donations on.

The group welcomes volunteers to accompany people signing on at police stations. The NICRAS office is also urgently looking for a volunteer to help with administrative work.

Please email [nicras@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:nicras@hotmail.co.uk) or phone **9024 6699** to find out more about opportunities.

### City of Sanctuary

During Refugee Week this year the Mayor of Sheffield announced the support of the City Council which allowed Sheffield to become the first UK City of Sanctuary, working to become a welcoming place for refugees and people seeking asylum. Seventy-three local organisations have pledged support for this initiative. The organising committee is chaired by Inderjit Bhogal, former President of the UK Methodist Conference, who is known here because of his involvement with the Corrymeela Community. To read more see [www.cityofsanctuary.com](http://www.cityofsanctuary.com).

### Slavery Today

Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith has launched Pentameter 2 (UKP2) which aims to rescue victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and to identify, disrupt, arrest and bring to justice people involved in criminal activity. Pentameter 1, which took place in 2006, was the first proactive policing operation involving all 55 forces in the UK simultaneously. As a result, 88 victims of trafficking from 22 different countries (primarily in Eastern Europe, China/South-East Asia, Africa or Brazil) were recovered. 232 people were arrested and 134 charged with a variety of offences. To read more see [www.pentameter.police.uk](http://www.pentameter.police.uk).

### Lowest Recorded NI Unemployment Figures

The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment recorded that unemployment figures here reached an all-time low of 3.7% at the end of June 2007.

## CHURCH NEWS

### Focus on the Presbyterian Church:

#### Race Relations Panel

Convener, Rev. Richard Kerr reports that the RRP's initial focus was on racial justice in other parts of the world, such as S Africa. More recently however, the Panel has been involved in developing the Church's Policy on Asylum Seekers and Refugees and challenging the churches to become centres of welcome for immigrants. Congregations have responded through initiatives such as language, conversation and after-school classes, and hospitality for newcomers.

The Panel continues to monitor developments. Recently the Inspector for the Border and Immigration Agency and Head of the Immigration Enforcement Unit for NI, Mr Elwyn Soutter, addressed the Panel. It was an excellent chance to hear about the work of the agency although members were concerned about the emphasis on removal. Cases like those of the Falode family (see below) help to provide a personal connection to those on the receiving end of the Agency's work.

The RRP helped to facilitate the discussions with organisations working with homeless migrants in setting up of the 'Embrace on the Street' project. The Panel emphasises communication and liaises with other agencies, boards and committees of the Presbyterian Church and with other Churches. The RRP has a responsibility to provide the wider Church with information and resources, and works closely with organisations such as EMBRACE.

#### Mountpottinger and the Falode Family

Mountpottinger Presbyterian congregation in Belfast is challenging the removal of a Nigerian family who have become part of their church family over the past year. Ronke Falode and her children Dappo (14), Deery (12) and Boyeh (8), are actively involved in the church and community. Ronke volunteers in the church's charity shop and sings in the praise group. Her children attend local schools, Boy's Brigade and Junior Church and have made friends there.

Ronke and her family came here following the death of her husband in 2003. She tells how her late husband's family demanded that she marry his brother, who was already married, and give him control of the property. Ronke refused, and when violence was threatened she left the country. The family's application for asylum was turned down in June, and they were detained by immigration officials on 29<sup>th</sup> October, at the beginning of their Halloween break. They were taken to Yarl's Wood removal centre near London and were to be returned to Nigeria on the 8<sup>th</sup> November. Their Mountpottinger congregation responded quickly. Rev Johnson Lambe flew to Westminster to meet with politicians, and the campaign

has had the support of the main local political parties and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Dr Paisley has taken a personal interest in this ongoing case. Mr Lambe has visited the family at Yarl's Wood to chat and pray with them. He spoke of their strong faith and reliance on God to bring something positive out of this situation. Members of the congregation established a 'Friends of the Falode Family', circulated petitions and sent letters to MPs and to the Falode family to encourage them. The children's schools have also been very supportive. To read more see [www.ncadc.org.uk/Newszine88/Ronke.html](http://www.ncadc.org.uk/Newszine88/Ronke.html).

#### Castleblaney and the Okioli family

One small southern congregation has a similar story. Nkechi Okioli, and her three children came to Ireland in 2002. They joined Castleblaney Presbyterian Church where they received a warm welcome. They not only attended morning worship but took part in many congregational activities. The then minister, Rev. Nancy Cubitt described Nkechi as "a beautiful, intelligent and gracious woman who displayed great faith in God." She also got involved in several voluntary bodies in the Castleblaney area.

It was a shock when, in 2005, the Department of Justice decided to return the Okioli family to Nigeria. The minister, members of the congregation, and many local friends tried unsuccessfully to get the Department of Justice to reverse the decision. At very short notice the family was brought to the local Garda station. Many gathered there to offer help. Amid scenes of great distress they were eventually taken to the airport. Rev. Alan Martin writes: 'This sad story has a hopeful side. It shows how in the short period of three years close and deep relations between people of different cultures can be built up. So close was the relationship that the eventual forced separation caused great sorrow not only to the Okioli family but to the Castleblaney congregation and the many friends they had made.'

#### New leaflets

##### Who's Who? Who's Here?

As a follow-up to the ROI leaflet, *Who's Who* (mentioned in Newsletter 9) EMBRACE has published its own leaflet, *Who's Who? Who's Here?* It contains basic facts and figures about migrants, people seeking asylum, and refugees in NI. Copies may be obtained from EMBRACE (Contact details on pages 1 & 4).

##### Parish-Based Integration Project Leaflet

Adrian Cristea has produced a leaflet to explain how this Dublin-based project can assist churches integrate immigrants into congregations. It includes 10 key integration guidelines for parishes. You can contact him at UICCSI Project Office, Bea House, Milltown Park, Dublin 6. Tel: 01 (003531 from the north) 269 0951 Email: [adrian@iccsi.ie](mailto:adrian@iccsi.ie) Web: [www.iccsi.ie](http://www.iccsi.ie)

## EMBRACE News

### Vyishnu Somasundram



Members of EMBRACE have been saddened by the sudden tragic death of Vyishnu Somasundram, the youngest son of a much loved and respected family who fled from Sri Lanka 6 years ago. We extend our sympathy to the family circle. Those who were privileged to know him will always remember Vyishnu's mischievous smile, his warm personality and the contribution he made in his school, the Indian community and far beyond.

This family has suffered a great deal, with considerable dignity, and we pray that the authorities may find a way to allow them to stay here where they have started to belong.

### Committee News

Sister Eileen McKillen has unfortunately had to resign because she has gone to work abroad and the committee wishes her well. Maura McCallion has agreed to be co-opted onto the committee. She has a legal training, and works in the Law Centre. She is a member of St Colmcille's parish in East Belfast, has campaigned for many years in support of international human rights issues and has volunteered with St Vincent de Paul.

Since the last newsletter was published, the committee has met with Andy Bruce of the Churches' Commission for Racial Justice. CCRJ hopes to build partnerships with regional groups. It was agreed that EMBRACE will share information, invite Andy to its meetings and activities. He plans to come here more frequently in future in order to network and further his knowledge about church activities in relation to racial justice.

At a recent committee planning session an additional sub-group was formed to enhance the capacity of EMBRACE to assist people through advocacy. Since the last newsletter, committee members have undertaken consultations and speaking engagements to groups and at conferences, in Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Cavanaleck near Fivemiletown and Lurgan.

### New CCRJ/CTBI Resources

The CCRJ newsletter, *Racial Justice Today*, has had a major facelift and is now in full colour and carries lots of articles and photographs. To find out about subscribing email [ccrj@ctbi.org.uk](mailto:ccrj@ctbi.org.uk).

*Migration Principles: Statement for Churches Working on Migration Issues* is a broad statement of principles and suggested actions produced by an inter-denominational study group convened by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. To obtain a copy (£5.00 & £1.50p&p) phone [01733 325002](tel:01733325002) or order online [www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk).

### Appeal for Funds

Please consider supporting the EMBRACE Emergency Fund. This is used to provide vital emergency assistance to destitute migrant workers and people seeking asylum where no other means of support, either statutory or charitable are available. The fund has been used to provide hostel accommodation and food, as a short-term stop gap, whilst a longer term solution is established. Funding may be provided to allow someone to return to their home country when there is no reason to stay, and no other means of returning is available. All support given is subject to meeting a set of criteria set down by the EMBRACE Committee. EMBRACE does not distribute money directly to people, rather it is delivered through agencies such as Bryson One Stop Service and NICEM.

If you would like to give a financial gift to this fund, please send a cheque, payable to EMBRACE Emergency Fund, to EMBRACE, 12-24 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GY. Your support is greatly appreciated.

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### The Light of Christ Shines Upon All!

*We, Christian pilgrims from all over Europe and beyond, witness to the transforming power of this light, which is stronger than darkness, and we proclaim it as all-embracing hope for our Churches, for all of Europe and for the entire world. From the Assembly Message of the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Ecumenical Assembly, September 2007*

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### Contact Us

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**EMBRACE welcomes new members.**

**Annual subscription of £10 for individual membership, £20 for groups.**

