

Building a Welcoming Community

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A Shared Future?

Programme for Government Criticised

Church people and others have expressed fears that the Shared Future ideal is not central to the plans of the NI Executive. For example, Duncan Morrow, Chief Executive of the Community Relations Council, has commented that 'Without a practical and detailed peace plan the Programme for Government risks returning Northern Ireland to a culture of public denial and avoidance about sectarianism, discrimination and now racism'. Ten years after the Belfast Agreement he noted that sectarianism and racism still have a corrosive effect. 'We cannot afford to drift back to the pretence that our divisions are normal, will simply disappear, or have no relevance to social, economic and justice goals.'

www.community-relations.org.uk/about-the-council/press-releases/88/

18 Jan. 2008

Executive Minister Sees Partnership Role for Churches

At around the same time, while speaking at the Church of Ireland Pilgrim People Conference on immigration and integration in January, Junior Minister in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), Gerry Kelly, said that the Church had a key role in being able to deliver in areas where Government may not be able to.

'Diversity involves new people, living down the street, shopping at local shops, attending local schools and working alongside us and sharing our places of worship. It is at this level that the real level of integration must happen. ... It is important for us all to work together to promote good relations but Church and Government, in partnership, could provide the focused leadership.'

'The differences in our society must cease to be barriers. Difference must be recognised, appreciated and celebrated. It is important that we all act to make sure that intolerance, sectarianism, racism and violence have no place in our modern society. Every one of us has a responsibility and a role to play in creating a society that is at ease with the diversity of individuals and whole communities.' OFMDFM is currently working on bringing forward detailed proposals for a 'programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future.'

Source: www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-ofmdfm/news-210108-church-and-government

19 Jan. 2008

Funding for Voluntary Groups

At the end of February there was a call for applications for one-year funding from groups working with, or representing minority ethnic communities. In the long-term such funding should be part of the planned programme for cohesion and integration outlined above.



One of the resources launched at the Pilgrim People conference (See Col. 1) was a Welcome poster in many languages, which has been distributed to all Church of Ireland parishes. It can be downloaded at: www.hardgospel.net/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/welcome_poster.pdf

World Council of Churches Consults on Migration

"Strong voices in the consultation directed attention to the God who 'became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.' John 1:14"

Extract from 'Migration forces a fresh look at theology',
Racial Justice Today, winter 2008, Vol. 2 No 1
www.ctbi.org.uk/ccrj

The World Council of Churches intends to continue this theological reflection by means of an email network.

Access this via www.oikumene.org

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Immigration

New Points System Now in Place

The first phase of the new Australian-style immigration system is now in place. It applies at first only to highly skilled migrants. So, someone who speaks good English, is a graduate on £40,000 a year (or its local equivalent), will have enough points. Other workers can come if there is a skills shortage and they have a job offer. However, it is now expected that all low-skilled vacancies will be filled by people from the European Economic Area. This system favours wealthy people; for example, the English test will not apply to people who intend to invest £1million or more in the country. Eventually the former 80 modes of entry will be reduced to five. The new scheme bars many of the people who have traditionally come here from poorer countries (e.g. cooks who work in Asian restaurants).

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk_politics/7269790.stm

Legal Penalties

People should be aware that recent immigration legislation has introduced severe penalties in a number of areas. Employers unknowingly employing a worker without proper papers can be fined up to £10,000. Deliberately doing so can incur imprisonment or an unlimited fine. It is also an indictable offence to give technical advice (which could include assistance with form filling) on immigration, unless licensed to do so. People needing advice should be encouraged to ring one of the **Law Centre advice lines** Belfast (028) 90244401 or Derry/Londonderry (028) 71262433.

Foreign Prisoners

In spite of the fact that immigration detainees are now held in GB, increased immigration and the greater ease of international travel has made it inevitable that we will have more foreign nationals in our prison system. Some are held because of charges that they were traveling on false documentation. Many of these people may have no local relatives or friends to look out for them. One member of the Refugee Action Group's former detainee visitor group, Sophy Bryson, has been visiting women in Ash House, the women's section of Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre. Here, she was told that the nine foreign nationals made up 20% of the total. Two of the women were Vietnamese, two from Lithuania, and two from Nigeria. Some found it difficult to communicate at all with staff because of their poor English and they have to use Language Line or interpreters.

Sophy says '*I only have to imagine what it would be like to wake up in prison in a foreign country to realise how frightened and confused these women feel - as well as language, they have to cope with unfamiliar food, customs and the complexities of the legal system. Even if they are in touch with family back home on the phone, they may not wish them to know that they are being detained in a prison because of a sense of shame.*'

Refugee and Asylum Issues

Increased Numbers Pressure the System

In recent years the annual number of applications for asylum locally has only totaled around 150. However, this year, by the end of March, there have already been 85 applications through Belfast Bryson One Stop Service. This means that 97 people are in emergency housing at present. Under the New Asylum Model (NAM), designed to ensure that claims are dealt with speedily, initial interviews should take place within days, but this has not been happening locally. There is also pressure on advisors, as there are not enough experienced immigration solicitors for this number of cases. A feature of the new applicants has been the number of people from Somalia, including some unaccompanied minors. The few who have been screened speedily have had positive decisions.

Refugee Action Group Advice for Detainees

Meanwhile, local people who are concerned about the welfare of asylum applicants, and others caught up in immigration detention, are still focused upon dealing with the problems caused because people are taken without notice from N Ireland to removal centres in Scotland or England. The **Refugee Action Group (RAG)** is preparing an information pack which will be given to all those who may find themselves detained. The advice will cover 3 subject areas:

- Contact details for local (NI) and GB community support organisations and groups.
- Advice on rights and how to access legal advice and representation.
- Advice on how to be prepared, including keeping documents, medication and phone numbers to hand.

This pack should be launched in Refugee Week in June.

Independent Asylum Commission Interim Report Criticizes the Asylum System

On 27 March the IAC, which is led by a former judge, criticized the 'culture of disbelief' about applicants' claims, 'perverse decisions', and the fact that people whose cases have failed are forced into destitution as part of policy.

"We are a country with a basic instinct of fair play - the system denies fair play to asylum seekers not out of malice but because of a lack of resources"

Sir John Waite, Co-Chairman of the IAC.

The findings are rejected by the **Borders and Immigration Agency (BIA)** who claim that the system is 'firm but fair'. To read more, including personal stories, see www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/uk/7314710.stm.

The IAC final report should be launched here in June.

CHURCH NEWS

Campaigning on Behalf of our Neighbours



Posters on the steps of Parliament Buildings, Stormont, at a rally to prevent the forced removal of Nigerian families, 19 December 2007. Church groups, campaigning organisations and friends joined in an impressive display of support.

In our last newsletter we highlighted the fact that people from Mountpottinger Presbyterian Church, and other friends, were challenging the detention and likely removal of a Nigerian family whose application for asylum had been refused. As that newsletter went to press, the same congregation found themselves supporting the campaign to prevent the removal of another Nigerian family who had also been taken into detention prior to probable removal. Neither campaign was successful. Their minister Rev. Johnstone Lambe now says

'As a congregation we are very saddened that we lost Comfort and Ronke and their families from our fellowship. We continue to have contact with them and have afforded some practical support. As a congregation we remain committed to the support of the stranger within our midst and their lives have touched us in ways that have changed us forever. What I personally will never forget, are the eyes of Ronke's boys looking up at me and asking "What have we done wrong?", and my sense of helplessness as I watched them pass through the door to their detention centre as branded criminals. Thank you for all your support for these families.'

The Polish Catholic Chaplaincy in Ireland

Polish people form the largest of our new eastern-European immigrant communities. Many of them are Catholic, and a Polish Chaplaincy in Ireland was inaugurated in Dublin in 2006. Fr Mariusz Dabrowski is chaplain to Polish people in Northern Ireland. He celebrates Mass in Polish in Armagh, Aghnacloy, Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Dungannon, Newry, Portadown and Strabane. In an interview with Anna Rankin, published in *lion & lamb*, issue 43, 2006, he said

'Most of the Polish migrants have positive experiences here. They find a welcome, help and generally they feel very well here. I have met some who have had difficulties, but normally their experience is good ... There have been some racist incidents, in

which people were threatened or property was damaged, though this is not common and it is hard to say whether an incident is racist or not....Some who are more integrated and have been here longer are happy to come to Mass in English. But for those who are recently arrived it is very important that they can attend Mass in Polish. It is difficult for them, they are far from home and their families, in a new place and they can find community and find support. It is important for them to integrate with the wider community, but, as a first step, it is good for them to make contact with the Polish community. It is quite hard to integrate directly. ...

They are in a new situation and in terms of their faith it can go either way - like in any difficult situation - you can either learn to depend on your faith or lose it. ... The Irish parishes give a lot of support. They organise meetings for them and this is the first step in the process of integration.'

For the full interview see: www.contemporarychristianity.org/lionandlamb/043/neighbours.html

Speaking in 2008 about Polish immigrants, Fr Mariusz feels that religion plays an essential role in the life of practicing Catholics and helps them to cope with life, but there is still considerable homesickness. He says, 'My impression is that around 10% of them have decided to stay in Northern Ireland and the rest want to be back in Poland in the next few years.'

View the Belfast Polish parish magazine, www.polish-chaplaincy.ie/download/Belfast_biuletyn.pdf

The Blessing of Easter Food

It is the custom of Polish people to bring baskets of food to church to be blessed before Easter Sunday. This is an English translation of a prayer that is used.

Lord Jesus Christ,

On the eve of your suffering and death you asked your disciples to prepare the paschal supper. On the day of your resurrection you accepted the invitation of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus to have a meal with them and later on that first Easter day, you visited your apostles and had supper with them. On the day of your victory we ask you for the gift of faith so that we can acknowledge you as our Risen Lord and so share in your Risen Life. Living bread you came down from heaven to give life to the world through the gift of the Holy Eucharist. You fed your people in the wilderness as they gathered with hungry hearts to receive the bread of your word. And Lord, with tender love you prepared breakfast with your disciples on the lake shore. May our sharing of the bread unite us closely to you our Risen Lord and so to each other. Lamb of God who overcame evil and washed away the sins of the world bless this meat, sausages and other food, which we will eat in the memory of the paschal lamb and the festive food you shared with your apostles at the Last Supper. Lord, bless the salt so that it will protect us from decay. Keep us safe from the evil one and give us a taste for your Good News. Christ our Life and Resurrection, bless these eggs, symbols of new life. Lord in sharing these gifts with our families and guests we pray that we will share the mutual joy of your risen presence among us and that one day we will join in the eternal banquet where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

Available at: www.polish-chaplaincy.ie/download/swiecenie%20pokarmow%20pl_en.pdf

EMBRACE News

Contact with Street Sellers

In December about 40 people attended a meeting in Edgehill College, Belfast, hosted by EMBRACE, because of their concern about foreign nationals, mostly from Romania, who sell magazines and newspapers on the streets here. A good range of church backgrounds was represented and also a number of students from Queen's. The issues raised were complex, but there were decisions on some initial responses.

Contact has been made with people who sell newspapers and magazines on the streets and it was apparent that they often have poor English and would benefit from language and literacy support. Some initial opportunities for learning have been arranged.

In response to needs expressed at the meeting, Chairperson of EMBRACE, Scott Boldt, gave two introductory talks at Edgehill College, for people interested in setting up conversation and language classes. He outlined some preconditions for successful learning:

Convenience - ensuring that time, and venue suit

Advertising - in other languages and in places such as local shops, library, pubs, workplaces etc.

Informality - responding to the needs, level and interest of those who attend

Demonstration - people need to see and hear what they are learning and have resources to take away.

Engagement - the material needs to be lively, relevant and interesting.

Positive reinforcement - everyone needs to be encouraged to understand that they can learn.

New Research on Belfast's Migrants

Belfast City Council commissioned Neil Jarman's research, *New Migrants and Belfast*, which can be accessed at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/conflict/relateddocuments.asp?menuitem=related

Committee News

The committee met for a morning of reflection, on 9 April at Drumalis Retreat Centre in Larne.

EMBRACE has taken part in the consultation process towards a Northern Ireland Languages Strategy (To respond online visit www.nils.org). Committee members have attended meetings of the Belfast City Council Shadow Migrant Working Group, the Black and Minority Ethnic Faith Group, and a number of courses and workshops relating to children and diversity. They have also helped with workshops at the C of I Pilgrim People conference (see p.1), and a Ploughshares event in Bangor. Presentations and dialogue have taken place with young people in Hydebank Young Offenders Prison and with women church leaders in the Olive Branch group.

Spring Meeting Focuses on Vulnerable People

Spring Meeting & AGM

Tuesday 20 May, 7pm and 9.30pm

Edgehill College

9 Lennoxvale, Belfast, BT9 5BY.

The theme for the evening is Exploitation and the main speaker will be **Deirdre Coghlan** whose talk will be titled

Life in the Shadows - An exploration of vulnerable migrant workers in Ireland.

As part of her current research, Deirdre has interviewed many migrants in the Irish Republic whose immigration status is irregular. She will describe how people come to be in this difficult position, the problems and exploitation that can ensue, and the working and living conditions that result.

David Craig of Mountpottinger Presbyterian Church will speak about the experience of befriending and supporting people who have come to the end of the asylum process. (See page 3 and also EMBRACE Newsletter No 10.)

Emergency Fund

This is used to provide vital emergency assistance to people such as destitute migrant workers and people seeking asylum who have no other immediate means of support, either statutory or charitable. Assistance may be given to provide hostel accommodation and food as a short-term solution until something more permanent is put in place. Money 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. All support is given subject to meeting a set of criteria and delivered through agencies such as NICRAS or NICEM.

Money has been used recently to allow two people to return home; one, a destitute migrant worker, was unwell and returned to Bulgaria, and a young man, who arrived here and found himself abandoned by his contact, was able to go back to Romania. In other cases money was given for hostel beds for two people seeking asylum who had no other means of gaining immediate support elsewhere.

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