

The Aftermath of Racist Attacks in South Belfast

In a year of worrying racist incidents, one series of attacks stood out and was covered in the news media throughout the world. During the crisis in June, when 113 Roma people in South Belfast were forced from their homes by racist attacks, EMBRACE and a number of churches, raised funds to provide for the practical needs of those involved. These ranged from food and clothing, prescription charges, nappies and toiletries, to air fares. **To read more go to page 3.** To find out more about the return to Romania and lives of people struggling against history, prejudice and poverty, read some of the news accounts, including the Independent interview with Denise Wright of EMBRACE and Pastor Malcolm Morgan of City Church:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/defiance-meet-the-romanian-families-refusing-to-be-forced-out-1722458.html>

The Times article on poverty and despair at home:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6586383.ece>

Solidarity Service at Fitzroy

Following the attacks on the Roma people, an inter-denominational service, 'I was a Stranger and...', was held in Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, South Belfast, on 21st June. Revd Wilfred Orr, who led the worship, said beforehand: 'The service will help Christian people to express solidarity with the stranger in our midst as well as sorrow and shame at the racist attacks that have taken place in our community.' Also in advance of the service, the Church of Ireland Bishops of Connor and of Down & Dromore, the Rt Revd Alan Abernethy and the Rt Revd Harold Miller, said,

'It is important we stand together as a Christian city to reject racism in words and deeds and show solidarity with the stranger in our midst as Christ would have us do. We want people of every race and nation to know that they are welcome among us, as people from this place have been welcomed all round the world. It is vital to work across the community to ensure their protection at this time.'

The gathering at the service included representatives of the main churches, members of local congregations, and public representatives including the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness. Belfast's Lord Mayor, Councillor Naomi Long, read the Gospel reading, Matthew 25: 31-46, and other readers included Malcolm Morgan of City Church, neighbouring Catholic and Church of Ireland clergy, and Valentina Covaci one of the young Roma members of the Fitzroy congregation. The prayers were led by Revd Dr Fred Munce of Lisburn Road Methodist Church.

Former Presbyterian Moderator, the Very Revd Dr Ken Newell, gave the address. He spoke of his shock at recent events and expressed admiration at the response. He asked how we could all be proactive in developing an inclusive city, fulfilling God's vision for this country. Many people had been working at this for years in a climate of social apartheid. This was the time to turn

the tide. First, he advised, 'Return to the inspiration of our faith.' In the light of the Gospel reading he said: 'You cannot be a racist and say: "Christ is my Redeemer"'. Secondly, he urged people never to think that they were without influence. 'You are a spider at the centre of a network of relationships.' He encouraged people to raise the issues in their churches and to break silence in the face of unacceptable attitudes. Ken Newell then introduced a rugby metaphor emphasising the impact of 'a strong scrum', of binding together and responding together to the real needs of people. 'We are not playing for a draw.'

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



A combined choir of singers, including volunteers from Jubilate and others, at the 'I was a Stranger...' service.

2010: Year of European Churches Responding to Migration

In a press release after the 13th Conference of European Churches the following declaration was made: 'While we eagerly work for, and anticipate, a reconciled and united Europe, we mourn that new walls of separation are being erected between nations, cultures and religions. We see new divisions appearing – between the settled and the migrating, rich and poor, employed and unemployed, those whose rights are respected and those whose rights are put aside.' ... 'At this CEC Assembly we have celebrated closer co-operation with the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe. This will be further manifested in 2010, a year of "European Churches Responding to Migration", when together we have the opportunity to witness to our Christian commitment to refugees and migrants.' To read more and access the themes for each month go to the Migration 2010 web site <http://migration.ceceurope.org/index.php?id=627>

'You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns...' Deut 24:14

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REFUGEE & IMMIGRATION ISSUES

Just as recession seems to have brought racism to the surface, it has also heightened our concerns about poverty. Economic downturn can have a severe impact on incomers who are often reduced to destitution more quickly than local people, because they lack the network of local support and access to benefits. (See also EMBRACE On the Street, page 4.)

Refugee Week

Poverty was the theme for Refugee Week, back in June. The Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) organised a number of events, and many issues were raised. There was concern that the recession was reducing the amount of money that NICRAS could pass on to people in need from other charities, including EMBRACE and St Vincent de Paul.

Neil McKittrick of Red Cross spoke about research in Scotland on destitution, especially among people at the end of the asylum process, on Section 4 payments (accessed here in the form of supermarket vouchers), and how some people struggle to survive and suffer 'catastrophic weight loss'.

See <http://www.redcross.org.uk/temp/21spDaysspLater.pdf>

A seminar on poverty and destitution was held in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast. One of the speakers, Denise Wright of EMBRACE, talked about how, from the start, EMBRACE worked to assist people seeking sanctuary, whose lives were blighted by lack of money. She spoke passionately about how the ban on working while applying for asylum, deskills people and reduces self-esteem and the potential for integration.

Benefits Cut for Single People Seeking Asylum

From October 2009 newly arrived single people over the age of 25, seeking asylum here, will receive a weekly subsistence allowance of £35.15 rather than £42.16. Home Office Minister Phil Woolas said that this is to meet 'budgetary constraints' and to standardise the adult rates.

Gaps in Welfare Support for Migrant Workers

The Law Centre has submitted a discussion paper on 'Gaps in welfare support for migrant workers' to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) best practice working group on migrant workers. The paper was written a few days before 20 Romanian families were forced out of their homes and they were ineligible for benefits (see pages 1 and 3). The Law Centre is liaising with the Council for the Homeless in compiling their information. They describe how some categories of migrant worker quickly become destitute, unemployed or experienced relationship breakdown; they suggest research to audit the extent of the gaps in welfare provision, and recommend the creation of a support fund. Download the paper from: <http://www.lawcentreni.org/Policy/Briefing%20papers/Social%20security%20system%20and%20Migrant%20Workers.htm>

'No Home From Home'

Research by Roisin Devlin and Sorcha McKenna of the NI Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) on homelessness was published in September. Their report, No Home From Home, an Investigative Report into Homelessness and People who are Excluded from Accessing Public Funds, confirms the Law Centre's concerns and shows that restrictions in current immigration legislation often prevent access to even the most basic levels of support from government agencies. Personal accounts from homeless

individuals reveal their experiences of domestic violence, ill health and racial intimidation. The report includes a number of recommendations, the most pressing of these being that, regardless of nationality or immigration status, no one should be allowed to fall into destitution. For further information on the report, or to request a hard copy, email information@nihrc.org. The report is available to download at: [http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/108/No_Home_from_Home_\(September_2009\).pdf](http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/108/No_Home_from_Home_(September_2009).pdf)

Preparatory Research on Forced Labour

In September 2009, John Bell of the Institute for Conflict Research published, 'A Modern Form of Slavery? A Literature Review of Forced Labour'. Among the papers listed are some which indicate that the tightening up of immigration regulations (as in our new points-based system) increases the likelihood of people having to rely on smugglers and people traffickers. People within the asylum system who are not allowed to work legally are also vulnerable to exploitation. Researchers have found migrants in domestic work to be especially vulnerable.

Alarmingly, STEP (the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme) was reported as having recorded up to 20 cases per day where gangmasters have been exploiting the different regulations on either side of the border. Workers are often unaware that their status becomes unauthorised when they move across the border.

To read the full document, go to the Trafficking page on the EMBRACE website where you will find other new background information and other source material. (See page 4) <http://www.embraceni.org/category/information/trafficking/>

Some Positive News on Reducing Fear of Racism

A new bilingual community safety advocacy scheme involving the Chinese Welfare Association and the Polish Association NI aims to reduce the fear of crime and improve communications with public services. Witnesses or victims of racist incidents or vandalism, or people who are feeling vulnerable, can contact the bilingual community safety advocates, Simon Ling, CWA, on Mobile 07888 398630, Tel: 9028 8277, Email simon@cwa-ni.org or Aleksandra Lojek-Magdziarz on Mobile: 07916 574225.

Contact Denise Wright, in her capacity as Race Relations Co-ordinator of South Belfast Partnership, for further information Tel: 9024 4070 or E-mail denise.wright@sbrtr.org.uk

New Rights Guide for A2 Nationals

The Law Centre has published a new guide, My Rights as a Romanian or Bulgarian Student or Self-Employed Person. People from Bulgaria and Romania (A2 countries) are treated differently from those from the A8 countries such as Poland or Lithuania. Unless they are highly skilled, self-employed or setting up in business, they are unlikely to get permission to work here. This new guide explains the technicalities. Download it at: <http://www.lawcentreni.org/Publications/Migrant%20Workers/My%20Rights%20Romanian%20&%20Bulgarian%20June%202009.pdf>

Reminder:

RAG Immigration Emergency Helpline: 0800 8400 495

If you see someone being detained at our border, ports or airports, you can phone this number so that family, friends or legal advisors can be informed or assist. Helpline cards are available from EMBRACE.

CHURCH NEWS

The Aftermath of Racist Attacks

in South Belfast (Continued from Page 1, Col 1)

The Roma group included very vulnerable families with small children and elderly grandparents. The men had been working, either selling the Belfast Telegraph or in car washes and were generating very little income; however they all said that it was still considerably more than they could hope to earn even if they were able to access employment in Romania. The group was supplied with temporary accommodation, but once it became clear that there were no public funds available, to help re house them here, EMBRACE worked closely with the NI Housing Executive and Belfast Trust to enable the individuals involved, to return to Romania.

While some members of the group felt that they were too traumatised to remain here, many individuals and families had wished to stay in Belfast, but in the absence of any way of accessing housing, they felt their only recourse was to return home. EMBRACE helped to coordinate flights and while the Housing Executive was able to pay for flights for those with children, funds raised by EMBRACE paid for flights for the people who would otherwise have been on the streets. Some of those who returned to Romania in June have come back to Belfast, and have secured work and accommodation here, that would have been impossible in their own country. Denise Wright of EMBRACE says:

'Many of those people have made contact with me since their return, to express their thanks for all the help they received. There has also been recognition by the statutory agencies of the key contribution of the churches who were able to meet needs when public bodies were unable to, and they are looking to build working relationships to feed into existing emergency planning for the city.'

The EMBRACE Committee is deeply grateful for all the generous contributions of money (including from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland), food, other gifts, and for those who prayed during the crisis.

Good Relations Forum Listens to the Experience of Local Church People

Early in 2009 North Down Good Relations Ethnic Minority Forum listened to a presentation from Helen Sloan of First Bangor Presbyterian Church that highlighted welfare issues. The church provides English classes and since these were launched in April 2008, more than 150 people, representing 10 different nationalities, have improved their written and spoken English with support from volunteers at the Church. Helen Sloan told the forum:

'It wasn't long after the classes started that we realised it was more than just an English Class. ... it was somewhere they could come, not just to improve their language skills, but where they felt safe and could socialise with others. Somewhere where they felt comfortable enough to share their worries and concerns with their tutors.'

Helen also raised a range of concerns including job insecurity, and finding accommodation, doctors, dentists and schools. She stressed that the church volunteers are not professional advice givers and praised local groups such as St Vincent de Paul, North Down YMCA, Citizens Advice Bureau, Home-Start and the Simon Community, who provide both advice and practical support to the church, when needed. Illustrating some of the serious problems,

Helen related a few personal stories.

'A lady came to (our) class, not long after we first started. She appeared with a note in her hand. It said "Helen Sloan, the Church, Main Street, Bangor, [her name] and I don't speak English". We learned that she had been brought over by an agency and was working in a private house looking after two elderly people one of whom was bedridden. She was working 24/7 and was allowed off just two hours per week to attend the class.'

Helen continued:

'Over the weeks we watched as this woman aged before our eyes, finally she couldn't take it anymore and asked us for help. I am pleased to say she is now working in a care home, she is very happy and looks 10 years younger.'

She also described how a couple came to Bangor and worked at the fun fair and in the summer months thought that Bangor was a paradise but when the fun fair moved on they could not find any other work.

'They had no food, no money to pay their rent and had a huge draw back, no English. We approached various homeless agencies and support groups in Belfast. No-one could help them.'

Eventually they went home with donations from the church.

Read the full report at http://www.northdown.gov.uk/news_detail.asp?id=376&area=8

Bible Resources for Migrants

The United Bible Societies has produced an illustrated resource, *On the Road: a Journey through the Bible for Migrants*, put together by the French Bible Society, in conjunction with a group of migrant people. It is a combination of bible stories, prayers and personal experiences and suggested questions for discussion. It could be used for personal or group work, by migrants, or local people – or to help bring them together. Download the 96-page booklet at <http://www.la-bible.net/doc/dons08072.pdf>

The Bible Society in N. Ireland (27 Howard Street Belfast, Tel 028 9032 6577, Email gsec@bsni.co.uk) stocks Bibles in 50 languages, including some children's editions, and can order scriptures in 100 languages. Some bi-lingual texts are available. See <http://www.bsni.co.uk/pages/20-non-english-scriptures>

How Churches are Responding to Migration

Recent research through surveys of faith leaders and laypeople in Ireland, undertaken by Dr Gladys Glaniel, of the Irish School of Ecumenics, reveals how immigration has impacted on parishes and congregations. In N Ireland, for example:

- 44% of clergy, pastors, ministers, and faith leaders have never done anything to accommodate minority ethnic people.
- 55% of clergy and faith leaders say that they have preached or taught on immigration, diversity or welcoming strangers in the last 12 months.
- 62% of lay people said that there are immigrants or minority ethnic people in their congregations.
- 19% stated that the languages of minority ethnic people had been used in services during the last 12 months.

To read the background and results of the surveys see <http://www.tcd.ie/ise/news/articles/2009/survey-report.php>

EMBRACE NEWS

Committee News

Susan McEwen, seen here, on the right, with Marie Makougang at the 2008 NICRAS (Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers) Christmas Party, has been co-opted onto the committee to represent the Corrymeela Community. As part of the Irish Peace Centre's Consortium she is Corrymeela's Inter-Community Interface Co-ordinator, and supervises the Corrymeela/NICRAS, Inclusive Neighbourhood Project, that is supporting integration between the refugee and host community in Northern Ireland.



Committee members continue to be involved in training and speaking engagements. Chairperson, Scott Boldt undertook a full day's training with the Northern Ireland HealthCare Chaplains (NIHCA) on the subject of 'working with people from other faiths/cultures' in September and spoke at South Belfast Methodist Church and Crescent Church, Belfast in October.

Denise Wright gave an overview of EMBRACE's involvement with the Roma people at Bloomfield Presbyterian Church, Belfast, in November. (See pages 1 and 3.)

EMBRACE continues to be represented at the Churches' Asylum Network (CAN) in Dublin, the Refugee Action Group, the Belfast City Council Migrant Forum and the Black and Minority Ethnic and Faith group in Belfast.

Margaret McNulty addressed the Church of Ireland Down and Dromore Diocesan Mission Council, assisted with dialogue on immigration, as part of a 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' course with women from North, East and West Belfast, in October. She also attended the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) conference on equality legislation.

EMBRACE was also represented at a thanksgiving Mass before the opening of the Catholic Bishops' Conference in October, through our involvement with Sr Joan Roddy of the Migrant and Refugee Project at Maynooth.

EMBRACE material was used in Willowfield Church, Lagan deanery, as part of the 24/40 Prayer Initiative in the Church of Ireland Diocese of Down and Dromore: 40 days of continuous 24-hour prayer.

The committee has also been concerned to encourage local politicians to take a greater interest in social cohesion, immigration policy and citizenship, and how immigration policies are enforced. Members have begun to arrange meetings with MLAs from different parties in order to discuss these issues and to find out from them how the recession is impacting on the lives of migrants and minority ethnic people in their areas.

EMBRACE Website

The web site has had to take a back seat to meeting the deadlines for producing regular newsletters, information updates and fact sheets, and, more recently, providing briefing material for politicians. Some sections are out of date, and a lot of work is needed. Getting new text onto the site can be complicated.

The Trafficking page has just been updated, with less text and more use of PDFs and references to web material. We would be grateful to our readers if they would go to <http://www.embraceni.org/category/information/trafficking/> and let us know if they find it user friendly. We will then try to get the other web pages updated in a similar way. Meanwhile, the EMBRACE Resources on the web contain our most up to date information.

We continue to welcome your ideas, news and information about forthcoming events.

EMBRACE On the Street

Ashleigh Hunter, who co-ordinates this project from Edgehill College, writes

'There has been a tremendous increase in activity from a range of churches for the EMBRACE on the Street collections. Churches that have had 2 collections per year in the past, have increased them to 4 collections. New churches have also enrolled to begin collecting from the New Year. This is very welcome news with the increasing need for practical assistance due to the destitution of some migrants. Through direct contact with organisations such as Home Plus and the Red Cross, EMBRACE has been able to advise churches on what items are particularly in need at the time so that donations are used effectively. In the last few collections alone there have been over 50 winter coats donated which have been used straight away by the people who most need them.'

EMBRACE Finances

An appeal for funds from the Churches has begun to bear fruit and we are extremely grateful to those who have made the decision to fund the work of EMBRACE when there are so many other important calls on shrinking resources.

Thinking of Joining Us or Making a Donation?

Continue to support the EMBRACE Emergency Fund. (See page 1) 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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