

NI Assembly Recognition for the Work of Faith-Based Groups

In February 2010 the NI Assembly passed a motion,

'That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities...'

The resolution also asked for research to quantify the contribution made by such groups. Many tributes were paid by MLAs from all parties to volunteers and charities, including the following from Anna Lo:

'We are well known for our generosity in helping people in developing countries... At home, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) has told me that faith-based organisations have been the main source of support for the destitute in our community and that, without the generosity of those organisations, it would be facing a much more serious crisis... Those organisations have also been proactive in opening their doors to refugees and other migrant groups and in providing them with opportunities to meet others and seek advice. They have also made their premises available for groups to use. Indeed, the City Church in south Belfast and the interfaith [sic] organisation Embrace Northern Ireland were very active in helping the Roma families when they were targeted by racists in June 2009.'

During the debate, Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie announced a 2-year pilot, 'faith forum for social development'. www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2009/100202.htm#6

EMBRACE Receives Funding

EMBRACE has received a grant of £32,000 from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFM DFM) Minority Ethnic Development Fund. The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches have each pledged financial support of £4,000 per year for three years, and Belfast City Vineyard £500 per year. These grants are a tribute to the work and reputation of EMBRACE to date, and are to be used towards the funding of a Development Worker post to work with the Christian community, encouraging a positive welcoming response to people from other countries and ethnic backgrounds. At the moment this money enables the group to finance the post; however we hope to maintain the level of funding needed to secure this post over a long term period.

EMBRACE Development Worker

EMBRACE has now advertised for a Development Worker starting in May 2010,

'To develop the work of EMBRACE in promoting good relations, cohesion and integration by encouraging Church communities to make Northern Ireland a more welcoming place for all people from minority ethnic backgrounds, including people who have migrated here and Irish Travellers.'

The appointment should be announced in the Summer Newsletter.

Morning of Reflection



EMBRACE Committee members sharing a meal together, at the end of a Morning of Reflection at the Drumalis Retreat Centre, on 2 March.

This was an opportunity to consider the work of EMBRACE set against the searching experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, 'The Lord is my light and salvation' (Psalm 27) and the greeting of God through the greeting of the other, among many inspirations. An overall theme of the morning was

'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.'

Proverbs 31 8-9

Stronger Together

On 25 March 2010, over a hundred people working in areas related to race and ethnicity came together to meet, exchange ideas and discuss issues which could be addressed better by working together. The Stronger Together event was initiated by the Black Minority Ethnic and Faith Forum who brought the idea to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). People came from all over Northern Ireland, representing inter-ethnic and inter-cultural forums, networks, support groups and specific projects.

During the afternoon session, instead of set workshop topics, people were asked what they wanted to talk about. One of the topics that attracted most interest was that of how to deal justly and compassionately with destitution among people who have no recourse to public funds. This includes migrant workers who have no right to welfare benefits and people whose asylum cases have ended and who cannot go home safely.

There was general agreement that things needed to be moved on, by collecting statistics and personal stories from charities that have been helping individuals so that lobbying Government can be accomplished more effectively. EMBRACE hopes to bring people together for further discussions when the initial fact-finding has been completed.

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REFUGEE & IMMIGRATION ISSUES

Poverty and Asylum

There is continued concern about how people seeking asylum in the UK are supported financially. Refugee Action is trying to get the basic allowances restored to 70% of Income Support, a link that has been eroded over the years. See www.refugee-action.org/ One supporter lived on £35.13 per week during Lent to demonstrate the difficulty that asylum applicants experience each week. blog.refugee-action.org/2010/03/living-on-5-a-day/

Locally there is anxiety about low levels of support and about the gaps in the system. People often arrive with nothing and experience delays before support starts. Out of their small weekly allowance, they may also try to save money to send to separated family members facing starvation in their countries of origin or in refugee camps.

Those whose applications succeed may have to return to emergency housing before they manage to get a job or access state benefits and more permanent accommodation. Family Reunion is another challenge. People with refugee status are entitled to have close relatives join them. Many borrow money because they are afraid that temporary visas for their families will run out before official funding for transport is available. When families are reunited, they may spend some time living on a single person's benefit before they manage to get everything sorted out. For people whose application fails, the situation can be worse. In theory those who are destitute are entitled to Section 4 Support if they co-operate with the UK Border Agency but cannot immediately be returned safely to their own country. In practice they often lose their accommodation and support for weeks or months, before Section 4 Support starts. Locally:

- A pregnant homeless woman was said to have applied too early because she was over 8 weeks away from her due date.
- Further submissions were required of a homeless, destitute man from Darfur who requires treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- A homeless family of 4 was told that the case was awaiting review after 3 months.

Groups like the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) and the Red Cross are forced to call upon charities such as EMBRACE for short-term help so that people can access food and a hostel bed.

Detention of Children

There has been increasing concern about the detention of families in Immigration Removal Centres. In October 2009 a medical study of children in Yarls Wood Removal Centre in England, found that a majority were experiencing mental and physical health difficulties related to their detention. These included weight loss, sleep disturbance and bed-wetting, day-time incontinence (indicating severe stress), headaches, abdominal pain and behavioural problems. The study showed deterioration in the mental health of the parents as well as their children. See: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/18550_news.html

If you are concerned about ending child detention you can sign an online petition to the Prime Minister. See: petitions.number10.gov.uk/NoChildDetention/

A member of the Refugee Action Group, Anna Morvern, has also initiated a Belfast parents' petition. See: petitions.number10.gov.uk/Belfast-Parents/

Look Out for the Signs of Human Trafficking

The international Blue Blindfold campaign to open our eyes to the horror of human trafficking and to the possibility that we can help to stop it, was launched here in February 2010. Slogans include 'It's happening here' and 'See what you can do'. The campaign has produced excellent postcards to counterbalance myths, and gives information on the signs to look out for trafficking; these can be accessed on the campaign web site www.blueblindfold.co.uk/

Honorary Consuls

Many of the countries of origin of new migrants here now have honorary consuls appointed by the embassies of their nations. The Consuls are local people who can help to represent the countries and provide a link between nations, cultures and people; they can also provide assistance when problems arise.

One of the newest appointees is Declan O'Loan, MLA, who became Romanian Honorary Consul in March 2010. (There are estimated to be around 1,000 Romanians in N Ireland some of whom are Roma people.) Mr O'Loan said,

'I am honoured to have been asked to take up this position ... I will do all that I can to promote excellent bilateral relationships between the people of Romania and the people of Northern Ireland.'

Read more:

www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/breaking-news/uk-ireland/oloan-lands-honorary-consul-role-14703906.html

New Research about Migrant Workers

The gaps in our knowledge about the impact of migration and about the experience of people who come here to work are beginning to be filled.

The Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) has sponsored useful research, including 3 major reports, published in December 2009:

The Economic, Labour Market and Skills Impacts of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland

The Experiences of Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland

Attitudes to Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland: Results from the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey 2009

These can be accessed at www.delni.gov.uk/index/press-releases/press-releases-oct09-dec09/departments_publishes_reports_on_migrant_workers_in_northern_ireland_.htm

In the autumn of 2009 the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) published the research report:

'Za Chlebem': The Impact of the Economic Downturn on the Polish Community in Northern Ireland www.nicem.org.uk/uploads/publications/Za_Chlebem_Report.pdf

The public service union, UNISON also looked at the impact of recession by interviewing their members, many of whom work in the health care sector, and published a report in late 2009.

Migrant Workers, Racism and the Recession: Survey Results on the Impact of the Recession UNISON Migrant Worker and Black and Minority Ethnic Members www.unionbook.org/pg/file/NathalieD/read/19153/migrant-workers-racism-and-the-recession

CHURCH NEWS

Catholic Church Appoints a Field Officer

Helen Young has been appointed as the Field Officer for the Irish Episcopal Council for Immigrants (IECI), which aims to develop and foster initiatives between the Catholic Bishops' Conference and parishes, in relation to outreach and pastoral care of immigrants. Following an assessment of needs within the dioceses, pilot immigrant pastoral outreach schemes will follow, at parish level.

Presbyterian Moderator Visits Searchers Cafe

The Rt Rev Dr Stafford Carson, Presbyterian Moderator 2009–10 has recorded his experience of visiting centres run by the Belfast City Mission. The BCM dates from 1827 but his blog shows that the Moderator found it responding to contemporary situations.

'Searchers Cafe on Dublin Road is run by BCM and is a rendezvous for people from many different ethnic backgrounds who have come to live in Belfast. Willie and Stanley are the two mission workers connected with the cafe, and they introduced me to a group of Somalian people who have escaped from the violence of Mogadishu and have come to Belfast in the hope of finding asylum and a secure and peaceful place in which to live. In all kinds of practical ways, the BCM workers are providing support and counsel to these people, and are showing them the love of Christ in a very practical way.'

Stafford Carson: Presbyterian Pastor. 2 March 2010
www.staffordcarson.com/2010/03/belfast-city-mission/



The Moderator at Searchers Café.
 Photo courtesy of Rev. Dr Carson

Polish for Beginners

When you visit the Portaferry and Glasyr Methodist Church web site you get information about the church, daily Bible readings, prayer, etc. – and a page on Polish for Beginners. People are being encouraged to take welcome seriously.

www.portaferrymethodistchurch.org/polish/polish.htm

News from the South

Young Christian Workers (YCW) Research

A YCW research document, *What's the Story? Experiences of Young Migrant Workers in Relation to Work, Faith and Social Integration in Ireland*, was launched in Dublin on 20 February 2010 by the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmuid Martin. The report recommends more effective outreach towards migrant workers by the mainstream Churches and co-operation between Churches and Trade Unions in the provision of drop-in centres for newcomers.

'There is a huge opportunity for the Church and the Trade Union Movement to collaborate here and provide a safe space for those seeking information on their rights as workers plus emotional and spiritual support.'

Download the report www.ycw.ie/resources/publications.php

Philippine Ambassador to the UK visits Belfast



Philippine Ambassador to the UK, Antonio M. Lagdameo (third from left) and his wife Mrs Linda Lagdameo were welcomed at St Colmcille's Catholic Church, East Belfast by Fr Ciaran Feeney, Katrina Alberico of the Filipino Communities in NI (FilCom-NI) (extreme left), Paddy Donnelly (EMBRACE Committee member) and his wife Anna, and Kit Tupas, co-ordinator and advisor, FilCom-NI (extreme right), during a recent visit to Belfast.

St Anthony's Community Fund

Many local charities have been concerned about hardship experienced by people from other countries during the recession and especially during the severe winter. Some migrant workers have decided to do something about it themselves. For example, the Polish Community associated with St Anthony's Catholic Church in East Belfast, has set up a fund, 'to help migrant workers who are not doing well, have been exploited, taken ill or simply have to go back home and have not got money for their fare.'

Find out more from St Anthony's web site: <http://www.saintanthony.co.uk/page7.html>

Embracing Diversity:

EMBRACE NI Information Update 2010

Our annual information update has now been printed and will be available at our AGM (see page 4). It will be considerably dearer to post this year and so will only be mailed on request to people who are not members. Copies are available at the AGM and will be mailed automatically to members not able to attend. To request a hard copy please contact our office. (See pages 1 & 4 for contact details.)

If you are happy just to consult it online go to www.embraceni.org/category/about-us/embrace-resources/

EMBRACE NEWS

A Tribute to Shirley Rutherford

The EMBRACE Committee was saddened by the death, in February 2010, of their former Committee colleague Shirley Rutherford, following a long illness. Shirley served God with infectious enthusiasm and faithfulness in a number of countries, in Malawi with the Overseas Board of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, for example, and most recently as an agriculturalist for Samaritans Purse working with widows in a Muslim country in Central Asia. She assisted EMBRACE in the early years with her presentational skills in the very first newsletters and information sheets and through her ability to communicate to young people.



**Shirley Rutherford
1968–2010.
Photo courtesy of PCI**

Everything she did was a witness to the transforming nature of her faith and that vibrancy will be sorely missed. To read more about her life and work see www.pcimissionoverseas.org/news/item/111/tribute-to-shirley-rutherford-who-died-this-week/

EMBRACE Asylum Support Morning

On 21 January EMBRACE hosted a public meeting which had representatives from groups such as OFMDFM, NICRAS, the Housing Executive, the Red Cross and the Bryson One Stop Asylum Support Service. People came together to hear Elizabeth Griffith, Policy Officer at the Law Centre NI, talk about the Government consultation document on asylum support and to network about problems for people in the asylum system.

EMBRACE Information Evenings

In February EMBRACE hosted two information evenings, one in Edgehill College Belfast and the second in the Methodist Church, Ballymena. We are grateful Bill and Joan Parkinson and Rev. Maureen Hassard of Ballymena Methodist Church for providing us with a venue where people from a variety of church backgrounds could come together.

Speaking Engagements

Committee members continue to speak at events. For example, Chairperson Scott Boldt spoke recently to Youth for Christ members in North Belfast on 'The World Around Us'; gave a lecture to Church of Ireland Ministerial students on 'Creative Exploration: Minority-Ethnic Communities and Inter-Faith Issues'; talked to a women's group in Willowfield Church of Ireland Parish, East Belfast, about EMBRACE; and spoke of the work of EMBRACE in a lecture to visiting students from Taylor University, Indiana.

EMBRACE Finances

The grants noted on page 1, column 1, have helped towards securing the smooth running of the group and the Emergency Fund has also received support from members, other donors and £1,000 from the St Anne's Cathedral Sit out (Black Santa appeal). This has been extremely important during such a hard winter when all the charities working with destitute people have had their resources stretched.

EMBRACE on the Street

Ashleigh Hunter, who helps co-ordinates this project, says

'We had an extremely cold winter, which caused difficult conditions for destitute people, especially those sleeping rough. A large number of churches supported our EMBRACE on the Street project by donating much needed heavy clothing and sleeping bags. EMBRACE passed these on to organisations such as Homeplus and St Vincent de Paul who ensured the particularly vulnerable received the bulk of the collections.'

If you want your church to be involved in EMBRACE on the Street please contact us.

Forthcoming Events

EMBRACE Public Meeting and AGM

The Spring Meeting and AGM takes place on **18 May, 7.30–9.30** at Edgehill College, Belfast. The subject is Destitution & Migration: Who Cares? Maura McCallion of EMBRACE and the Law Centre NI will provide an overview of migrant destitution. Sandra Moore of the Welcome Organisation will speak about its work in providing hospitality and care for destitute people. John Dunlop, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland will consider how churches might respond.

There will be an exhibition about Roma people in N Ireland. Sorina Toma of the Multi-Cultural Resource Centre (MCRC) has been working with Roma people and will be available to answer questions.

Two EMBRACE Events in the Belfast Inclusion Festival

Global Cafe

Saturday 12 June, 10am–12.30pm, at Willowfield Church of Ireland Church, Woodstock Road, Belfast. This free cafe event seeks to show the rich diversity of cultures in our locality.

Voices Together

Saturday 19 June, 7.30–9.30pm, City Church, University Avenue, Belfast. This is a concert with a difference – audience participation. Join in singing some well-known songs and learn some new material including songs from other countries and cultures.

Thinking of Joining Us or Making a Donation?

Continue to support the EMBRACE Emergency Fund 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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