

‘Use **initiative** in exploring options. Find out what is appropriate in your situation and for those you meet. What works elsewhere may be a good pointer, but may well need adaptation for your situation and your gifts and resources.

Perseverance is an important attribute; if at first you don’t succeed try and try again. Some things may work, others (perhaps inexplicably) won’t.

It is important to **network** with other churches, statutory organisations and non-government organisations (NICEM, MCRC, Law Centre and ourselves in EMBRACE for example).

Commitment is required to make things happen and to build relationships. Within your congregation there will be a need to inform and persuade members and leaders of the importance of reaching out. This will inevitably demand **patience**.

Being involved may well involve risk; it will not necessarily be easy. Yet, the challenges and opportunities are there to be met, and provide us with an opportunity to share and show the love of Christ.’

The authors of *Welcoming Angels*, published by the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin’s Working Group on Combating Racism outline 3 stages of Christian welcome

‘Genuinely outward-looking’: a social welcome The welcome beginning in the wider society

‘Truly welcoming’: a welcoming church event
How people are made welcome when they choose to attend a service

‘Seriously inclusive’: a structural welcome Celebrating diversity and encouraging participation

Welcoming Angels, Dublin 2005, pp37–51.

Ideas for congregational welcome

(Including some from *Welcoming Angels* and others from Parish-Based Integration Project material):

- Analyse your local circumstances carefully in order to be able to provide a meaningful welcome for newcomers. Where you find it hard to get a picture of what is happening locally, it may help to talk to other community leaders, employers and Further Education Colleges to find out about incomers and how best to get to meet them.
- Ensure that the building is welcoming from the outside, with clear meaningful welcoming signs.
- As well as having individuals responsible for welcoming at services, involve the whole congregation in learning about the importance of welcome.
- Welcome should never be overwhelming, people need to take their time before they decide to make a congregation their home.

- Language is very important, and it is helpful if people can be greeted with a phrase or two in their own language. Use plain English in services in order to help those with limited language skills to participate better.
- When praying for people in difficult situations in other countries, ensure that the words do not imply an attitude of patronising pity. It may be helpful to use prayers from the country concerned.
- Encourage newcomers to participate, for example, in reading a lesson or taking up the collection/ offertory – small, visible signs of acceptance. Include some aspect of the worship tradition from the country of origin, such as a song or a prayer.
- Promote the participation of newcomers in leadership and promote a sense of belonging and being appreciated.
- Invite members of minority-ethnic churches to take part in special services.
- Hold special services for example, in Refugee Week, Anti-Racism Sunday, or

Holocaust Memorial Day, and invite members of minority groups to speak or attend.

- Stress the universal nature of your church, as a church for all nations.
- Expect blessings, such as enthusiasm and sense of fellowship, not just problems.

What churches can do together

Work together to let new residents know about church services and activities. It is also helpful if local church leaders have an agreed policy so that they can respond jointly and immediately if a racist incident occurs.

Pastoral considerations

Many people who come here will adjust easily; however, we need to bear in mind that others find a change of country very difficult. In addition, people who have been forced to flee here, destitute migrant workers or unauthorised people all have special difficulties. It is not always easy to understand people's feelings of insecurity, bewilderment, loneliness, suspicion, fears, hopes and needs, when their stories are so different from ours. We need an attitude of openness, respect and sensitivity.

- You may need to do research in order to find out where to access expertise – legal, social, and medical.
- You may be pressed to find time for people whose multiple problems leave them very emotionally dependent.
- You will need to be aware of special sensitivities, for example, regarding confidentiality. Someone left a church permanently because he felt shamed at being introduced as 'an asylum seeker' by someone who probably only wanted him to be made especially welcome.
- In responding to a racist incident the natural instinct is to make public your sense of outrage. The victim of the attack must be consulted and may ask for privacy. The victim's wishes must then be paramount.
- In some cultural backgrounds women should never be visited by a man, on his own, so it is helpful to make at least initial pastoral visits in pairs, a man and a woman.
- Be aware that immigrants and minority-ethnic groups are not homogeneous; there is great diversity, and sometimes animosity, within and between ethnic groups.

- It is important to listen empathetically. It can be a challenge to hear what someone is feeling and not just the words they are saying. Different cultures invariably include different modes of expression, even similar words can be understood in different ways, and body language can be significant.
- You may never know if what people tell you is completely true, and it is hard to measure up a story when the normal parameters do not apply. You have to take a certain amount on trust, and you may find cultural signals confusing. For example, failure to make eye contact may appear a sign of untrustworthiness or trauma, when in reality it may be what is regarded as respectful in the country of origin.
- We all make cultural mistakes, whether in assumptions, language or behaviour, such as simply forgetting to remove your shoes in an Asian house.
- You may be confronted by new unpleasant issues, such as prostitution and people trafficking.
- You may find yourself acting at or beyond the edge of the law and uncertain where the moral and legal boundaries lie, especially where you are relating to people who are here without proper documents.
- Above all you will not be human if you do not experience frustration and anger, pain and guilt, as there is often little that can be done to assist in immigration cases, which are governed by laws and procedures which seem beyond influence.
- You may find yourself involved in campaigning and advocacy on behalf of people, such as failed asylum applicants, who may be detained under immigration legislation and ultimately removed or deported. Ensure that you involve other people and groups who have appropriate expertise. Your campaign may not succeed. Seek prayer support and a listening ear for yourself and other supporters who may be left with a deep sense of pain and disillusionment.

It is now an indictable offence to give technical advice on immigration (which could include assistance with form filling). People needing advice should be encouraged to ring one of the Law Centre advice lines Belfast (028) 90244401 or Derry/Londonderry (028) 71262433 or visit their local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). This is equally true of people who may have been trafficked or who have no authorisation to be here. Poor advice could put someone in danger. Advice is available from the [Law Centre NI \(https://lawcentreni.org\)](https://lawcentreni.org).

How we can learn from each other

- Encourage cultural and ethnic awareness and intercultural and anti-racism training.
- Link with schools and community groups in developing good relationships

and planning programmes.

- Hold celebration meals such as harvest suppers where you might invite people from minority-ethnic groups to share their cooking traditions with you.
- Celebrate festivals such as Chinese New Year.
- Visit cultural centres together. For example, people from a rural background,

anywhere in the world, may find something in common at somewhere like the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

- Visit the cultural centres of minority-ethnic communities – such as the Indian Community Centre in Belfast, to learn, and affirm their presence as part of a shared society.
- Learn about other people’s religious beliefs and practices by, visiting religious centres, or inviting members of other faiths to explain their religious beliefs.
- Take part in a course that encourages examination of Christian attitudes towards relationships with people of other faiths.
- Encourage young people to study the languages, cultures and religions of people from local minority-ethnic populations.
- Find ways of celebrating and honouring the achievement of individuals and groups from minority-ethnic populations in your community.
- Use any forum, inter-church groups, Community Safety Groups, District Policing Partnerships, to make sure that even minor acts of racism are taken seriously and to foster good relationships at local community level.

When you are planning a project remember that small grants may be available from your local authority for good relations activities. For other advice on looking for funding or drawing up grant applications go to NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action), 61 Duncairn Gardens Belfast, BT15 2GB, Tel: (028) 9087 7777, E-

Mail: nicva@nicva.org, Web sites: <http://www.nicva.org/> and <http://www.grant-tracker.org/>.

The use of church premises and other resources

Churches form part of the social capital of a community and many already make their buildings, facilities and the skills of their members available to other groups. These are some suggestions as to how our churches can, and are being used:

- A community audit of local needs
- Working with others on a welcome pack for new residents
- Drop-in centres giving people the chance to integrate
- Parent and toddler groups for refugees or the families of migrant workers
- After-school clubs, helping incoming children to adjust to differences in our

education system

- Language and conversation classes
- Advice centres for newcomers run by those who are nominated by the local authority

to do so – such as Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB)

- Recreational facilities for minority-ethnic groups

Some sources and resources

Comerford, Patrick. *Embracing Difference: the Church of Ireland in a Plural Society*. Church in Society Committee, Social Justice and Theology Group (Republic of Ireland). Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing, 2007.

Delargy, Mary. 'New Communities in Northern Ireland: The Christian Response,' in *Shared Space; A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland* Issue 5, March 2008. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, 2008.

EMBRACE NI. *Once We Were Strangers*. (CD Rom.) Belfast: EMBRACE NI, 2007.
EMBRACE NI. *Embracing Diversity*: Information Update 2014, EMBRACE NI, 2014.

French Bible Society. *On the Road: a Journey through the Bible for Migrants*. Villiers-le-Bel: French Bible Society, 2008.

O'Mahony, Kieran. *What the Bible Says about the Stranger: Biblical Perspectives on Racism, Migration, Asylum and Cross-Community Issues*, Dublin: Irish Inter-Church Meeting, 2009.

Scott Boldt ed. *Inter-cultural Insights: Christian reflections on racism, hospitality and identity from the Island of Ireland*. Belfast: All Ireland Churches' Consultative Meeting on Racism, 2007.

Unity and Diversity in Our Churches. Dublin: Parish Based Integration Project/ Irish Inter-Church Meeting, 2008.

Welcoming Angels, Report of the Archbishop's Working Group on Combating Racism. Dublin: Church of Ireland Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough, 2005.

Weller, Paul ed. *Migration Principles; Statement for Churches Working on Migration Issues*. London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2007.

DVDs

And You Welcomed Me Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Race Relations Panel, 2013. Copies are available from the EMBRACE office.

Hear My Voice: Voices of Migrants and People Seeking Asylum, EMBRACE 2012. Copies are available from the EMBRACE office.

Our Voice: The Voices of Young Migrant People in Northern Ireland, EMBRACE 2015. Copies are available from the EMBRACE office.